**Do remember anxiety and sadness is a typical part of growing up in children and during developmental stages. This workshop is here to help raise awareness and support you as a family but not to create fear! Do speak to me if you have any worries.**

**Anxiety and Depression CAN affect primary school children, The last survey, conducted in 2004, found that 1 in 10 children aged 5-15 had a mental health disorder (either emotional, behavioural, hyperactive, or other). In the released 2018 figures, this has risen to 1 in 9.**

**Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety in Children**

Agitation.

Restlessness.

Inattention, poor focus.

Somatic symptoms like headaches or stomach aches.

Avoidance.

Tantrums.

Anger.

Crying.

Refusing to go to school.

When most people speak of anxiety, they are often referring to Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), which we cover in more depth below. Symptoms of anxiety in children take on many forms and several other types of anxiety disorders also impact children:

1. Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviours (BFRBs) are related to self-grooming, anxiety management, or sensory stimulation. The most common BFRBs are trichotillomania (hair pulling), dermatillomania (skin picking), onychophagia (nail biting), dermatophagia (skin biting), rhinotillexomania (nose picking), as well as cheek biting and joint cracking.

2. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) causes children to experience pervasive, unwanted obsessions or worries. Sometimes, they work to relieve this anxiety through repetitive physical or mental behavioors called compulsions.

Among kids and teens with OCD, common obsessions include:

fear of dirt, germs or contamination

a need for symmetry, order, and precision

religious obsessions

lucky and unlucky numbers

sexual or aggressive thoughts

fear of illness or harm coming to oneself or family

intrusive sounds or words

grooming rituals, including hand washing, showering, and teeth brushing

repeating rituals, including going in and out of doorways, needing to move through spaces in a special way, or rereading, erasing, and rewriting

checking rituals to make sure that an appliance is off or a door is locked and repeatedly checking homework

ordering or arranging objects and cleaning rituals around the house

counting rituals

hoarding and collecting things of no apparent value

ticks (blinking, twitchy, coughing, head shaking to name a few)

3. Panic Disorder is characterised by the sudden onset of intense fear, called a panic attack, followed by weeks of worry about having another similar attack. Symptoms include: difficulty breathing, racing heart, sweating, needing to escape, sense of danger or doom, and chest pain, among others.

4. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is an anxiety disorder that can develop after involvement in or exposure to a frightening, traumatic event. Symptoms include ongoing upsetting memories, nightmares, flashbacks, feeling overly jumpy or irritable, and avoiding reminders of the incident.

5. Social Anxiety Disorder causes children and teens to fear social and/or performance situations because they worry about doing something embarrassing or being negatively judged by others. The extreme manifestation of this is the rare condition Selective Mutism.

6. Separation Anxiety Disorder causes children to worry excessively about being separated from primary caregivers or from the home.

7. Specific Phobias involve persistent, over-the-top fears of an object or situation that is beyond the child’s control and significantly impacts life. Common phobias include insects, heights, dogs, and loud noises.

**Common Symptoms of Generalised Anxiety Disorder for Children at Home**

If you notice the following warning signs, schedule an appointment with your child’s doctor or a counsellor:

Trouble falling asleep

Fear of being alone

Picking at skin

Nail biting

Strong startle response

Being overly self-critical

OCD-like behaviours (e.g. checking and rechecking the door to make sure it is locked or arranging objects “just so”)

Suddenly avoiding social contact

Frequent urination

**Common Symptoms of Generalised Anxiety Disorder for Children at School**

Your child’s anxiety may manifest at school in several ways. Keep an eye out for these signs:

Refusing to go to school or having a hard time at school drop-offs

Difficulty participating in class and interacting with peers

Excessive worry about everyday things

Trouble answering questions when called on by the teacher

Disruptive behaviour

Squirming

Frequent trips to the nurse (with complaints of headaches, nausea, stomachaches, or even vomiting)

Avoiding socialising or group work

Not turning in homework

If you notice several of the above, ask your child’s doctor to perform an in-depth screening of his mental and physical health to rule out a mood disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or a specific phobia, all of which can look like GAD. Certain physical conditions, like thyroid disorders or heart conditions can also mimic anxiety-like symptoms. Your doctor can rule out most of these with simple blood and urine tests — though some more complicated conditions may require x-rays or physical stress tests.

**Signs and symptoms of depression in children**

Occasionally being sad or feeling hopeless is a part of every child’s life. However, some children feel sad or uninterested in things that they used to enjoy, or feel helpless or hopeless in situations they are able to change. When children feel persistent sadness and hopelessness, they may be diagnosed with depression.

