



Top tips for helping an anxious child

**Coping with anxiety during unsettling times:
Advice from a Clinical Psychologist**

Advice from Dr Helen Care



We spoke to Clinical Psychologist Dr Helen Care to find out some of her top tips for helping an anxious child to manage their worries.

Before reading through this document and trying the exercises with a child, try working through Dr Care's '[Helping children understand worry](#)', which this document builds on.

In this guide

Dr Care uses the analogy of the '**Lizard Brain**' in the two lessons below, in order to make the concept of anxiety more accessible to young children.

Lesson 1 explains the 'Lizard Brain' – the primal part of our brain that gears us up to flight, fight or freeze (or, in this case, run, rumble or rabbit). This session may help you to introduce children to some of the physical symptoms of anxiety so that they can start to spot when they feel anxious.

Lesson 2 focuses on why we have anxious feelings (why we need our Lizard Brains). This session also introduces some simple techniques that you can try with children so they can learn to manage any anxious thoughts and feelings they might have.

Dr Care has also provided five exercises you can try with your children or students. Dr Care suggests seeing which exercises work best for your children or students and then encouraging them to practice those exercises whenever they start to feel anxious

Some other great sources of information and guidance on **worry, anxiety** and **youth mental health** are:

- [British Psychological Society](#)
- [Childline](#)
- [Anna Freud Centre](#)
- [Young Minds](#)
- [The Mix](#)
- [Samaritans](#)

If you feel that you or someone you know (be they a parent, child, teacher or young person) are at risk of causing harm to themselves or others, then it is important to seek immediate professional help.

Seek an emergency GP appointment or call 999 if you or someone you know is at immediate risk.

Learning to control the 'Lizard Brain'

Introductory Session 1:

What is the 'Lizard Brain'?

Our brains are clever. They can do lots of brilliant things. We can talk, read, do maths and bake cakes using different parts of our brain.

There is a part of our brain, in the middle, which is our '**Lizard Brain**'. The Lizard Brain is in charge of keeping us safe and out of danger, but the Lizard Brain isn't so clever at some of the tricky things we need to do, like reading and maths. Every animal with a backbone has a very similar part of the brain, including lizards! That's why we call it the Lizard Brain.

The Lizard Brain's job is to try and keep us safe and protect us from danger. But it only knows how to react to dangerous things like a lizard would! Try thinking like a lizard for a second. What sort of things might be dangerous?

Some dangers are:



Things that might try and eat us!



Things that might want to attack us!



Things that might be dangerous like floods, lightning and being out in the snow all night!

When our **Lizard Brain** spots something it thinks might be dangerous, it sets off a 'Worry Warning Signal'. It uses chemicals to send messages around the whole body to get us ready to react really quickly and keep ourselves safe. The main chemical the Lizard Brain uses is called adrenaline.

Our Lizard Brain has three strategies for keeping us safe. When the Lizard Brain sends adrenaline around the body, it is preparing us to do one of three things to keep us safe: run, resolve or rabbit.

Run



The Lizard Brain wants us to **run away** from the scary thing or danger.

'Argh! There's a bear!'

Rumble



The Lizard Brain wants us to **tackle the danger** or scary thing head-on.

'I'm going to resolve this problem, not run away from it!'

Rabbit









The Lizard Brain wants us to **freeze like a rabbit** in the headlights.

'If I stay totally still, maybe the danger won't see me!'

Our Lizard Brain may respond in these ways at different times. If there's a bear coming to get us, then the Lizard Brain is very helpful because it prepares us to deal with the danger. But if there's no bear (no danger) then it may not be so helpful.

What does it feel like when our Lizard Brain spots a danger?

It sends adrenaline around our body to get us ready to run, rumble or rabbit! It does lots of things to our bodies that we might be able to feel.

What adrenaline does:	What this feels like:
Heart – adrenaline makes the heart beat faster and send lots of blood to our big muscles that we need for running and rumbling.	 Heart pounding. Muscles feel tense.
Breathing - adrenaline makes us breathe faster and harder to take in lots of oxygen so our muscles can work hard to run from or resolve the problem head-on.	 Panting, Breathing faster, Dry throat, Feeling like you can't quite breathe enough.
Sweat – adrenaline makes us sweat more. This gets us ready for cooling down after running or rumbling.	 Sweaty.
Stomach – adrenaline tells our stomachs to forget about whatever they are doing – breakfast isn't important if you are running away from a bear!	 Feeling sick. Having 'butterflies in your tummy'.
Wee! – Adrenaline makes you wee more. This gets rid of anything your body doesn't absolutely need for staying safe.	 Really, really needing the toilet!
Brain – adrenaline makes your brain only think about the dangerous thing until you are safe.	 Hard to concentrate. Thoughts about the dangerous thing keep popping into your head.

