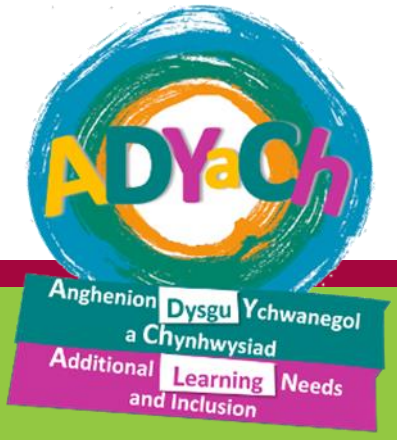
Reducing Anxiety

GWYNEDD & MÔN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE



Introduction

In this workbook from the Gwynedd & Môn Educational Psychology service, we aim to support the wellbeing of educational staff, carers or young people

Anxiety

We all experience anxiety at some point in life and it is a natural response to many situations we come across. Unfortunately many people can get anxiety a little bit too often and it sometimes gets in the way of doing things.
In this workbook, we will explain why we feel anxious and give some guidance on what we can do to help reduce our anxiety over time.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

It is normal to get anxiety – especially when doing things that we aren't used to or have never done before. Anxiety can lead to physical, mental and behavioural symptoms:

Physical symptoms can be scary and unpleasant. It is important to know these because you will learn to recognise them as anxiety which makes it easier to know when to use the practices you will learn in this workbook. They include:

- Chest Pain
- Loss of Appetite
- Headaches
- Feeling Lightheaded or Dizzy
- Faster or irregular heartbeat

Mental symptoms are also important to be aware of because they can let us know when we need to use our exercises. They include:

- Feeling tense or nervous
- Unable to Relax
- Worrying about the past of the future
- Feeling tearful
- Not being able to sleep

Behavioural symptoms usually happen because of physical and mental symptoms and can give you an idea of how bad your anxiety is or if you have normal amounts of anxiety. They include:

- Not being able to enjoy your leisure time
- Difficulty looking after yourself
- Problems concentrating at home or school
- Struggling to make and maintain friendships and relationships at home
- Worried about trying new things

What are your experiences?

Take a moment to write down some of the things you experience when you feel anxious. Think of a situation that may cause you anxiety and try to personalise them as much as you can.

PHYSICAL (HOW YOUR BODY FEELS)

E.G. SWEATING

MENTAL (YOUR THOUGHTS)

E.G. PEOPLE ARE LOOKING AT ME

BEHAVIOURAL (WHAT YOU DO)

E.G. STARED AT MY PHONE

What can I do about how anxiety makes my body feel?

Physical Symptoms are usually feeling tense in the body and an increase in our breathing and our heartrate. If we practices exercises to help physical symptoms, it will go a long way to helping our mental and behavioural symptoms too. We will discuss *breathing techniques*, *muscle relaxation* and *meditation*.

There are helpful exercises from Calm and Headspace. They have lots of helpful videos on their Youtube channels and on the Calm and Headspace apps.

BREATHING RELAXATION

While it sounds too simple to help, breathing exercises are one of the best ways to help our anxiety. Gaining control of your breathing will not only help your heartrate and heavy breathing, it will help the "butterflies" in your stomach and nervous shaking as these are linked to increased blood and oxygen rushing to other parts of the body.

Try some controlled breathing exercises. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth, focusing on your body and you do. If it helps, count breaths for 3-4 seconds before exhaling. Calm has a useful 'breathing bubble' tool that can help.

Practice some controlled breathing now and take a moment to write down how you feel afterwards.

MUSCLE RELAXATION

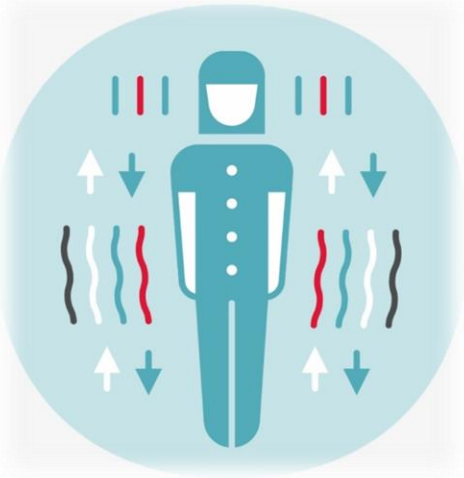
Just like how controlled breathing helps reverse breathing too heavily and our increased heartrate, muscle relaxation will help remove some of the tension in our muscles.

