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# YOGA AND MINDFULNESS FOR ANXIETY

## Top Ten Tips for reducing anxiety in children & young people

### BWY SPECIAL FEATURE

Words: Christiane Kerr

The cycle of endless lockdowns and home-schooling during the pandemic have not just taken their toll on us adults, but it has affected our children too. Over the last two years, research about the psychological impact of COVID-19 on children and young people has been emerging. Before the pandemic, England's Mental Health Of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey found one in nine children and young people were affected by a mental health condition. By October

2020, this figure had risen to one in six, mainly due to increased anxiety about leaving the house.

While our schools and borders have now re-opened, the effects of anxiety still linger on. According to NHS inform, anxiety is one of the biggest issues that can interfere with a child's personal development and lead to depression in teenagers, so it is vital that we give children tools to recognise and manage anxiety. With

schools now entering their summer terms, exam season can put children and young people under increased pressure. It is important to look out for symptoms of stress which can include disturbed sleep, over or under-eating and an inability to switch off from studying and enjoy life.

### WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is natural and normal but for some children, it can affect their behaviour and thoughts and interfere

with school, home and social life. It only becomes an issue when the individual overestimates the level of perceived threat and begins to avoid situations or become hypervigilant.

## CAUSES OF ANXIETY

While external factors, including exam stress are contributing factors, some children are naturally more sensitive to stress. Anxiety can occur during stressful events such as moving house or school, parents fighting or arguing, bereavement, illness or injury, bullying or being abused or neglected. Children with ADHD and autistic spectrum disorders are more likely to have problems with anxiety, according to the 2023 National Health Study. It can have a big impact on a child's day-to-day life as they battle to control their emotions.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE ARE ANXIOUS

Anxiety evokes a very quick physical response. Signals are released from the brain that cause the body to react to a threat, as if this threat were present. This is known as the 'fight, flight or freeze' response and can cause physical symptoms such as a pounding heart, sweating, shaking, muscle tension, headaches, tummy aches and shortness of breath.

## HOW TO MANAGE ANXIETY

Recognising the symptoms of anxiety can be the first step to reducing it. Sometimes it can be challenging for children to acknowledge when they are anxious. It can then build up until they become overwhelmed. This is when behaviours like shouting, screaming, crying, or wanting to be alone may occur.

It is important to help children understand what they are feeling and why. It is easier to talk about the physical symptoms of anxiety first, as thoughts are often harder to express. A useful way to discuss these can be to

label or draw the physical symptoms they may feel on an outline of a body representing themselves. This can help develop an understanding of the link between their physical symptoms and their worries.

When a child can recognise that they are anxious, it is important to help them build up some strategies and techniques they can use to manage their anxiety.

## TEN WAYS YOGA AND MINDFULNESS CAN RELEASE ANXIETY

Yoga and mindfulness exercises can also be an effective way for children to manage their anxiety as they provide tools to manage difficult thoughts and emotions and help bring attention to the present moment. Physical postures (asana) can release tension from the body which in turns helps us to relax. Pranayama or controlled breathing techniques can help us to take back control from the threat signal and give us time to rationalise our thoughts and divert our attention away from anxiety-provoking thoughts. Certain yoga and mindfulness exercises can activate the parasympathetic nervous system which can help reduce the

threat signals in our brain, allowing the heart rate to reduce. Please find some examples below

### 1. Child's pose

This helps to release tension in the back, neck and shoulders. These are areas where we often hold stress.

Sit on your heels, separate the knees slightly and bend forward to rest the forehead on the floor. Let your arms relax down to the floor along the sides of the body. Close your eyes and allow your shoulders, neck and back muscles to relax.

### 2. Standing poses such as mountain pose and warrior 1 pose

These poses can help children feel more grounded and stable. Whether it is standing tall and strong in mountain pose, with feet hip-width apart and a steady focus, or in a warrior 1 lunge, with the front knee bent, back leg straight and arms reaching upwards, these grounding techniques can be very helpful for reducing children's anxiety, especially when panic attacks occur. You can also get them to focus on their surroundings and their senses by asking them what they can hear, see,



smell, touch and taste. This can help create space from distressing feelings.

### 3. Balancing postures like tree pose

Balances can promote concentration, focus and awareness and can distract children from their worries. Standing in mountain pose, shift the weight to the left foot, turn the right knee out to the side and rest the heel on the left ankle, keeping the toe on the floor. If balanced, try lifting the right foot up to rest on the inside of the calf. Balance here for 3-10 breaths or as long as you are able before repeating on the other side.

### 4. Alternate nostril breathing

Alternate nostril breathing is really useful for anxiety, but if this is not possible due to blocked noses or colds, simply encourage children to be aware of the breath entering the body and leaving the body.

Find a comfortable seat. Place the right index finger over the right nostril to close it. Breathe in and slowly out for three breaths. Pause and switch to the other side. Repeat for 3-5 minutes noticing how you feel.

### 5. Belly breathing

Chest breathing can make our body tense and activate our upper chest muscles which can increase feelings of anxiety. To avoid this, belly breathing can help us control feelings of anxiety.

Lying on the back with a bean bag or similar on the belly will help children to feel the rise and fall of their diaphragm.

### 6. Visualisation and meditation

This can distract them from their thoughts and feelings by creating imagery in their mind and keeping their attention on this. Visualising

can evoke positive emotions and help battle the anxious feelings and worries.

A great visualisation that I often use is 'Relax and Let Go', which can be accessed for free on the Insight Timer app. It is best suited for children from seven up.

### 7. Mindful eating

This encourages children to eat slowly and notice all the sensory and physical elements of what they are eating. Include looking closely at what you are about to eat and elements of taste, touch, texture and the physical sensations of chewing and swallowing.

### 8. Self-soothe box

This is a box that children can make that contains things that make them feel more relaxed and reduces symptoms of panic, anxiety or low mood. It is recommended to have a range of sensory things to focus the mind on. The box can include something to smell, something to touch, something to look at and maybe even something to taste. Some

common things that are used in these boxes are fidget spinners, stress balls, colouring books, nice smelling room sprays and photos of loved ones.

### 9. Worry journal

Encouraging children to write down their thoughts and put their worries away is another great strategy. This can make it feel like the book is where their worries are "held" rather than having them in their minds.

### 10. A healthy lifestyle

And of course, it is always important to encourage children to have a healthy lifestyle. A balanced diet, having enough sleep and getting regular exercise is also vital to reducing anxiety and improving mood.

While these strategies are useful, children are very aware of what others are doing around them and will look up to adults as a model for healthy behaviour. Do your best to keep your own stress under control and manage it in healthy ways. Why not practice yoga together?



**British Wheel of Yoga Teacher and Trainer, Christiane Kerr** has more than a quarter of a century's experience sharing yoga and mindfulness with children and young people through her Calm for kids enterprise. As a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) teacher and yoga mentor, Christiane has written six books and produced an array of audio relaxation CDs to help children and young people develop a calm and creative approach to everyday challenges.

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