Introductory Session 2: Teaching the Lizard Brain to stay calm

Last time, we learnt that we have a Lizard Brain whose job it is to keep us safe. But the **Lizard Brain** only knows how to react like a lizard! It makes us run, rumble or rabbit! Run away from danger or problem, try to fight back (rumble), or make-like a rabbit and freeze!

So, why do we need our Lizard Brains anyway?

Can't we just get rid of them?

Our Lizard Brains are useful. They keep us safe when there are real dangers around, like making sure we stay out of the way of fast cars, don't stick our fingers in plug sockets and avoid any hungry bears we come across. They can also be helpful for some other worries too. Lizard Brains and their adrenaline are pretty good at getting us ready to run races or concentrate until the end of a maths test. We do need our Lizard Brains to keep us safe. It's just that sometimes, they aren't so helpful. If the danger the Lizard Brain has spotted isn't going to be solved by running away, fighting back or freezing and hoping it doesn't see you, then it isn't going to be of any help. The Lizard Brain can be especially unhelpful when there is a worry that is really big or that happens a lot of the time.

If there is a problem that keeps happening, stays around for a long time, or feels really really big, it can scare our Lizard Brain so much it goes into 'Red Alert!' Red Alert is when the Lizard Brain thinks there is danger everywhere and it starts looking out for danger all the time. It can't relax, and it can feel like it never sleeps! Sometimes it makes us spot dangers and problems even when there aren't any in the first place.

Sometimes we have to train our lizards! We can teach them what is dangerous and what isn't. We can send signals back to our Lizard Brains to let them know when they are being helpful, or when they are not.

If we think about the ways our Lizard Brains work, it gives us clues about how we can help them calm down.

Ways our Lizard Brains work

1

We can use our breathing to send a signal back to our Lizard Brains that says 'I am safe. I don't need to run away from a bear!'

2

We can release some of the tension in our muscles and get rid of the adrenaline.

3

We can problem solve – that means actively thinking about the problem the Lizard Brain sees as dangerous and coming up with better solutions to cope with it, instead of fighting back, freezing or running away.

4

We can use our amazing imaginations to remind our Lizard Brains that we can learn to feel calm, confident and ready to manage the problem.

5

We can teach the Lizard Brain to calm down again and learn to live with problems that we can't control or can't make go away.



Have a go and see which exercises work for you when you feel your Lizard Brain taking over.

Exercises for managing the Lizard Brain

These exercises are short and designed to help control our anxious Lizard Brains. You may need to practice each exercise a few times, so you start to get the hang of cooling down your Lizard Brain. Take your time and practice the exercises when you start to feel the worrying Lizard Brain take over so you can see what works for you. Remember to be kind to yourself. Learning to control the Lizard Brain can take some time!

Exercise 1: Bear claw breathing or Square breathing



Bear claw breathing (Younger children)

Put a hand up in front of you and say 'Stop! Is it a bear?'

If there isn't a bear or immediate danger, you can blow your bear claws away! Turn your hand around so your palm is facing you. Trace up your fingers one at a time with the finger of your other hand. Breathe in through your nose as you go up the finger and breathe out through your mouth as you trace down and fold the claw away. Do it with all 5 of your 'claws'!

Repeat a few times, trying to slow your counting down a little more each time. Keep your breathing calm and gentle throughout.



Square breathing (Older children)

Imagine a square, or look at something like a window or door frame with a square shape. Count along the four sides as you breathe in and out.

Breathe in through your nose for a count of 4 as you trace or look along the top; hold your breath as you count 4 down the side; breathe out gently as you count 4 along the bottom, and hold for a count of 4 as you count up the other side, before breathing in along the top again.

**How do you feel?
Has your Lizard Brain settled down?**

Exercise 2: Squeezing and relaxing

- 1 Squeeze and relax your muscles to help all the adrenaline and tension in your body melt away.
- 2 Start with your feet. Screw up your toes as tight as you can. Hold it. Then relax them out.
- 3 Pull your toes up to the ceiling and feel your calves tighten. Hold it. Relax.
- 4 Point your toes towards the floor. Hold it. And relax.
- 5 Try and tighten your thighs. See if you can squeeze them tight. Hold it. And relax.
- 6 Now your bottom. Squeeze it! Hold. Then relax.
- 7 Pull your belly button in as far as you can. Hold it. And relax it out.
- 8 Now your arms. Make fists, bend your arms and pull your fists up to your shoulders. Hold it. And relax.
- 9 Raise your shoulders up towards your ears. Hold it. Relax.
- 10 Now your face. First, grin like a great big Cheshire cat! Give a really big smile. Hold it. And relax. Now push your lips out in a fish face. Hold it. Try not to laugh! And relax.
- 11 Now screw your eyes tight shut. Hold it. And relax.
- 12 Open your eyes really wide and raise your eyebrows. Look really surprised. Hold it. And relax.
- 13 Finally, make fists. Squeeze them tight. Imagine all the worry and tension is being squeezed tight in your hands. Hold it. Now relax, spread your fingers wide and feel all the tension and the worry float out of your hands and away into the sky.