One of these exercised is call progressive muscle relaxation. Take the following steps:

1. Make sure you're sitting or lying down.
2. Take a deep breath in.
3. Tense any part of the body (legs, arms, shoulders, stomach etc.)
4. Exhale
5. Release the tension.
6. Repeat with a different part of the body.

You can do this from your face all the way down to your feet.

Practice this with the parts of your body where you feel tense and note down how you feel afterwards.



MEDITATION

Meditation involves elements of progressive muscle relaxation and controlled breathing and can be another useful tool to help relax and reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety. Meditation also has other benefits such as better decision making, emotional health and feeling less stressed.

Try to do a few minutes of meditation to practice;

1. Either sitting or lying down, keep your spine straight (if sitting place your feet on the floor) and relax your arms. The important thing is feeling comfortable.
2. Control your breath like you do with breathing exercises (count your inhales, holds and exhales if it helps).
3. Close your eyes or keep them open.
4. Let your thoughts and emotions come and go. Try to avoid fixating or 'removing' these and just experience them.

To help make meditation part of your routine, think about when you will do it (In the shower/bath, on the bus to school, after brushing your teeth etc.). Try to practice in a place you won't be disturbed or distracted if possible.

Calm and Headspace have loads of helpful meditation videos that are suitable for everyone. You can find them on youtube or on their apps.

What can I do about thinking anxiously?

Much of the way anxiety affects us is because of the way we think. Following certain practices we can try change our thinking to reduce our anxiety.

Sometimes we can think in an unhelpful way that makes our anxiety worse such as:

• Black and white thinking	"*I failed my exam so I'll fail at everything*"
• Catastrophizing	*"mam is late coming home, something must be wrong"*
• Treat emotions as facts	*"I feel anxious, something must be wrong"*
• 'Shoulds' and 'musts'	*"I should be able to cope"*
• Jumping to conclusions	*"They haven't replied to my text. They're ignoring me"*
• Ignoring positives	*"They don't really mean those nice things they said"*

CHALLENGING THOUGHTS

Try writing down a thought that causes you anxiety

1. When you experience an anxious thought ask yourself:

- How realistic is this thought?
- Does this thought have any evidence to support it?
- Is there any evidence against this thought?
- What is the best outcome?
- What is the worst outcome?
- What is the **likely** outcome?

2. Imagine if the worst outcome is true. Would it still matter…
- In a week?
- In a month?
- In a year?

3. Can you identify an unhelpful thinking pattern? (Black and white thinking, jumping to conclusions etc.)

4. What would you tell a friend in the same situation?

5. Is there another way of looking at the situation?

6. Is there something I can be doing to help feeling anxious? Relaxation exercises, distract myself with an activity I enjoy etc).

DISTRACTIONS

It is important to use distractions that help your anxiety. These will usually be activities that make it difficult to think, help relaxation or just be things you enjoy doing. For example: sports, reading or watching TV and films.

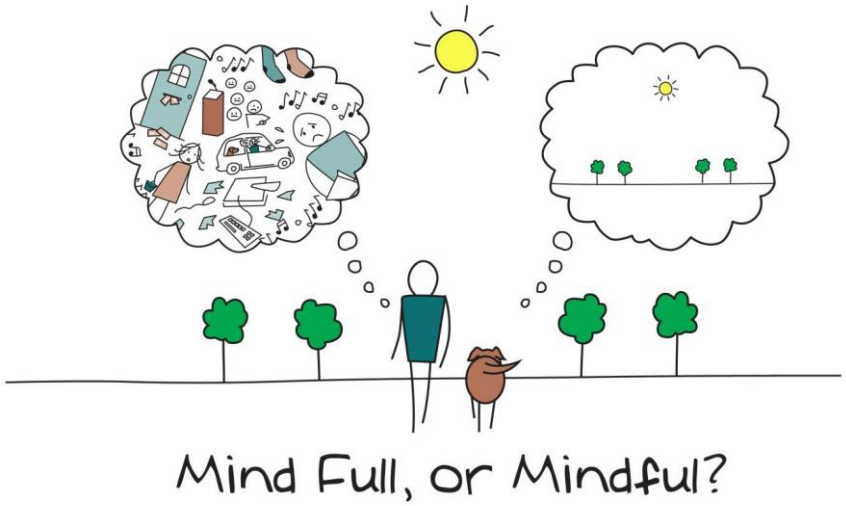
Take a moment to write down some activities you can use to help distract you from your anxieties.

