

# ANXIETY IN CHILDREN

## A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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### **EUNICE COLLINS**

M Psych (Ed & Dev)(QUT), B Psych (Hons)(QUT)

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST, ACC MORETON

### **MARIA SARINA**

BA Soc Psych Soc Research, Dip Com Serv (Couns), Assoc Member CCAA

DIRECTOR & FOUNDER,

FRIENDSHIP CENTRE COUNSELLING SERVICES



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# INTRODUCTION

Childhood has sometimes been romanticised as a relaxed, carefree time to relish the joys of youth, before adult responsibilities crowd in and spoil the fun.

In reality, childhood is rarely like this. Our generation isn't the first to suffer adversity. In fact, children historically faced situations such as war, extreme poverty and slavery (and still do in many parts of the world).

There's no doubt that contemporary stresses are impacting children. Issues they're dealing with – such as academic stress, bullying, eco-anxiety, pandemics and excessive use of social media – are every bit as real and capable of making children feel anxious.

Fortunately, God knew that people would experience anxiety, so the Bible is filled with encouragement and advice for dealing with it. The Psalms offer many references to God's sustaining love and guidance, including reassurance that we can trust him, even though we “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4). Jesus, too, advised his followers not to be worried or upset, while promising them divine peace (John 14:27).

If you're reading this guide, it's likely you have or know a child experiencing anxiety. Be reassured that you are not alone, and that help is available.

Our hope is that it provides you with useful information and guidance about helping your child not just survive, but thrive as they grow to be a healthy, responsible and fulfilled young adult. We trust it will support your child on their journey to finding the peace that transcends understanding (Phil 4:7).

We'll start by looking at what anxiety is, and how it's different to stress and depression.

# WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. Stress and anxious feelings are usually a response to a specific situation (such as an exam or a misunderstanding between friends) and go away once that situation has passed.

While everyone feels anxious from time to time, if those feelings happen for no particular reason, don't go away, or are impacting everyday life, it could indicate an anxiety disorder.

It's important to understand that anxiety isn't always bad. Anxiety is an important feeling because it helps us to stay safe and avoid danger. But those feelings can become problematic when they don't go away, or affect your ability to concentrate, sleep and carry out everyday tasks. In children, this could include going to school and interacting with friends and family. In extreme cases, people may avoid going out altogether.

In this situation, anxiety is a defence mechanism that works to over-protect the person – like a fire alarm that continues to go off even after the fire has been put out.

## SOME ANXIETY STATISTICS

Anxiety disorders are the most common group of mental health conditions in Australia. On average, one in four Australians – including one in three women and one in five men – will experience anxiety at some time in their lives. In a 12-month period, over two million Australians experience anxiety.

Children are not immune either. In 2015, the Australian Government conducted a survey into the mental health of children and adolescents. They found that 6.9 percent of children aged 4 to 17 years had suffered from an anxiety disorder in the past 12 months.

They also discovered almost one-fifth of young people aged 11 to 17 years experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress in the previous 12 months. One in ten young people aged 12 to 17 years have engaged in self-harm, one in 13 will seriously consider a suicide attempt, and one in 40 will attempt suicide.

ONE IN THREE WOMEN WILL EXPERIENCE ANXIETY  
AT SOME TIME IN THEIR LIVES



ONE IN FIVE MEN WILL EXPERIENCE ANXIETY  
AT SOME TIME IN THEIR LIVES



## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Anxiety and depression are linked and have some similarities. They both involve changes in the function of neurotransmitters (chemical messengers in the brain). However, the conditions are experienced differently. They can be likened to two sides of the same coin.