**How does your body feel?
Have any tensions in the body melted away?**

Exercise 3: Problem solve strategy

If you're feeling worried and ready to run, rumble or rabbit, then something made your Lizard Brain think there was a problem. What was it? If you can work out what it was, you can use your clever brain to get around it or find ways to cope.

Try these four steps to get around the problem:

- 1 **Identify** – what is the problem?
- 2 **Investigate** – what kind of problem is it? What is it stopping you from doing? Have you ever faced a problem like this before? What do you know about it?
- 3 **Ideas** – what might help solve this problem? How could you get around the problem? How could you make the problem smaller or go away?
- 4 **Invite help** – who could help you get around this problem or cope with it better? Ask them for help and get their ideas.



How do you feel after working through the steps above?

Exercise 4: Visualisation

Instead of letting your Lizard Brain make you feel frightened, worried or angry, let's show it you can feel something much more helpful instead.

- 1 Find somewhere comfortable to sit** with plenty of space around you so you won't be disturbed by anyone else and close your eyes.
- 2 Imagine you are a calm and confident lion.** You aren't afraid. You are ready to be clever and think of a way around this problem. You aren't bothered by a puny Lizard Brain! You can get around problems and cope with anything!
- 3 Imagine yourself standing strong and proud in the African savannah.** You have a good look around you. You notice the grass under your paws. The blue sky above you. You can see a flock of birds flying overhead. You feel the warm sun on your fur. You take some nice, slow breaths, in through your nose and gently out through your mouth. You notice a strong, confident feeling inside you. It is like a bright
- light. It starts in your tummy, small and bright, but then it starts to spread. That warm 'I can handle this' feeling starts to spread from your tummy, down to your paws. Then it goes all the way past your shoulders, into your head and out to the tips of your ears. You notice how warm and confident and ready to try you are. You feel ready to have a go at using your problem-solving skills.
- 4 You notice yourself standing tall,** ready to try and full of the 'I can handle this' feeling. It feels great to be that confident lion.
- 5 Then you give a big stretch.** You put your front paws out, yawn, and stretch away any worry.
- 6 And in a moment,** we will count to five and come back to the room where you really are. But you can bring that confident lion feeling with you and feel ready to tackle anything!

Exercise 5: Mindfulness

Sometimes problems don't go away. Sometimes our Lizard Brain has spotted something that we can't fix or something that we don't need to feel afraid of. We don't need to run, rumble, or freeze like a rabbit. Instead, we just want to teach our Lizard Brain that it is OK. It is OK to just be where we are and not get rid of the problem. We can live with the problem, or beside the problem, or we can wait until the problem goes away. When we can accept where we are and the problem we have, we can be fully mindful. Mindfulness is about paying attention to where we are and what is going on around us right now without judging it. It's about letting go of our expectations and learning to accept ourselves and what is going on around us, instead of trying to change things, run away from them, or tackle them head on.

- 1 Find somewhere comfortable to sit and close your eyes. Start by focusing on your breathing, feeling the sensations of the breath coming in and going out.
- 2 Now, start to focus in and listen to what's going on around you. Spend some time paying attention to the sounds. What can you hear? Are the sounds loud or quiet? Low or high-pitched? Try not to think about where the sounds come from or what they mean. Just focus on the qualities you hear – how loud they are, whether they are fast, slow, high-pitched or low-pitched.

- 3 Now focus in on the thoughts going on in your head. What are you thinking about at the moment? Imagine you are in a cinema (or watching a big TV) and all your thoughts are like pictures on the screen. Watch your thoughts go by. Try not to get wrapped up in them, but just sit and watch all the different thoughts that come into your head. Watch how they appear for a moment or two and then eventually pass by.

By learning to simply watch and listen to what is going on around you, you can learn to tell your Lizard Brain that things are. We don't need to solve the problem at the moment, we can just let it be. It's OK for things to be how they are.

More in the series...

Explore more free mental health and wellbeing support on our **Mental Health Hub**