PRACTICE BEING MINDFUL

Practicing mindfulness can change our thinking in a lot of ways but will also help with feeling anxious. And it simply means paying more attention to yourself (your thoughts, emotions and how your body feels), others and the world around you.

You will be mindful to follow some of the guidance we have already covered in this workbook and practicing mindfulness will make the exercises work better and become easier to do. Try these steps to practice mindfulness.

1. Remind yourself to take notice (either in general or during a relaxation exercise).
2. Try setting a time of the day to practice (in the shower/bath, while eating or during an exercise like meditation for example).
3. Try something new and practice being mindful while you do it.
4. Be mindful of your thoughts (you have to do this to be able to challenge them!)
5. Name the emotions and feelings you come across during the day.



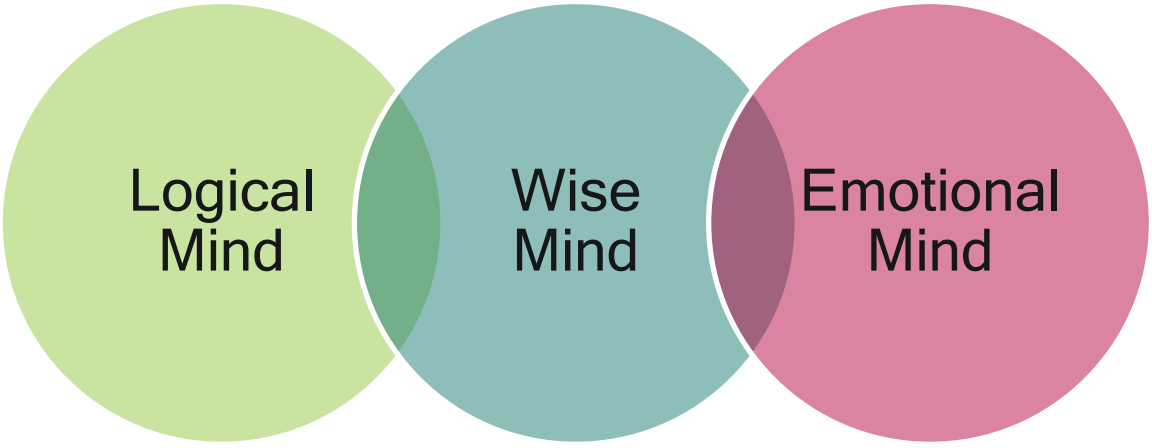
BE MINDFUL USING WISE-MIND

Another way to practice mindfulness is to be mindful of your 'mindset'. Are you using an emotional, logical or *wise* mind?

Emotional mind: This is when your emotions are in control. When anxiety is deciding what you do for example!

Logical Mind: This is when you ignore emotions and only focus on facts – decisions are made by logic.

Wise Mind: This is when we use both emotion and logic to make our decisions, to get things done and be mindful of our experience.