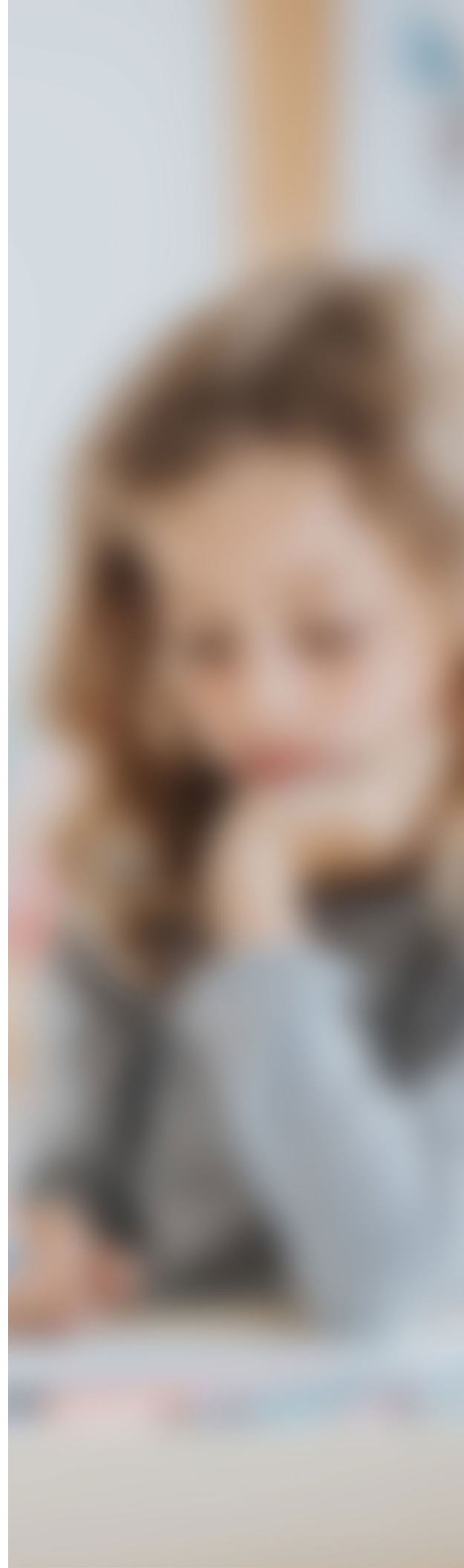
Anxiety is usually marked by a state of worry, uncontrollable thoughts about something going wrong, and a tendency to avoid anxiety-provoking situations. The worry is disproportionate to any actual risk or is related to situations where nothing is actually wrong.

Several types of anxiety disorders can affect children, including generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

In contrast, depression is marked by persistent thoughts of hopelessness, worthlessness, and lack of belief that the future will get better, and therefore there's no point trying.

Anxiety and depression can occur at the same time, or one may happen as a reaction to the other.

The good news is that anxiety disorders can be treated. We know that God doesn't want us to have a spirit of fear, but of a sound mind (2 Tim 1:7). Understanding more about them is a great first step.



# WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY IN CHILDREN?

There are many reasons why your child might develop an anxiety disorder, including factors they are born with and others in their environment. Some of these include:

1

## GENETICS

Some children are born more anxious and less able to cope with stress than others. Children can inherit genes that make them anxiety prone. If your child has a family member with an anxiety disorder, they are more likely to have one too.

2

## BRAIN CHEMISTRY

Genes determine how neurotransmitters work. If levels of certain neurotransmitters are low or they're not working well, it can cause anxiety..

3

## LEARNED BEHAVIOURS

Children who are around anxious people can pick up their anxious tendencies. For example, children growing up in a family where others are fearful or anxious may learn to be anxious too.

4

## LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

- Just like adults, children experience situations that are stressful and hard to cope with. Some children develop anxiety after stressful events, such as:
- loss of a close relative or friend
- a serious illness or accident
- frequent school or house moves
- parents fighting or arguing
- school-related issues such as bullying
- experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect.

5

## OTHER DISORDERS

Children with autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are more likely to have anxiety problems.

# HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOUR CHILD IS EXPERIENCING ANXIETY?

Perhaps you're wondering if your child's symptoms could be related to anxiety, or a teacher has commented about a concerning behaviour. Signs that your child may be experiencing anxiety will vary depending on their age and the type of anxiety disorder.

A young child experiencing separation anxiety, for example, may be clingy and tearful when separated from their parents. An older child with social anxiety disorder may complain of stomach upsets before school and avoid social situations.

Some physical signs of anxiety include:

- feeling jittery or shaky
- shortness of breath
- butterflies in the stomach
- racing heart
- sweaty palms, dry mouth
- tense muscles.

These signs are related to the body's fight or flight response – a normal response to perceived danger. Believing you're in danger triggers the release of adrenaline, which prepares our bodies to run away – or stand and face our foe – by quickening the pulse and breathing rates and diverting blood flow to our muscles.

In dangerous situations, this response is vital for our protection. But in anxiety disorders, the fight or flight response is overactive and happens even when there's no real danger.

Occasional fight or flight signs don't mean your child has an anxiety disorder. They may be a reaction to a stressful event, like worry about an upcoming exam.