**Examples of behaviours often seen in children with depression include**

Feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable a lot of the time

Not wanting to do or enjoy doing fun things

Showing changes in eating patterns – eating a lot more or a lot less than usual

Showing changes in sleep patterns – sleeping a lot more or a lot less than normal

Showing changes in energy – being tired and sluggish or tense and restless a lot of the time

Having a hard time paying attention

Feeling worthless, useless, or guilty

Showing self-injury and self-destructive behaviour

Extreme depression can lead a child to think about suicide or plan for suicide. For youth ages 10-24 years, suicide is among the leading causes of death.

Some children may not talk about their helpless and hopeless thoughts, and may not appear sad. Depression might also cause a child to make trouble or act unmotivated, causing others not to notice that the child is depressed or to incorrectly label the child as a trouble-maker or lazy.

The first step to treatment is to talk with a healthcare provider such as your GP or a mental health specialist, about getting an evaluation.

Some of the signs and symptoms of anxiety or depression in children could be caused by other conditions, such as trauma. Specific symptoms like having a hard time focusing could be a sign of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It is important to get a careful evaluation to get the best diagnosis and treatment.

A mental health professional can develop a therapy plan that works best for the child and family. Behaviour therapy includes child therapy, family therapy, or a combination of both. The school can also be included in the treatment plan. For very young children, involving parents in treatment is key. Cognitive-behavioural therapy is one of many forms of therapy that is used to treat anxiety or depression, particularly in older children. It helps the child change negative thoughts into more positive, effective ways of thinking, leading to more effective behaviour. Behaviour therapy for anxiety may involve helping children cope with and manage anxiety symptoms while gradually exposing them to their fears so as to help them learn that bad things do not always occur.

**Managing Symptoms: Staying Healthy**

Being healthy is important for all children and can be especially important for children with depression or anxiety. In addition to getting the right treatment, leading a healthy lifestyle can play a role in managing symptoms of depression or anxiety. Here are some healthy behaviours that may help:

Having a healthy eating plan centered on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (for example, beans, peas, and lentils), lean protein sources, and nuts and seeds

Participating in physical activity for at least 60 minutes each day

Predictable routines

Getting the recommended amount of sleep each night based on age

Practicing mindfulness or relaxation techniques

Counselling and Therapy; CBT, Play Therapy, Holistic treatments

Social Support

**Prevention of anxiety and depression**

It is not known exactly why some children develop anxiety or depression. Many factors may play a role, including biology and temperament. Having another condition such as attention problems, learning issues or anxiety disorders also puts children at higher risk for depression. It is also known that some children are more likely to develop anxiety or depression when they experience trauma or stress when they are bullied, spend too much time on social media, or are rejected by other children, or when their own parents have anxiety or depression. The first 3 years of a child’s existence is very much based on attachment. Secure attachment is an emotional bond between children and caregivers. In contrast, the children without a secure attachment to their caregivers tend to display more fearful, angry, confused, and upset behaviours than the securely attached children.

Although these factors appear to increase the risk for anxiety or depression, there are ways to decrease the chance that children experience them:

Bullying prevention

Mental Health awareness

Well-being focus

The good news is that there are several effective treatments for depression. Treatment may include working with a psychologist (or "talk therapy"), meetings with your family, and, with your permission, discussions with your child's school. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and many forms of psychotherapy are shown to be effective in treating depression. Sometimes medication can be used for older children struggling with anxiety and depression though holistic thoughts are always the first call.

**How to Empower Your Child to Deal with Anxiety**

How to Deal With Anxiety

Anxiety is awful for children and heart wrenching for parents. It’s so common, but it doesn’t always look the same. Sometimes it will dress itself up as illness (headaches, tummy aches), sometimes as a tantrum or fierce defiance, and sometimes it looks exactly as you would expect.

**School Anxiety. What it’s not.**

If I could write this across the sky, I would:

Anxiety and school anxiety have absolutely nothing to do with behaviour, defiance or poor parenting. Nothing at all.

Why getting tough won’t work.

School anxiety isn’t a case of ‘won’t’, it’s a case of ‘can’t’. It’s anxiety. It’s a physiological response from a brain that thinks there’s danger. Sometimes the anxiety is driven by the fear that something will happen to the absent parent. Sometimes it’s not driven by anything in particular. Whether the danger is real or not is irrelevant. Many kids with anxiety would know somewhere inside them that there is nothing to worry about, but they’re being driven by a brain that thinks there’s a threat and acts as though it’s true.

When this happens, the fight or flight response is triggered and the body is automatically surged with neurochemicals to deal with the threat. That’s why anxiety can look like a tantrum (fight) or resistance (flight). It’s the physiological, neurochemical response of a brain on high alert. It’s hard enough to control your own brain when it’s on high alert, let alone someone else’s, however much that someone else wants to do the ‘right’ thing.

