



# TALK BACK TO YOUR WORRIES. JUST BECAUSE YOU WORRY IT, DOESN'T MAKE IT TRUE.

When kids (and grown-ups) are anxious, they often spend a lot of time thinking about the things they're afraid of, even when they don't really want to. It's kind of like they're carrying around a giant magnifying glass that makes them focus on all the scary or awful things that might happen, instead of letting them see the whole picture, which usually isn't as bad as what they're imagining. It's like a worry cloud that hangs over them and follows them around. Some examples of common worries are, "What if I get sick?" "I might get lost," "They're not going to like to me," or "What if I make a mistake?" These "what-ifs" or worry thoughts can be extremely powerful, making fears grow even bigger and increasing the chances that we may try to avoid or escape from new and difficult situations. And, unfortunately, avoiding and escaping the things we fear only makes our anxiety worse. A more helpful worry-shrinking strategy is to identify and talk back to the "what-ifs" and worries that sometimes take over and try to boss us around. Below are some helpful tips you can use to help your child cope better with their "worry clouds."

- 1. One strategy is to think about the worries as something separate and distinct from your child.** This is sometimes referred to as "externalizing the problem," and especially for younger kids, it can be a great way to make their worries seem less frightening and more manageable. Teaming up with a trusted adult to shrink away a "worry cloud" that's trying to trick them or set off false alarms can be a truly empowering experience for kids. Drawing a funny picture of the anxiety and giving it a silly name can often add an extra element of lightness to the process and further engage and motivate your child.
- 2. Younger kids can be coached in the use of "brave talk"** - simple coping statements that help them stay calm in challenging situations or that contradict typical worry thoughts (e.g., "I'm safe," "I have lots of friends," "I'm a smart kid and can figure things out"). Parents and other adults can also help smaller children recognize when their "worry cloud" is on the scene and encourage them to challenge or resist it more directly (e.g., "I see that Mr. Worry is trying to trick you again by making you think that the thunder will hurt you. That's just not true. Maybe we need to tell Mr. Worry to stop telling lies and get lost").
- 3. Older kids can be explicitly taught how to challenge or test out the accuracy of their worry thoughts.** To do this, they first need to identify exactly what they're afraid might happen (e.g., "I'll forget what I want to say and make a fool of myself in front of the entire class.") Once their worries are out on the table, they can be taught to ask questions, consider alternatives, and collect evidence to determine the actual facts. Potential questions could include, "What would I tell a friend who was worried about something like this?" "How likely is it to happen?" "What could I do to cope if this actually happened?" "What are at least three other things that could happen?" Asking and answering these kinds of questions may assist older children in gaining a more accurate and balanced perspective regarding difficult or frightening situations, which can help them to

challenge their “what-ifs” and worry thoughts instead of automatically assuming they’re true. Recognizing that their worst-case scenario has never actually happened and that other, less awful possibilities are equally, if not more likely to happen, can go a long way in helping kids feel more confident about their ability to cope and gradually face their fears.