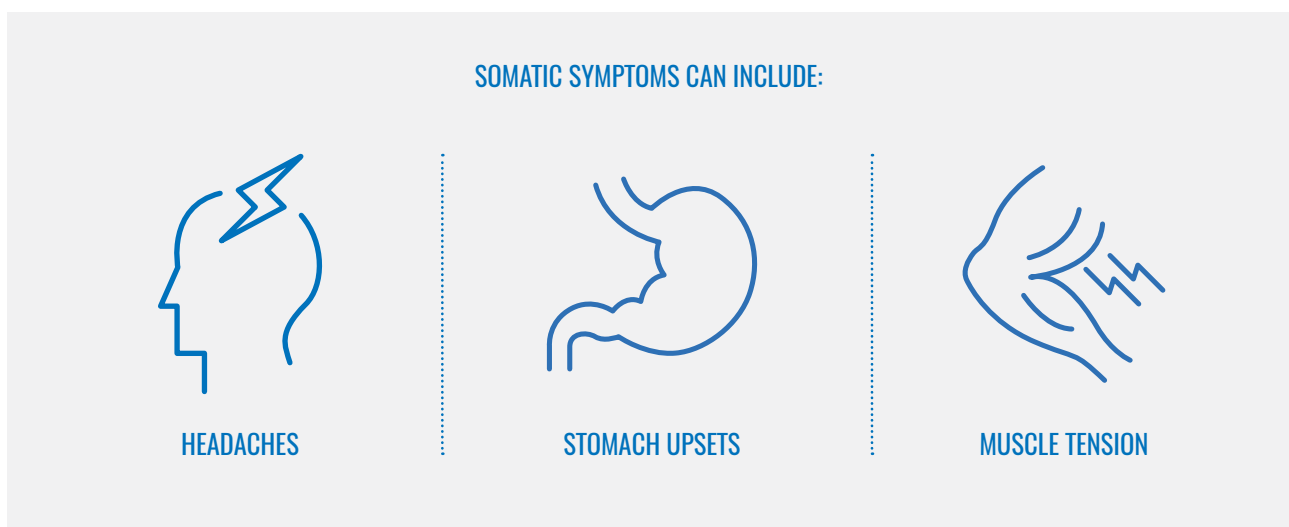
Other signs of anxiety in children include:

- frequent worry or needing a lot of reassurance
- difficulty sleeping or frequent nightmares
- trouble concentrating, restlessness
- not eating properly
- having unwanted and intrusive thoughts
- being angry or irritable
- complaining of headaches or tummy upsets
- using the toilet frequently
- trying to avoid the situation they're concerned about
- wanting things to be perfect and getting upset when they're not
- refusal to talk or do what you ask
- asks for help with things they can do for themselves
- not wanting to get ready for school
- refusal to sleep without a parent or other adult
- frequently asking you to do or say things for them
- tendency to focus on the dangerous or negative side of thing

Many anxiety symptoms overlap with symptoms of other disorders. Stomach upsets or not eating well, for example, may be caused by a gastrointestinal disorder. Restlessness and irritability may be signs of ADHD. That's why it's important your child is assessed by a qualified health professional if you're concerned about their wellbeing.

For a child to be diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder, they should have one or more anxiety symptoms for at least six months, which are triggered by more than one thing (such as being anxious about schoolwork and social situations).

Their feelings of worry will also be difficult to control, cause distress and lead to an impairment (a reduction in or loss of function or ability). For example, your child may have trouble sleeping, which interferes with their ability to concentrate at school, causing their grades to decline. They may also experience symptoms in their body (called 'somatic symptoms'), such as headaches, stomach upsets and muscle tension.



While some anxiety symptoms are obvious, others can be harder to detect. Children with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), for example, may have repetitive behaviours or mental rituals they perform (compulsions), such as hand washing or repeatedly checking their schoolwork for mistakes. These are easy to see. Others, however, will have recurrent, intrusive and unwanted thoughts (obsessions) that you'll only know about if your child says something.

## **FEARS AND PHOBIAS**

Although they can be distressing, some fears are common and age-appropriate. For example, pre-schoolers may experience fear of the dark or monsters.

For some children, anxiety is only triggered in specific circumstances, such as seeing a snake or spider, or during a thunderstorm. Most children outgrow these anxieties.

If fears and phobias continue past an age where they're appropriate, or are interfering with daily life, they could be a sign of a deeper problem.

## **PANIC ATTACKS**

This type of anxiety disorder is rare in children but becomes more common in later teen years. Symptoms include extreme fear or discomfort, along with at least four 'fight or flight' symptoms, such as heart palpitation, shortness of breath, feeling choked, nausea, and dizziness.

People having a panic attack may feel like they are detached from themselves or losing control.

