

# When Anxiety Doesn't Look Like Anxiety – How to Recognise and Manage Behaviour When Anxiety is the Fuel

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When the world feels frightening or fragile, kids and teens might respond in ways that fall a decent way short of

adorable. They might yell or hit, try to control you, refuse you, push away, push back, or just push. If their behaviour is fuelled by anxiety, it has nothing to do with 'bad behaviour' and everything to do with a brain that is trying to find its way back to safety.

If we could see behind these behaviours and into the needs and neural processes driving them, the behaviour would all make sense. This doesn't mean it would make us feel squishy with pride, but it would make sense.

Anxiety has nothing to do with what is actually safe or unsafe, and everything to do with what the brain perceives. There are all sorts of things that can trigger threat in the brain – smells, sights, sounds, memories, or thoughts of things they've heard, seen in a movie, read in a book, or imagined. We might not know why the brain has registered threat, but the amygdala knows. The amygdala is part of the brain responsible for anxiety. When it senses something that *might* be a threat, it will influence thoughts, feelings, physiology and behaviour towards one common goal – safety.

If we see the behaviour for what it is – the outward expression of a brain that feels unsafe – it can soften our hearts enough to respond to our children in ways that help them feel safe, preserve the connection, and expand our influence. It will also be easier not to take their behaviour

personally. Their behaviour is not a reflection on you, them, or your parenting. It is a reflection of a brain that has registered threat, and a young person who might need our help to feel calmer and safer. Here are some of the ways anxiety might show itself in children and teens, and how to respond.

## **Anxiety might look like ...**

### **1. Big feelings – anger, frustration, sadness.**

During anxiety, the amygdala is switched to high volume, so other big feelings will be too. This might look like tears, sadness, or anger. Big feelings have a good reason for being there. The amygdala has the very important job of keeping us safe, and it does this beautifully, but not always with grace. One of the ways the amygdala keeps us safe is by calling on big feelings to recruit social support. When big feelings happen, people notice. They might not always notice the way we want to be noticed, but we are noticed. This increases our chances of safety.

Anxiety can also drive frustration. The point of anxiety is to move us to make changes to restore a sense of safety. When there is no capacity to change a situation, frustration can give way to tears, giving up, or anger. Anger is also the 'fight' part of the fight or flight response. Aggressive behaviour in children can be confronting for any parent, but

if we could see behind the aggression, and into the need or the feelings behind it, we would want to scoop them up, hold them close, and sit with them in the emotional storm until it passes. This is exactly what they need us to do.

This doesn't mean our kiddos can blame their anxious brain for the things they do when they are angry. They still need to be the [boss of their brains](#), but this will take time to learn.

### ***What to do.***

Emotion is energy in motion – 'e-motion'. The energy that is connected to emotions has to move. Ideally, this movement would happen in ways that are easy to manage or respond to, or in ways that don't feed chaos in families or relationships, but we humans don't always work like that. The healthy expression of emotion takes time to learn, and there's no hurry. In the meantime, whenever you can, give their feelings a safe outlet to try to catch them before they reach overwhelm. Some ways to do this are through talking, writing, journaling, drawing, creating, play-doh, sand play, painting, dancing, listening to music – anything that lets them feel their feels and release the energy that is connected to them.

Once things have spiralled, your young love will probably have zero interest in writing or dancing or anything else that

can make way for a gentle release. That's okay because we have another plan. At this point, our job is to help their 'threatened' brain feel safe again. When the situation is heated, all we can do is manage the situation until the temperature in the room comes down. This means keeping everyone safe, meeting them where they are, and riding out the storm. Be loving and firm, and try a 'yes-yes-no' approach – 'Yes, it's okay to feel the way you do. Yes, those feelings need to come out. No, it's not okay to hit.'

Most importantly, try not to avoid thinking about it or responding to it as 'naughty behaviour'. It's not naughty behaviour – it's a brain that has registered threat, and is trying to fight it's way to safety. When we respond to any big emotion as 'naughty behaviour', it will likely make anxiety worse because disconnection from an important person will cause the brain to feel even more threatened.

It won't always be easy to preserve your connection with your child when their behaviour is hostile, angry or foul, but whenever you can, it will make a difference. We will have the most influence when we are with them, inside the relationship, not outside, or disconnected from them. This isn't about permissive parenting. It's about giving the brain what it needs, so you can give your child what they need, which is your guidance and influence. During big feelings, the thinking brain – the prefrontal cortex – shuts down. This

is the part of the brain that can hear rational information, think logically, calm big feelings, problem solve and plan. Any attempt to have a rational conversation, or invite them to put things right or think about what they've done will be useless until they find calm. Meet them where they are, validate what they are feeling, and wait for the storm to pass. When that happens, the prefrontal cortex will be back online, and that's when you can have the conversations that matter – what happened, how can they put things right, and what can they do differently next time.

