



# WORRY SHRINKER

A 5 STEP GUIDE TO HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH AND DECREASE ANXIETY



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## CONTRIBUTORS

**R. Abdulrehman, Ph.D., C.Psych.**

Registered Clinical Psychologist  
Public Mental Health Initiative, Director  
Clinic Psychology  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of Clinical Health Psychology  
University of Manitoba

**Alana Grayston, Ph.D., C. Psych.**

Registered Clinical Psychologist  
Clinic Psychology Manitoba

**Lyla Levy, M.A., C.S.C. School Psych.**

Clinical Associate.  
Clinic Psychology Manitoba

**Tiffany Lippens, Ph.D., C.Psych.**

Registered Clinical Psychologist  
Clinic Psychology Manitoba

**Jo Ann Unger, Ph.D., C.Psych.**

Registered Clinical Psychologist  
Clinic Psychology Manitoba  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of Clinical Health Psychology  
University of Manitoba



# 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.



# BREATHE. MORE SLOWLY. FROM YOUR NOSE AND YOUR TUMMY.

As stated in the earlier section, physical changes in our body are one way our alarm gets triggered with anxiety. Our body does this by breathing faster, and taking in more oxygen more quickly. This often means breathing fast, and results in a rapid heart rate, but also other physical problems, like nausea, dizziness, or chest pains. Younger children may have difficulty describing these problems specifically and so will often describe these feelings as just “feeling sick” or having a “tummy ache”. They may have them alone, but often in response to something that makes them feel anxious.

Breathing more slowly from your tummy and your nose (sometimes called Belly Breathing), is a good way to slow the intake of oxygen into our bodies, and also slowly turn off the physical anxiety alarm.

Below are steps to one of our favourite breathing activities for kids, however, there are many different types of mindfulness and relaxation strategies that can be helpful. A quick internet search yields several fun ways to engage in these types of activities with your little one. So have fun experimenting with a variety of these types of activities and discover which ones your youngster likes best!

Remember, when learning a new coping strategy, it is helpful to first practice it regularly when somewhat calm. A regular practice of relaxation or mindfulness, will help to reduce stress and anxiety levels overall, even if they are not anxious while they practice. Once the strategy becomes more natural, children can also use the skill to help settle specific moments of high anxiety.

## **Mindfulness For Kids – Teddy Bear Belly Breathing aka Breathing Buddies**

What you need: Comfortable clothes, ample floor space (or another place to lie down), a favourite stuffed toy.

1. To practice belly-breathing, ask your child to lie comfortably and place his hands on their belly (if they use a stuffed animal, it can be placed on the belly at or slightly above the belly button).
2. As you count to three, ask them to inhale deeply through their nose. Tell them to fill their belly with air as they inhale; they should feel it get bigger and bigger and bigger throughout the count to three. If their stuffed toy sits atop their belly, they might see it rise as their belly “fills with air”. Many children like the example filling a balloon with air, or waves on the ocean and taking their stuffed toy for a ride up and down.
3. Ask them to exhale to a slow count to four. Tell them they might see their stuffed toy fall as they feel their belly shrinking and shrinking throughout the count to four.
4. Do five to ten rounds of belly (“buddy”)-breathing to get started or more if they are enjoying it.
5. Afterward, ask your child how it felt. Is there a difference in how you feel now? What did you notice about your stuffed toy as you inhaled and exhaled? How did it feel when you let your breath out? Could you help them try this the next time they feel anxious or could they try it themselves?



## TRY TO DO THE THINGS YOU ARE AFRAID OF (A LITTLE AT A TIME).

This is also called facing your fears, being brave, or exposure therapy. One of the very best ways to beat anxiety is to get closer and closer to the thing that we fear. When we do this, we learn, in an experiential way, that the thing that we fear is actually not so fearful. If we continue to avoid the thing that we fear, our fear actually gets stronger. When we gradually put ourselves in the situations we fear, and nothing bad happens, our alarm system turns off, and our anxiety goes down. When we repeat this, it decreases the likelihood that our anxiety alarm goes off in those situations and shrinks our fear. Below are some helpful tips on how to help your child do this with their unrealistic fears. Using the story of the worry cloud is especially helpful with this tool. You can remind the child that when they avoid the things they are anxious about (that you recognize as irrational), their worry cloud gets bigger. When they do the opposite of what they are anxious about, their worry cloud gets smaller.