## **SELECTIVE MUTISM**

With this anxiety disorder, children refuse to talk, except perhaps to close family members at home. At school and in other social situations, they become anxious and extremely uncomfortable when they're expected to speak.

Selective mutism can sometimes be overlooked as a disorder, because it can be mistaken for extreme shyness.



# STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH ANXIETY

Some children experiencing anxiety develop their own ways of coping with difficult situations. Often, this involves avoiding the situation or asking a parent or other adult to do things for them. For example, they might ask a parent to discuss a classroom dilemma with their teacher.

While this strategy reduces the immediate anxiety, avoiding anxiety-provoking situations increases the likelihood of feeling anxious and unable to cope next time. This can lead to a spiral where children find it harder to cope with everyday stresses at home, school and in social settings.

If your child is experiencing anxiety, there are better ways to support them. They include:

- encouraging your child to take some slow, deep breaths to help settle the physical effects of anxiety – try breathing in for three counts, holding for three, then out for three.
- once they're calm enough, encourage your child to talk about their feelings.
- listening to them and acknowledging their fears or concerns; don't dismiss or ignore them.
- scheduling 'worry time' – set aside a designated time of 10 to 15 minutes each day to deal with worries. Encourage your child to write down or draw what's troubling them. When the time is over, leave worries behind until next time.
- gently encouraging them to do things they're anxious about. You could try a technique called 'laddering', where you break worries down into smaller chunks and work gradually towards a goal. For example, if your child is afraid of swimming, start by encouraging them to sit on the edge of the pool, then dangle their legs in, and so on.
- encouraging positive thinking – children with anxiety often get stuck in unhelpful thinking patterns such as focusing on worst-case scenarios and 'what ifs'. Help them shift to a more helpful thinking style. One way to do this is challenging their scary thoughts with facts. For example, remind them that thunder and lightning can't hurt them while they're safe indoors, and crocodiles can't climb up the S-bend into the toilet. Remind them of times when they faced similar issues and things worked out fine.

ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO  
TAKE SLOW DEEP BREATHS



LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD



ENCOURAGE POSITIVE THINKING



- planning for how they'll respond if things don't turn out as they'd hoped. For example, what they'll do if a group of people are unfriendly or leave them out.
- avoiding stepping in to help unless it's necessary.
- modelling helpful coping – children imitate what they see. When you're feeling anxious or stressed, talk to your child about your feelings and how you're coping. For example, tell them, "I'm really nervous about doing this presentation at work tomorrow, but I won't let that stop me. I'll practise deep breathing beforehand to help me stay calm."
- maintaining a loving, caring relationship with your child.
- avoiding labelling your child as anxious, fearful or shy.
- praising them for trying things that provoke anxiety.
- looking at BRAVE – this free online program helps children cope with worries and anxiety. It includes three versions: one suitable for young children aged 3 to 7, one for children aged 8 to 12 and one for teens, plus a parents' program.
- families could explore what the Bible says about anxiety and how to find greater peace. After all, peace is listed among the fruit of the spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Teaching your children to cast their anxieties on God (1 Pet 5:7) and take their concerns to him in prayer (Phil 4:6) can help build their faith and experience God's peace for themselves. You could also pray together, talk about experiences where your faith has helped you through anxious times, and read books about Christians who have overcome fear and pursued God's call on their lives.

#### MAINTAIN A LOVING, CARING RELATIONSHIP



#### PRAISE THEM FOR TRYING



#### EXPLORE WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS



If you suspect your child may have an anxiety disorder, it's important to seek professional assessment and advice. Don't assume things will improve on their own. Remember, anxiety is common, help is available, and seeking support early is the best course of action. Your family doctor is the best place to start looking for help.

You might need to seek professional support if your child:

- stops participating in school or social activities due to anxiety.
- feels anxious more than other children of a similar age, or
- has fears or worries that seem disproportionate to their circumstances.

# HOW ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS DIAGNOSED?

Anxiety disorders are diagnosed by trained health professionals, such as doctors and psychologists. An assessment will involve talking to you and your child about their anxieties and fears.

You and/or your child may need to fill out questionnaires to help determine your child's anxiety level and the type of anxiety disorder.

## TREATMENT FOR ANXIETY

Many children will benefit from talking to a qualified counsellor or psychologist. It's important to find a therapist you and your child feel comfortable with. Don't be afraid to ask questions before you book an appointment, such as whether the counsellor has experience helping children with anxiety. Families may like to work with a counsellor who shares their worldview and confidence in a God who promises to strengthen and uphold us (Isaiah 41:10).