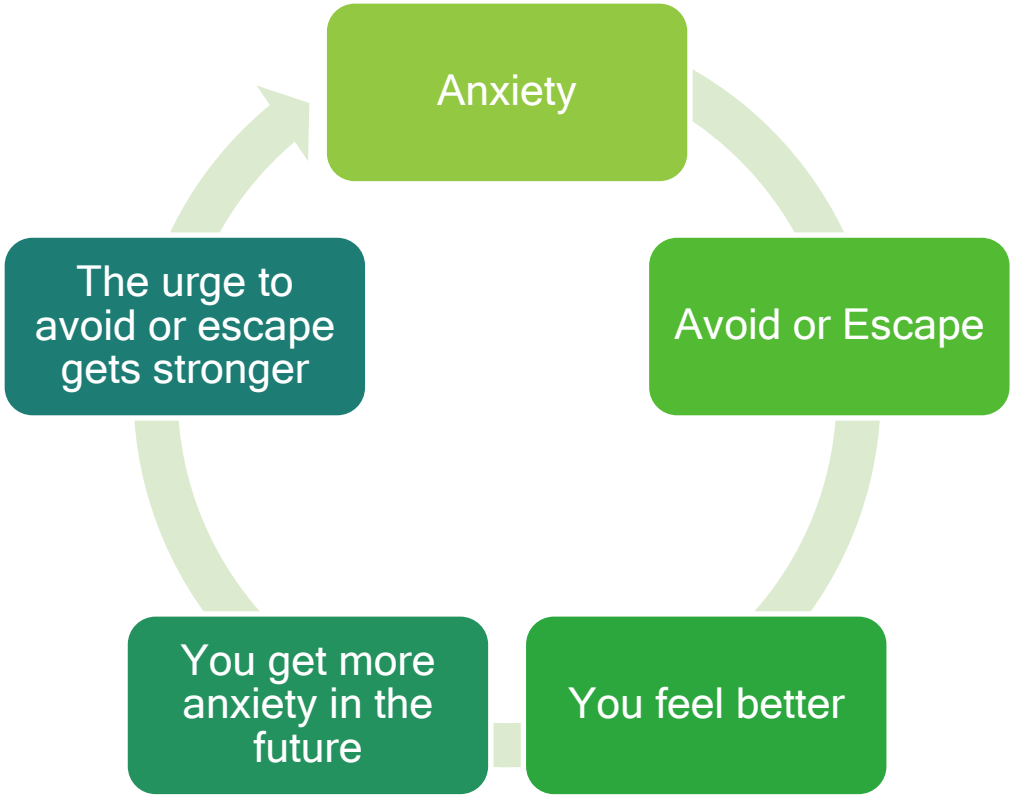


Being mindful about 'mindset' can help us figure out when our emotions are in control and start using a wise mind approach!

What can I do about anxiety behaviours?

Helping how we feel in the body and changing how we think can go a long wat to changing our anxiety behaviours. In this part of the workbook, we will focus on some behaviours, why they happen and how we can change it.

The anxiety cycle can show one way that anxiety changes our behaviour in a situation.



AVOIDANCE

Sometimes when we feel that we can't cope with anxiety, we can run away from the things that make us feel anxious. But this just makes the problem worse and gives us more anxiety when we come across that situation again! The longer you run away from a situation, the scarier it gets. Doing this over time can also make you less confident in managing things.

For example if you worry about people judging you, you might avoid…

- Speaking in front of your classroom
- You might avoid parties and gatherings
- Performing in presentations, drama or sport

Confronting things you avoid gives you confidence to deal with them in the future and will help reduce your anxiety over time! To help prioritise things to confront, fill in the table below with situations that give you anxiety and score how bad the anxiety is out of 10. This activity may also help you figure out which situation you avoid the most.

Situation	Score
e.g. Getting on the school bus	4

When you're more comfortable with a situation and feel more comfortable, work through the list and move on to more difficult situations. If something doesn't go as well as you planned or seems too hard, don't give up and maybe try an easier situation.

SAFTEY BEHAVIOURS

These are behaviours like staring at your phone, taking another person with you or calling/texting people to be more certain they're going too. These behaviours can be great to help us manage difficult situations but we become depend on them that way!

When you start to be more comfortable in situations, think about what your safety behaviours are and try to use them less then not at all.

Take a moment to think about the safety behaviours you use in the situations that make you anxious.

Situation	Safety Behaviour
e.g. Sitting on the school bus	*e.g. Staring at my phone*

DAILY ACTIVITIES

Here are some daily activities to try alongside the workbook.

WORRY TIME

Setting a ‘worry time’ can be really useful to help lower the amount of time you spend worrying in the day by giving some control over worrying.

1. Set a time in the day where you focus 15 minutes worrying about things.
2. When you start to worry outside of these 15 minutes remind yourself that you have a ‘worry time’ coming up or have already done your worrying for the day.
3. During the worry time, don’t stop yourself from worrying. There’s no need to try and fix anything or time yourself, just focus on being worried and try to keep it under 15 minutes. Ask a friend or family member to help if you need it.
4. Stop when time is over or earlier if you can’t think of anything else to be worried about.

POSITIVE REMINDERS

Set aside a time in the day (like before bed or when you wake up) to think of 3 things in your life you are thankful for. They don’t have to be big important things, any little thing will do! This can help us focus more on the positives in life which will help mood and anxiety in the future.

ANXIOUS THOUGHT DIARY

Use the diary below to help record your anxious thoughts, the situation that caused it as well as how is made your body feel. Try to also include the workbook exercise you used to try and help. This can be useful to help keep a record of your experience and progress.

Situation	Thought	Body Feeling	How did I act?	Technique I used	Did it work?