PEARSON

Helping children understand worry

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

Advice from **Dr Helen Care**

We spoke to Clinical Psychologist <u>Dr Helen Care</u>, who has put this document together as the first in a series on helping you to explain the concepts of worry and anxiety to young children.

This document leads on naturally to the 'Top tips for helping an anxious child' document, which builds on the concept of worry to explain anxiety. It also delves into practical activities for managing worry and anxiety in children.

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.

The activities, exercises and suggestions in this document are those of Dr Helen Care, not of Pearson Education or Pearson Clinical.

Understanding Worry

There are lots of words for the same kind of feeling. When we notice something that seems dangerous or like it might be too difficult to cope with, we get a feeling called worry. Worry is a warning signal to us. It is a warning that there might be a problem. Sometimes worry can be helpful. It can help keep us safe. It can warn us that something is dangerous and can stop us from getting hurt – it tells us not to step in front of a moving bus, or put our fingers in plug sockets, or step out of high windows.

But sometimes, we can get too worried! Our brains tell us things are a problem when they aren't really. Or our brains tell us we can't cope with a problem that we can actually cope with (even if we need to get some help to do it).

The **Worry Warning Signal** is a very old reaction that our prehistoric ancestors would have used to get their bodies ready for action! We still have the same automatic reaction today to get us ready to run away from danger, to fight it or to freeze.

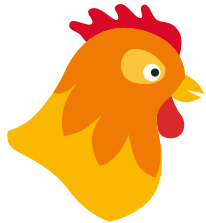Now, imagine being a caveperson and waking up one morning and noticing your Worry Warning Signal going off.

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What kind of problem might the Worry Warning Signal have noticed?

It could be a bear! → If it is a bear, we should run away!

It could be a chicken! → If it is a chicken, we should run and catch it as it could lay some eggs for breakfast.

It could be another caveperson trying to sneakily steal your best stone hammer! → f it is a caveperson, we should go and chase them away!

In any of these cases, the caveperson's body would need to do something really busy and active. So, the Worry Warning System gets their body ready for action using a chemical called adrenaline. The same thing still happens when we get worried today.

Adrenaline

Adrenaline is a chemical our bodies produce when they are worried. It gets our bodies ready for action when the **Worry Warning System** goes off! Adrenaline isn't dangerous and it can be really helpful if we are in danger, like if we are running away from a bear! But in our modern world, this is very unlikely to happen. Most things that our Worry Warning System notices now are not things we can do something to get rid of.

Nowadays, hitting things or running away from them tends to make problems worse! Imagine if your Worry Warning System had noticed a maths test, or a new club where you weren't sure you would know anyone, or friends not being kind... running away from these problems won't make them go away!

So, we have to help the Worry Warning System learn what it really needs to be worried about to keep us safe, and what we can cope with or ask for help to manage.

We also need to learn to get rid of some of the adrenaline that the Worry Warning System produces.

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Here are some of the jobs the **Worry Warning System** wants the **adrenaline** to do and what these feel like:

What the Worry Warning System wants adrenaline to do:	What this feels like:
Get more oxygen in your blood to help your muscles work hard.	Breathing gets faster (this can sometimes make you feel dizzy if you get too much oxygen in your body).
Pump more blood to your big muscles.	Heart beats faster.
Stop your tummy from digesting food or bothering with jobs that aren't going to help with running.	Butterflies' or sick feeling in your tummy.
Stop any extra blood going to the smaller bits of your body that don't help with running or hitting things.	Tingling/pins and needles in hands or ears.
Stop you being distracted or thinking about anything apart from the worry.	Hard to think or concentrate on anything. Headache.
Notice the worry until it has gone away.	Keep thinking about the worry even when you don't want to.
Keep your body cool ready for being really active.	Sweating more, especially on your face and other places.

Now we know this, we can work out ways to get rid of some of that extra adrenaline we don't need and teach our Worry Warning System to calm down. Have a read through the **'Top tips for helping an anxious child'** document to find some tips on exercises you can do to calm down when you are experiencing worry.

References for further information:

'Think Good, Feel Good' Paul Stallard

'The Handbook of Child and Adolescent Clinical Psychology' Alan Carr

'Playful Approaches to Serio us Problems' Jennifer Freeman, David Epston & Dean Lobovits

With special thanks to Dr Lucinda Hartley, Clinical Psychologist

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