

## **HELPING KIDS MANAGE ANXIETY DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES**

Anxiety is the fear of the unknown and worry about what we cannot control. An understandable and expected feeling during times of uncertainty and disruption. It is a normal and appropriate response to danger, as our brains are designed to recognize harm and protect us. This is the role of the Amygdala (located deep in the brain); it gets trigger when it spots danger and sets off an alarm starting the fight-flight-freeze response.

In order to help our kids manage their anxiety, we need to coach them to calm down their Amygdala. This 2-step process helps structure the parenting response to anxiety, with the goal of integrating the Left and Right parts of the brain:

Our Left side of the brain is logical and a problem solver, the Right side is non-verbal and emotional. Children need to connect both sides to successfully tame anxiety. We help them by showing empathy, reflecting back, validating their feelings and encouraging them to identify and label feelings; immediately after, we coach them to problem solve and choose a positive coping skill.

### **How to connect with their Right Side?**

1. Comfort you child. Let them know you are noticing their amygdala reacting.
2. Don't argue with their reasoning or go into problem solving mode. Just give them time to vent and feel validated. They don't need immediate solutions or answers; being heard can have a tremendous impact in soothing the amygdala.
3. Describe with your own words what you're seeing and how you interpret it. Use the feelings map to help them identify and articulate the feeling. (See resources)

### **How to connect with their Left Side?**

1. Teach coping skills ahead of time (see below for specific coping skills).
2. Ask them to choose from a list of strategies and model how to practice it. Start with them, but encourage independence.
3. Plan ahead. Help them build a "coping skills toolbox". Include: Feelings map, tools to help practice breathing (bubbles for younger kids, apps for older), drawing material, books, Sudoku (or similar). Let them be creative and take charge to include whatever is helpful to them.

## COPING SKILLS

### 1. Breathing:

Diaphragmatic breathing should be our goal. Also, called “belly breathing” or “balloon breath”, for younger kids.

Inhale slowly through nose, bring air down to expand belly (diaphragm). Exhale through mouth. Belly expands with each inhale and flattens with each exhale.

Place one hand on belly and one hand on chest. Try to keep chest still and focus on belly rising and descending.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_xQJ2O4b5TM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xQJ2O4b5TM)

### 2. Grounding exercise:

Helps to keep our attention in the present (opposite to anxiety, that demands our focus on the uncertain of the future).

#### GROUNDING EXERCISE

#### Engaging the 5 senses to get Back to Center

Look around and find:

5 Things you can SEE

4 Things you can FEEL or TOUCH

3 Things you can HEAR

2 Things you can SMELL

1 Things you can TASTE



### **3. Distraction**

### **4. Doing something for others:**

Helps shift their attention away from helplessness and towards having control of something positive. Helping friends, and even strangers, mitigates the effect of stress.

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/printed-publications/doing-good-does-you-good>

## **GUIDELINES**

1. Your kids are watching you and following your cues. It is absolutely okay for them to see you worried and sad, but more importantly, you should model good coping skills.
2. Maintain routines, such as bedtimes and meals.
3. Maintain/promote physical activity.
4. Focus on the positive; find the heroes in the narrative.
5. Moderate intake of news at home. Don't let the stressful topic hijack all of the conversation.
6. Focus on what kids (and you) have control over. Helping others is one of the most powerful tools we have to cope with anxiety.
7. Look for red flags that would indicate your child is struggling: Watch for changes in sleeping and appetite, extreme irritability, developmental regression. Know when to ask for help.