You could ask your doctor, pastor, friends, or your child's school if they can recommend someone.

A common and often successful form of treatment is called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). In this 'talking therapy', children learn about how their thoughts and actions affect their feelings.

For example, they'll learn that avoiding fears makes the fears grow stronger, and facing fears weakens them, so they ultimately go away.

The therapist will teach your child coping skills and provide opportunities for them to practice facing their fears.

Parents will also be involved in therapy. Your therapist will teach you how best to respond and help your child face their worries. You can help your child by being actively engaged in therapy. Talk with the therapist, help your child practice what they're learning at home, and praise them for their efforts. And be patient – it takes time for unhelpful thoughts and habits to change.

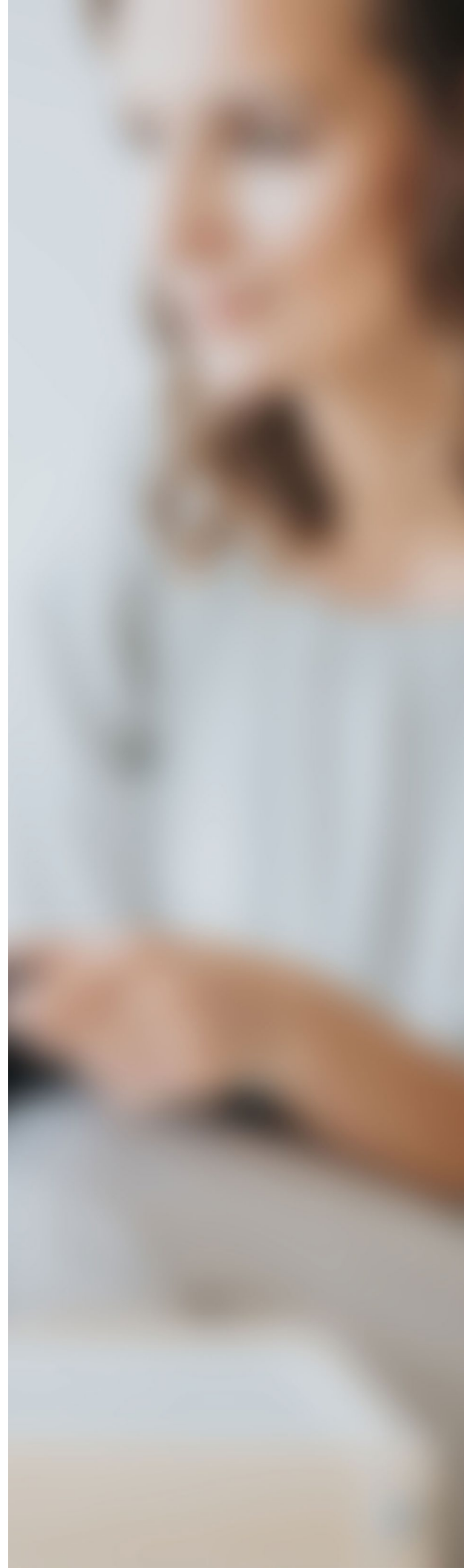
With time and perseverance, your child can learn to face their fears and feel better. They'll learn helpful strategies they can use throughout their lives whenever they face stressful situations, such as at university, work or social functions.

Rarely, a child might need medication for anxiety. A doctor (such as your GP or paediatrician) can discuss this with you.

You can also help your child by seeking support from other trusted adults, such as their school counsellor, class teacher, pastor or youth worker. Having a network of understanding, encouraging and positive people around them goes a long way to helping your child feel better about themselves and their lives. This network could include family friends, relatives, or people from your church.

Most importantly, remember you're not alone and help is out there. Jesus clearly knew people would be anxious, otherwise he wouldn't have needed to tell us not to worry about our lives (Luke 12:22-26)!

Sometimes, he intervenes to give us peace. Other times, he works through people he has gifted and trained to help others. Seek the support you need to give your child the best chance of becoming a healthy, fulfilled and successful adult.



## FURTHER INFORMATION & RESOURCES

CCAA	08 7099 2277
<a href="#">The BRAVE Program by Beyond Blue</a>	1300 22 4636
<a href="#">Kids Helpline</a>	1800 55 1800
<a href="#">Lifeline</a>	13 11 44
<a href="#">ehedspace</a>	1800 650 890

If you are in an emergency, or at immediate risk of harm to yourself or others, please contact emergency services on 000 (triple zero).

*Disclaimer: this guide is intended for general information purposes only and does not substitute for professional advice. If you have concerns about your or your child's mental health, please consult a qualified health professional.*

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