We humans are wired towards keeping ourselves safe above everything else. It’s instinctive, automatic, and powerful. This is why tough love, punishment or negotiation just won’t work. If you were in quicksand, no amount of any of that would keep you there while you got sucked under. You’d fight for your life at any cost. School and friendships for example are less dramatic than quicksand but to a brain and a body in fight or flight, it feels the same.

When you’re dealing with an anxious child, you’re dealing with a brain that will fight with warrior daring to keep him or her safe. It’s not going to back down because of some tough words or tough consequences.

The good news is that there are powerful ways to turn this around. Let’s talk about those.

Before we go further, it’s important to make sure that the anxiety isn’t from bullying, friendship problems or problems with schoolwork that might need their own response. Teachers generally know what’s going on so it’s always worth having a chat to get a clearer idea of what you’re dealing with.

In many cases, there are no other issues at all. On paper, everything looks absolutely fine. That’s anxiety for you.

Empower them.

Anxiety has a way of making people feel like they have no control. It’s inexplicable and feels as though it comes from nowhere. Explaining to your kids how anxiety works will demystify what they’re going through and take away some of the punch. It’s powerful. Here are some ideas for how to explain it in a way they can understand:

Why does anxiety happen? The words to help your child understand (you may need to think about age appropriate communication, for a young child it will need to much simpler) this may also help you as a parent understand it better.

Anxiety has a really good reason for being there. Your brain is great at protecting you. It’s been practicing for millions of years and is brilliant at it. If it thinks there’s something to worry about, it will instantly surge your body with fuel – oxygen, adrenaline, hormones – to make you strong, fast and powerful, kind of like a superhero. This is the fight or flight response and it comes from a part at the back of your brain called the amygdala. This part of your brain is small and shaped like an almond. It’s like a fierce (but very kind) warrior and it’s there to protect you.

Sometimes your brain gets a little overprotective. That’s kind of understandable. You’re pretty brilliant at a lot of things and the world needs you. Your brain is in charge of keeping you safe and it takes its job very seriously. It’s a relief to know the ‘keep me safe’ switch in your brain is working.

When it thinks there’s a threat, it doesn’t stop to think about whether or not the threat is real – it’s all action and not a lot of thought. In fact, the part of your brain that is able to think clearly, calm things down and make great decisions about what to do next, is sent ‘offline’ if the brain senses a threat. That can actually be really handy and is another clever way to keep you safe. If there’s a real danger, like an out of control bus screaming towards you, you don’t want your brain to keep you in the path while it figures out whether or not to get out of there.

When it comes to school, your brain can sometimes read it as a threat, even though it isn’t. That’s because school is a bit different to home – there are new people, different things and routines, you’re away from your parents, sometimes it’s noisy, and sometimes you don’t really know what to expect. To a brain whose job it is to protect you, that can feel like a really big deal.

This is why the bad feelings you feel when you think about going to school can be so powerful. It’s your brain telling your body to stay away from school because there could be something dangerous there. It might also be telling you that something could happen to the people you love if you aren’t near them. Brains can be very convincing, but they’re not always accurate.

Even if you know there’s nothing to worry about, your brain won’t always listen to that, and it will get your body ready to run for your life or fight for it.

We’re going to talk about how to deal with this, but first let’s talk about what’s happening up in that power pack in your head.

Your brain and anxiety – what you need to know.

When your brain feels really strongly that it has to protect you (and remember, your brain doesn’t care if the danger is real or not) the fight or flight part of your brain forces the thinking part of your brain to be quiet so that it can get on and deal with the danger.

**Why does anxiety feel the way it does?**

When there’s no need to fight or flee, there’s nothing to burn off the superhero fuel that’s racing through you, so it builds up. That fuel is perfectly safe, and in the right circumstances can be really helpful, but it can feel bad when it builds up. The feelings and emotions you have when you’re anxious, or when it’s time to say goodbye are all because of this buildup.

Here are some of the things you’ll probably feel and why you’ll feel them.

You might feel breathless. You might also feel the blood rush to your face and it might feel warm.

That’s because your brain has told your body to stop using up oxygen on strong deep breaths, and to send it to your muscles so they can use it for energy to fight or run.

To make this happen, your brain organises for your breathing to change from normal, strong breaths to fast little breaths. When you think about it, it’s a pretty good way to save oxygen, even though it might not feel that great.

Your heart might feel like it’s beating out of your chest.