## **RESOURCES**

### **FEELINGS MAP AND TALKING POINTS**

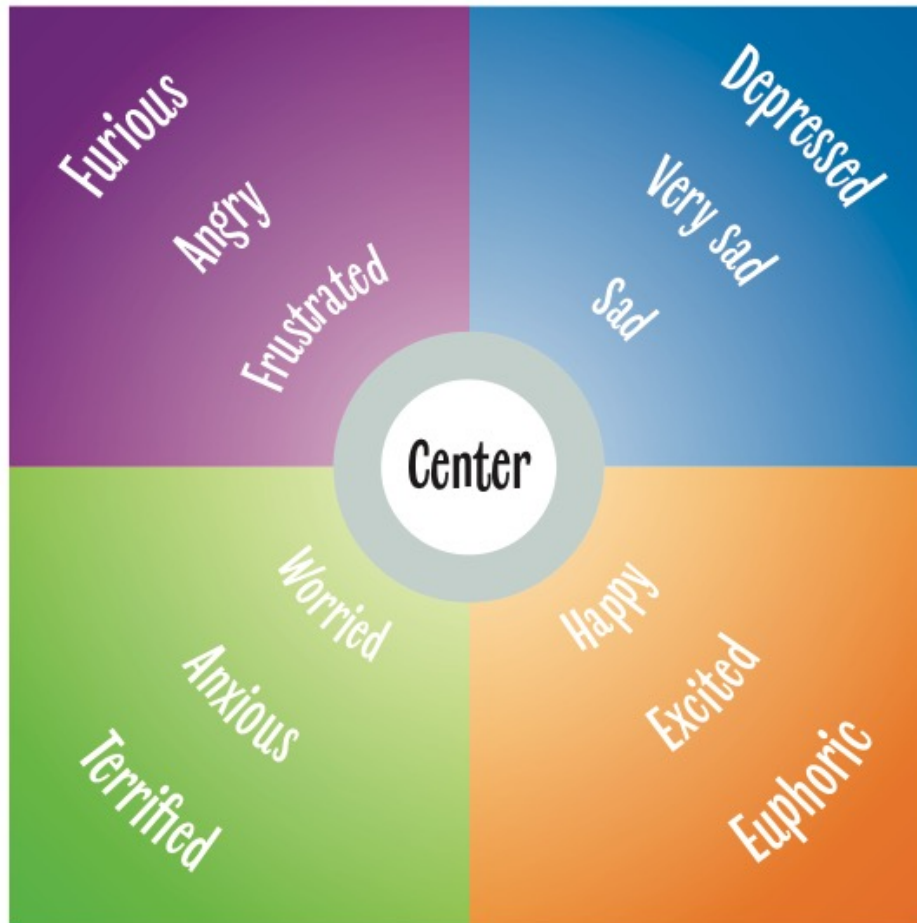
We all have a "Center", an emotional space where we feel calm and relaxed. It looks differently in each of us. Help your child identify when his/her body feels at center. Give examples as to when you feel at Center (for me, is while reading a book, going on a walk, and having dinner with my family).

Around our Center, we have 4-basic feelings (really, we have many more, but focus on basics!). It is absolutely normal and expected to move away from our center every day, many times a day; parents and teachers move away from their center too. We want to be able to recognize when that happens and try to stay close to/around our center. The bigger the feeling gets, the farther away we move, the harder it is to come back.

Labeling and naming feelings is the first step to then choose and apply a coping skill.



# Feelings Map



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## CONVERSATION STARTERS

- ✓ How does it feel when you are at your Center?
- ✓ I notice you are getting off your Center, can you show me on the Feelings Map where you are at?
- ✓ What can you do to go back to Center?
- ✓ Tell me about one feeling you recognized having today
- ✓ I can see you are a little sad, what strategy can you use to go back to Center?
- ✓ Can you map your anger?
- ✓ Map your anxiety and then we can talk about it

## BOOKS

*The Whole Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind.* Daniel Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson. (Parenting book; best for younger children).

*Something Bad Happened: A guide to coping with events in the news.* Dawn Huebner. (To be read by or with children. Best for ages 6-12, but gives great language and advice to parents on how to talk to their children).

*Outsmarting Worry: An older kid's guide to managing anxiety.* Dawn Huebner. (To be read by or with children. Excellent resource for general anxiety; background in biology and specific coping skills).

*The Self-Driven Child: The science and sense of giving your kids more control over their lives.* William Stixrud and Ned Johnson. (Parenting book. Excellent resource when raising teens).

*Under Pressure: Confronting the epidemic of stress and anxiety in girls.* Lisa Damour. (Parenting book. Helpful when raising teenage girls).

## APPS

MindShift: Good for teens. Within the "Tools" section and under "chill zone", there are many different breathing exercises.

VirtualHopeBox: Good for teens. Within "Relax Me", excellent breathing exercises. Kids can tailor it to their preferences.

CBT Tools for Youth: Within "Tools/Relaxation Skills". Good for younger kids. Guided breathing.

Insight Timer: Free meditation App, with many guided imagery and guided breathing meditations tailored for kids. Look for "Billy and Zac the Cat" to help young kids with sleep.

For additional support or information, please contact our 24/7 Family Consultation Service at +1-202-458-5550 or [familyconsultationservice@wbfn.org](mailto:familyconsultationservice@wbfn.org)

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