## **2. Withdrawal, addictive behaviour (gaming, screen time).**

This is the 'flight' part of the fight or flight response. When the world feels uncertain, it is understandable that children might want to do things that block out the world for a while. This might look like more screen time, more time in their room, more time playing with pets, or more solo time. All of these behaviours during social isolation are understandable, but we want to make sure they don't get in the way of the things that are good for them.

### ***What to do:***

First, validate them and gently name what you see, without judgement. Validation doesn't mean you agree with them. It means that for a moment, you see what they see and feel

what they feel. It lets us sit with them and hold them from inside the relationship. This might sound like, *'I notice you've been spending a lot of time in your room lately. I don't blame you – things out there are feeling pretty uncertain at the moment aren't they.'* Invite them to talk, but if they aren't interested, let it go.

Then, try to schedule something into each day that brings them back into the world for a while, such as walking the dog, cooking dinner together, kicking a ball outside, or having morning tea together – whatever works for them. Rather than having the conversation about what they need to stop doing, let the conversation steer to what they might add into their day to keep things healthy – physical exercise, family connection, healthy eating, play, time outside, and build screen time in around that. Invite them to come up with a plan themselves. This will help to restore a sense of power and autonomy, at a time when a lot of this has been taken away.

### **3. Restlessness.**

During anxiety, a neurochemical fuel surges the body to get it ready for movement – to fight the danger, or flee the danger. When there is no capacity for fight or flight, there is nothing to burn this neurochemical fuel so it builds up. The drive towards movement doesn't disappear. Instead, it can come out as restlessness, hyperactivity, or jittery

movements.

### ***What to do:***

Anxiety is energy with nowhere to go, so give it somewhere to go. Movement is the natural end to the fight or flight response so if you can, get them dancing, running around outside, kicking a ball – anything that gets their bodies moving. If it's hard to get outside, try a dancing or exercise channel on YouTube.

### **4. Demanding, controlling behaviour.**

Typically, the relationship between a parent and child is one of the parent as leader and the provider of safety and guidance, and the child as receiver. When children become anxious, they can be driven to take control and to put themselves in the position of 'leader', but this will look less like 'provider', and more like 'controller'. They might be controlling, demanding, aggressive, or more likely to ignore instructions, or refuse comfort or guidance. This is not bad behaviour. It's an attempt to take control of making their world feel safe again, but it will be exhausting for everyone.

### ***What to do.***

When anxiety drives children to take control, they will need really strong cues of safety from the adults around them. They need to know you've got this and that they can count

on you to lead them through the storm. Think of it like this. If you were lost in the wilderness, you would want to follow a confident guide out to safety – someone who knew what they were doing, gave clear directions, and fully backed their ability to lead you to safety. When children are anxious, they are looking for the same confidence from the people around them. If you are anxious, that's okay, but communicate this with strength. 'Yes I feel anxious sometimes, and I absolutely know that we are safe. We are going to get through this. I'm not going to let anything happen to you.'

This needs to happen as much as it can from within the relationship – calmly, lovingly, and with strength. Whenever you can, try to anticipate their needs for safety or leadership, before they can register that there might be a problem. Think of it as taking the lead before they do. The idea is to recognise what they might need, and offer ways to meet that need, before they are driven to control you, the family, or the environment.

For example, you might often struggle at bedtime when your child tries to take control of the routine. This might look like refusing to go to bed at bedtime, shouting, yelling, demanding story after story, and demanding that you stay until he or she falls asleep. Remember, this is *not* bad behaviour. It's your child trying to take the lead in an

attempt to feel safe. The task is to take the lead. This might look something like,

*'Bedtimes have started to be a bit of a struggle haven't they. It can be hard to settle into your own bed at night, especially when there is so much happening in the world. I want you to know that we are safe. We are so safe here. I would not let anything happen to you. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to make bedtimes really special, to make sure you feel calm and cosy so you can have a beautiful sleep. After you brush your teeth, we're going to read two stories. You can pick which ones. I'd like you to also pick one for us to read when you wake up, so we both have that to look forward to. Then, I'm going to lay beside you and we're going to listen to the mindfulness app for ten minutes. Then I'll give you a cuddle and tuck you in. I'll come and check on you every ten minutes until you fall asleep. I'm going to help you feel relaxed and cosy and safe in your bed.'*

Don't worry if things don't fall into place straight away, especially if the struggle has been going on for a while. Brains can take a little convincing that it's safe to let go. Be open to anything that might need tweaking, stay loving, confident, and consistent, and know that the calm will come.

