



# REMEMBER THAT WORRY IS NORMAL. WE ALL WORRY SOMETIMES.

An important first step to helping your child with anxiety is to let them know that everyone worries sometimes. Anxiety is a normal, healthy emotion. We can think of it as our internal alarm system that helps us cope with stress, difficult problems, and dangerous situations. For example, your child might be afraid of strangers or of being separated from you. This is a normal reaction to situations that are unfamiliar, unpredictable, or potentially dangerous. And, sometimes our anxiety alarm system can go off when there is no real danger, or when the threat is very minor. We can think of these as false alarms. But, even though the threat may not be real, the alarm feels the same.

When our alarm goes off it affects us in three main ways:

- **Physical Changes:** Anxiety activates the fight-flight-freeze response, which prepares our body for responding to a threat. This includes many physical changes such as an increased heart rate and rapid breathing.
- **Thoughts:** Anxiety gets us thinking about the danger/problem and narrows our attention to focus on the threat.
- **Behaviour:** Anxiety urges us to act in ways to protect ourselves or others. Such as running away from danger.

Here are some ways we can help children recognize and understand their anxiety:

1. **Provide opportunities for your child to talk about his/her worries and fears.** Sometimes this will mean, noticing when your child seems worried and asking about it. For example, *“When the cashier asked you a question, you hid behind me. You seemed to be feeling nervous. What was that like for you?”* Ask them about how they experience anxiety in their bodies. You might want to start with your own experience, for example: *“When I get worried, I usually get butterflies in my tummy. How do you feel in your body when you get worried?”*
2. **Explain the fear response to your child.** You might explain this using the alarm analogy described above, or ask them about what people tend to do when they are scared or frightened. You can then discuss how sometimes people defend themselves (fight), run away from the situation (flight), or stay still and hope that they aren’t noticed and the danger goes away (freeze).
3. **Problem-solve.** One important reason that we worry, is that it helps us focus our attention on problems that need to be solved. If your child’s worry is about something solvable, try working on solving the problem together. Have your child brainstorm possible solutions to the problem, decide together which strategy to try, encourage them to do it and see how it goes. If it wasn’t successful, you can move on to one of the other possible solutions.
4. **Limit the reassurance.** As we all know it’s not always helpful when someone says, *“Don’t worry, it’s going to okay.”* And, this is the same for children. It can be helpful to let your child know that you will take care of things, when they are worrying about something that is an “adult worry”. But, most times you want to acknowledge their fears and worries, and then guide them through how to manage their anxiety.