- 1. In doing any of the steps below, be sure to talk about it with your child beforehand and make all plans for bravery practice together.** It is very important that this experience is as positive as possible, not in any way coercive and within the control of the child. So consider yourself team members where you can act as a coach or cheerleader to help your child shrink their worry cloud. By targeting the worry cloud, you don't blame the child for behaviors that may come as a result of the anxiety. By being a team member, the child feels supported, and as a team you can target behaviors and not the child. Allowing your child to make some decisions on where to start and what fears to face first and how much or how quickly you proceed (you can use gentle encouragement to move them along) empowers them, and reduces the likelihood of making the fear worse (which can occur when you push too hard too quickly). Remember, you can use encouragement and positive rewards (like social praise and mini celebration) for every little step your child makes towards their fears.
- 2. Talk about anxiety with your child as described in the previous section.** Then talk about levels of anxiety and how some things make us a little bit afraid and other things very much afraid. Teach them about how to rate their anxiety on a scale from 0 to 10. Using visuals to relay the level of their anxiety, such as the size of their worry cloud, can be helpful and anchor the ideas in their minds.
- 3. Next create a Fear Ladder or hierarchy.** This means creating numerous steps to facing the biggest fear. This can be done by breaking the feared situation down into small steps or listing the things we fear in order of least feared to most feared. For example, if a child is afraid of dogs, the lowest step on the ladder might be watching movies about dogs, next seeing a dog from across the street, then in a pet store behind a window, then petting a dog on a leash and finally petting a dog off of a leash. As you create the steps together, have them rate their imagined level of anxiety if they were in that situation. Then write the steps on the ladder from the lowest to the highest feared situation. Consider having some type of reward or party for when your child reaches the top. Social praise is one of the best reinforcers.

**4. Now your child is ready to practice being brave.** Start at the bottom of the ladder and plan how and when you will practice doing that step. The more often you can practice, the quicker the fear will shrink. Keep track of the practice situations using a chart. This chart should include a place to put a sticker to reward the practice, as well as a way to track the anxiety level at the start, during and at the end of the practice. Again, examples of charts can be found online (check our Build Your Team section for ideas.) The practice ends when the anxiety level has come down. It is very important for your child to not leave the practice at the height of their anxiety, as this is a type of avoidance and will actually increase the fear to the situation. Your child is ready to move up the ladder when their highest fear rating during the practice is no more than a 2 or 3 out of 10. Then you practice facing their next highest fear. Working in this way helps your child to develop a sense of confidence in themselves and in their ability to face their fears and be brave. Praise them each step of the way. Social praise is one of the best ways to reinforce behaviors. Have fun with this step, play with how you face your fears. Remember your reaction also models a reaction for your children. If you're having a little fun with it, but are sensitive to their emotions, they will feel understood but not as scared about facing their fears.



# 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.





# GET HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT. BUILD YOUR TEAM!

Encourage your child to talk to you about their anxiety and include you as a part of their team. Their teachers and if needed, psychologists, can also be a part of their team. If the tips on our website are not enough for your family, consider these additional resources. Remember, we all need extra help sometimes. Our mental health deserves as much care and attention as our physical health.

## 1. Useful Websites

Below are some websites that we find helpful when working with children with anxiety.

- Anxiety self-help material - [www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com)
- A useful video explaining child anxiety: <http://www.heysigmund.com/age-by-age-guide-to-fears/>
- Belly Breathing Video from Sesame Street: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_mZbzDOpyIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mZbzDOpyIA)
- Buddy breathing example - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2Tbfs7neAk&feature=youtu.be>
- Child Mind Institute - <https://childmind.org/>

## 2. Useful Books

- A book for children on anxiety: <http://www.apa.org/pubs/magination/441A314.aspx>
- A parenting book on teaching emotion coping- The Whole Brain Child by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D. - [http://www.drdansiegel.com/books/the\\_whole\\_brain\\_child/](http://www.drdansiegel.com/books/the_whole_brain_child/)
- A book on mindfulness for children - Planting Seeds by Thich Nhat Hanh - <https://www.amazon.ca/Planting-Seeds-Practicing-Mindfulness-Children/dp/1935209809>

## 3. Community Resources

There are a number of helpful resources, at the community level, that are available in Manitoba. Below are some ideas we often share with people.

- Anxiety Disorders Association of Manitoba - [www.adam.mb.ca/Winnipeg](http://www.adam.mb.ca/Winnipeg)
- Student Services at your local school with school psychologists. Ask about this at your school.

## 4. Clinical Services

- Clinic Psychology Manitoba - [www.clinicpsychology.com](http://www.clinicpsychology.com)
- Manitoba Psychological Society - [www.mps.ca](http://www.mps.ca)
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health - Centralized Intake: <http://www.matc.ca/services-cimh.html>