



Working with Worries

It is completely natural to sometimes feel worried or anxious. Worries only become a problem when they impact on everyday life. Worry often reflects underlying thoughts and beliefs. Sometimes the worry may seem irrational, but it is still real to the child experiencing it. This document is to help adults to support children who may be feeling worried at school.

Worry or anxiety can present itself in many different ways

It is important to create a safe environment where a child can talk about their worries. Use practical activities such as small world play (stones, shells, figures), construction play, life road maps, feelings graphs, therapeutic board games etc.

The desire to control people and events 	Difficulty getting to sleep 	Feeling agitated or angry 
Defiance and other challenging behaviors 	Having high expectations for self, including school work & sports 	Avoiding activities or events (including school) 
Pain like stomachaches and headaches 	Struggling to pay attention and focus 	Intolerance of uncertainty 
Crying and difficulty managing emotions 	Over-planning for situations and events 	Feeling worried about situations or events 



Adapted from Butler and Hope 2007



The worry tree can be used to support children to either act on or let go of a worry.

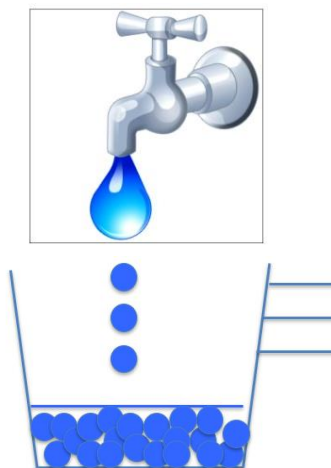
*Adapted from ELSA Working with Worries training



Helping children to better understand their worries

Sometimes worries can build up until they feel too much. Work together with the child to teach them about worries in general and to better understand what is happening for them in a child-friendly way. Here are some examples:

The Worry Glass



Imagine you have a glass inside your body which can hold a certain amount of worry.

Worry is like a tap dripping drops of anxiety or worry into the glass. When we are calm and relaxed the tap is turned off. The more we worry the more the tap drips.

What turns on the tap for one person may not necessarily be a worry for someone else. So as the level of worry rises our body produces symptoms to signal to us that the level is getting too high.

The Balloon

Imagine a balloon inside your brain. The more you feed the worry by dwelling on it and adding to the anxious thoughts, the more the balloon inflates.

Distracting attention on to more neutral subjects, or challenging the anxious thoughts through cognitive reframing, begins to deflate the balloon.

An inflated balloon leaves very little head space for other thoughts, such as school work.



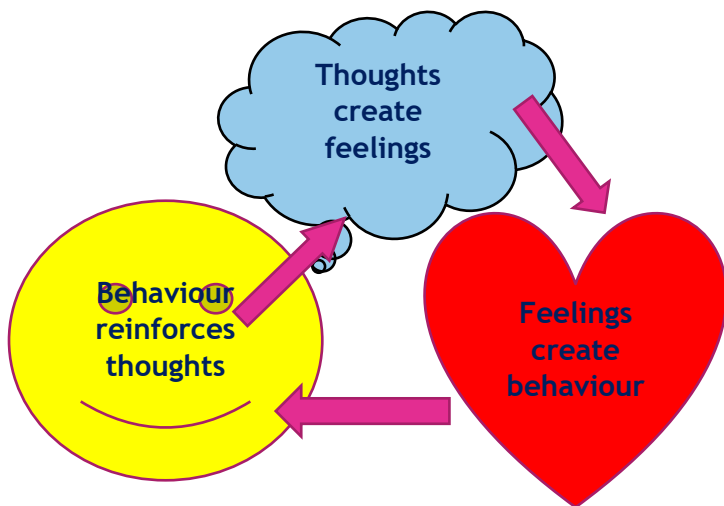
Feelings Thermometer



When working with worries it can be helpful to support a child to identify the extent to which their anxiety goes up and down, and what makes it better or worse.

This can help the child to realise that they are not worried ALL the time and the adult to know how the child might be feeling throughout the day.

Red and Green Thoughts



The way we interpret events and make sense of our world affects the way we feel and behave.

We all engage in 'self-talk' (the talk inside our heads). It may be positive or negative. Thinking errors are assumed to be maintaining a problem.

Adults can support children to become aware of and change any thinking errors they have around events and emotions.



Tackling Negative Thinking

Get children to practise coming up with helpful or **green** thoughts. Support them to turn **red** thoughts into **green** thoughts!

Ask the child to choose something that is worrying them. They could write their red thoughts on a red balloon and pop it to get rid of the unhelpful thoughts. Then write their green thoughts on a green balloon.





Balanced Thinking

Encourage children to challenge their negative thoughts. By asking questions, adults can help children to notice new information that they might not have been aware of.

What would you say to your friend if he/she had this thought?

How do you know this thought is true?

Is there anything telling you this thought is not true?

How does this thought make you feel?



Some Strategies for Controlling Thoughts

Externalise the problem

Label your worries as the "Worry Monster" who is a bully who is responsible for making you think worrisome thoughts. The Worry Monster's job is to keep us from enjoying life. He gets joy from picking on children (and adults) and making them worried and scared. The more you talk about the Worry Monster and gang up on him with your allies, the weaker he will get and the sooner he will go away.

Throw them away or use the worry box

Make a list of everything the child worries about. The Worry Monster doesn't like us to talk about him or how he works, so the more things you put on the list, the better. When finished, scrunch up the paper tightly and throw the thoughts in the bin or place them in a worry box to be discussed later.



Some suitable books about dealing with worry