This is because your heart is working hard to pump the fuel around your body so it can fight or flee. It’s doing a great job, but it can feel a bit scary. It’s nothing to worry about. It’s just your heart doing exactly what a healthy heart does.

You might feel dizzy or a bit confused.

This happens because there’s nothing to fight or flee, so there’s nothing to burn the fuel that’s surging through your body. As the oxygen builds up, the carbon dioxide drops, making you feel dizzy and confused.

Your arms and legs might feel tense or wobbly.

Your brain is sending fuel to your arms (so they can fight) and to your legs (so they can run away).

You might feel a bit sweaty.

Your body does this to cool itself down. It doesn’t want to overheat if it has to fight or flee.

You might feel like bursting into tears or you might feel really angry

This is the handy work of the amygdala – the part of the brain that triggers the fight or flight. It’s also involved in emotions. It’s in full control and it’s working super hard. When it’s highly active, you might get emotional or angry at all sorts of things or nothing at all. It’s a really normal part of anxiety.

You might feel like you’re going to vomit or you might actually vomit. You might get tummy aches or feel as though you have butterflies in your belly. Your mouth might also feel a little bit dry.

Everything that’s happening in your body that isn’t necessary in that moment for survival will shut down. One of these is your digestive system, which is the part of the body that gets the nutrients from food. That can wait, so it shuts down until the crisis (or what your brain thinks is a crisis – nobody said brains were always sensible!) is over. It’s a great way to save energy, but it can make you feel sick. It’s feels awful, but it definitely won’t hurt you and it’s definitely not a sign of anything worse going on inside you.

As you can see, there’s a really good reason for every physical symptom. It’s your brain doing a great job of what brains are meant to do – keep you alive.

This is why you might feel so strongly that you can’t go to school (for example) because that’s what your brain is telling you. It’s why it might upset you when people tell you there’s nothing to worry about. You already know this, but your brain and your body aren’t so convinced – your body is being driven by a brain that thinks it’s under threat.

This can feel scary, which is totally understandable.

Here’s the thing though: Even though your brain is telling you there’s danger, sometimes it might misread the situation. It happens to everyone from time to time but some brains will be a lot quicker to sense threat than others. There’s nothing wrong with that. An anxious brain is just as healthy and strong and capable as a non-anxious brain. In fact, it’s often even more capable, more creative and more sensitive to what’s happening around it.

When your brain is reacting to things that aren’t really a threat, what it actually needs is for you to come in and be the boss. Let’s talk about how to do that.

1. Your anxiety isn’t the enemy, so try not to fight it.

Remember that the amygdala that sets your anxiety in motion is like a fierce warrior that’s trying to protect you. Even though it might be causing you trouble, it really doesn’t mean to. If it could, it would hug you and walk one step in front of you to keep you safe. It can’t do that, so instead it surges you with fuel to keep you strong, fast and powerful whenever it thinks you need it, and sometimes just in case. If you can put the thinking part of your brain (the pre-frontal cortex) back in control, it will stop the fuel surging through you and this will help you to feel better and braver. It really needs your help though because the only way it’s going to be let back in control is if the amygdala thinks you’re safe. That message needs to come from you.

2. Let your brain know, ‘You can stop worrying now.’

Luckily, there is a very cool thing your brain can do and it’s called the relaxation response. You don’t have to believe it works because it’s programmed into your brain, like breathing, so it just does. But – it won’t work until you flick the switch. The best way to do that is to breathe. Not just any breathing though – strong, deep breaths that come from your belly.

° in through your nose for three,

° pause,

° out through your mouth for three.

(Imagine that you have a hot drink in your hands and you’re breathing in the delicious smell through your nose for three seconds, and then blowing it cool for three seconds.)

When you do this, it’s like a gorgeous massage for your amygdala. It totally relaxes it. It tells it that you’re okay and that it can chill for a bit. When your amygdala is relaxed, something kind of wonderful happens. Your prefrontal cortex (the ‘let’s think about this’ part of your brain) can take back control. The first thing that it does is to neutralise (get rid of) the fuel (oxygen, hormones, adrenalin). When that happens, the intense physical and emotional things you’re feeling all start to settle down. You’re back in control. Back to being the boss of your brain. It might not feel completely comfortable straight away, but it will be to a level that you can handle.

Very soon after that, you’ll feel much stronger and braver.

3. Get really active for a couple of minutes or go for a walk.

Remember that the fuel surging through you is there to make you strong, fast and powerful. If you don’t burn it up, it will build up, and that’s when it feels bad. Walking or exercise will burn the fuel and stop the awful physical things you’re feeling. If you can get sweaty for five minutes by running, skipping, jumping – anything – that will really help. Otherwise going for a brisk walk will also be a great thing to do.