## **5. Clinginess.**

We are wired to feel safest when we are close to our people. During times of uncertainty, anxiety happens to move children to restore proximity to the ones they feel safest with. This can look like clinginess, but it is an instinctive response that is designed to keep us safe.

### ***What to do.***

When their world feels shaken, hold them, cuddle them, and sit with them as much as they need you to and as much as you can. Physical closeness, warmth, and touch release oxytocin. Oxytocin is the 'bonding chemical' and it's released when we feel close to our important people. Here's the magical part – the amygdala has receptors for oxytocin. When the amygdala receives a juicy dose of oxytocin, it will calm.

### **6. Sore or sick tummy.**

Anxiety can hit tummies hard. It can make the muscles of the gastrointestinal tract contract – and it hurts. As well as this, during anxiety, the brain shuts down anything that isn't completely necessary in the moment for our survival. One of these things is digestion. This can cause butterflies or nausea. It's completely safe, but it can feel awful. It's the brain and body doing exactly as they are meant to, but at times they don't need to.

## ***What to do.***

Strong, steady breathing (in for 3, hold for 1, out for 3) is the most powerful way to calm the amygdala and bring the brain back to safety. It activates the relaxation response, which will lower blood pressure, lower heart rate, bring brain waves back to a state more consistent with relaxation, and most importantly for anxiety, it will start to neutralise the fight or flight neurochemical surge that is responsible for the physical symptoms of anxiety – including a sick or sore tummy. Have them practise when they are calm before they use it during anxiety. During anxiety, the brain is too busy to do anything that isn't familiar. Practising before they go to bed or when they wake up will help to build the neural pathways that will make strong steady breathing more accessible during anxiety.

Some ways to practise:

- Lie down with something on their tummy – a toy or a book – anything. If the toy or book moves up and down as they breathe, their breathing is perfect.
- Hot cocoa breathing – Imagine holding a cup of hot cocoa. Breathe the warm, chocolatey smell in for three, hold for one, blow it cool for three.
- Have them (or you) trace a sideways figure 8 on their skin

– anywhere that feels lovely. For the first belly of the 8, breathe in for three, hold for one, then trace the second belly of the 8 out for three.

## **7. Sore muscles, headaches.**

Anxiety can cause a ‘bracing’ – a readying for fight or flight. This can be felt in muscles that are held tense, ready for action, or headaches.

### ***What to do.***

Often, kids might not realise that they are holding tension. To help their bodies relax, try strong steady breathing or progressive muscle relaxation (tense then relax feet, then calves, then thighs ... all the way up to their head). Mindfulness meditations, a warm bath or shower (warmth helps the brain register safety), or listening to calming music can also help to bring calm.

## **7. Sleep trouble.**

If anxiety had a favourite time to play, it would be bedtime – when bodies are still and brains are meant to be. This is when ‘what-ifs’ and anxious thoughts can lumber into their mind like they have nowhere else to be. The problem is that the part of the brain most sensitive to a lack of sleep is the amygdala. So – the less sleep they get, the more anxious they’ll feel, and the less sleep they’ll get – but we can

change that.

## **What to do.**

If anxiety has been doing its thing for a while, the amygdala will have made a strong association between bedtime and feeling unsafe. We can change that by reworking the association, but it might take time. Talk to your young one about a bedtime routine that might work for them. Try to include a combination of [strong steady breathing](#), 10 minutes of mindfulness (try the Smiling Mind app, the Calm app, or [here for ideas](#)), gratitude (it makes positive experiences and memories more accessible than negative ones), or progressive muscle relaxation.

## **And finally ...**

Anxiety in our children will always trigger anxiety in us. It's how we're wired. Sometimes we will respond exactly as they need us to. Sometimes we won't. This won't break them. It can be even more difficult to know how to respond when anxiety doesn't look like anxiety. Whenever anxiety is the fuel, behaviour will always be the sign of a brain that is looking to feel safe. You have a phenomenal capacity to provide that safety to your child through your relationship. Be a calm, strong, loving presence, and know that you don't need to do any more than that. Sometimes it will be about helping them feel braver, stronger, and more powerful, and

sometimes – especially when the world feels fragile – it will be about letting them take that precious space beside you, because the world will always feel softer and safer from there.

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