4. Feel what’s happening outside of yourself.

When you feel anxious, you become really aware of what’s happening inside your body. Your brain also continues to worry itself silly by living in the future with a lot of ‘what if’s’. Bring your brain back to the present by turning your attention to what’s happening around you. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Touch your arms and feel the touch of your fingers against your sin. Feel your breath coming into you, and then going out. Feel the temperature. Hear the noises around you.

Try saying to self (in an example of school anxiety):

You’re brave. You’re strong. And you’re okay. Here’s why:

♥ You have people who care about you.

♥ Your teacher is on your side and would never ever let anything happen to you.

♥ School is strengthening your brain, so it can be even more amazing.

♥ Today you’re doing these fun things at school … (even if it’s just playing at lunch or eating something delicious – it all counts!).

6. Get organised.

Make a list of the things you need to do before you leave home to make your day go smoothly. That way, you can remind yourself that things are under control, even if they feel like they aren’t.

Breakfast eaten

Teeth brushed.

Uniform on.

Homework done.

Lunch packed.

Shoes on.

Bag packed.

Parents (or important adult) hugged.

bye to pets – done.

bye later,’ to sibling/s – done.

Hair – done.

7. Get some sleep.

When you sleep, your brain gets stronger and sorts out it’s emotional worries. The more sleep you get, the better.

8. Have something nice and smelly nearby.

Essential oils can calm a stressed out, busy brain. Have some ready when you need it by putting some on a tissue. Have a little smell when you need to feel calmer.

9. Anxiety and courage always exist together.

Anxiety means that you’re doing something brave. It doesn’t matter whether it’s easy for other people or not. We all find different things hard or easy. If you’re anxious, it’s because your brain thinks there’s something to worry about. It responds the same whether you’re about to give a presentation or about to skydive. It doesn’t matter what the thing is that’s making you nervous, an anxious brain is a brave brain, an anxious body is a brave body, and an anxious person is always a brave person.

Anxiety never just affects one person. It’s affects kids, parents, siblings and the teachers who also invest in the children in their care. One of the worst things about anxiety is the way it tends to show up without notice or a good reason. For kids (or anyone) who struggle with anxiety, it can feel like a roller coaster – it comes from nowhere, makes no sense and has a mind of its own. The truth is, the mind that anxiety has is theirs, and when they can understand their own power, they can start to establish themselves firmly as the ‘boss of their brain’. Understanding this will empower them, and will help them to draw on the strength, wisdom and courage that has been in them all along.

**More on Secure Attachment**

Developing a secure attachment with your child can help them in many ways. Children with a strong bond with a parent/guardian are more likely to have higher self-esteem, perform better in school, have positive relationships, and manage stress. Here are four simple ways you can develop an attachment with your child. Be Dependable Your child needs to see you as a safe place. Provide comfort whenever he or she is sick, hurt, or upset. Be physically available as often as possible. When your child feels safe, they can explore the world on their own, knowing they can return to you for security and comfort when they need it. Encourage your child to try new things by showing you believe they can do it on their own, but be nearby in case they need to return to you for comfort. Be Attentive Interact with your child one-on-one. Discover activities you can both enjoy, play games together, talk and listen to his or her interests. Take your child’s lead on what they need; do not force a specific type of interaction based on your needs. These activities do not need to take up a great deal of time, but it is the affection and undivided attention that is important. Eye contact, warmth and touch, and smiles will help build attachment during these interactions. Be Predictable. Children need routines to feel secure. Having a routine for meals, bedtime, and any other regular activity helps your child establish self-discipline and security. Knowing what comes next allows children to start the next step in the routine on their own, encouraging their independence.

Having your child spend time with another caregiver does not impact your attachment. Your child may create a bond with another person in addition to you.

**Practical Strategies to Improve Attachment**

Practice these new interactions to improve your parent-child attachment.

Re-do the behaviour. When your child behaves inappropriately, ask him to try the behaviour again but appropriately this time, “Let’s try that again…”.

Identify thoughts and feelings. Find alone time to listen to your child’s thoughts and feelings, especially ones that are hard to acknowledge, “I want to hear how you feel. Your feelings are important to me.”

Repair breaks in your relationship. Anytime a parent causes alarm, fright, or distress to the child (as all parents do), the parent must take responsibility for it and apologise thus repairing the break.

Gently point out distancing behaviours. When your child is distancing, use kind honesty to point it out, “I think you are pushing my love away by ignoring me/pushing me away/being mean to me.”

Write. When your child is reluctant or refuses to talk, encourage him to share his feelings through writing or drawing.