

Anxiety: Do's

Every day we work with children and young people who may be suffering from anxiety, and sometimes we can face situations where we are not competent with our use of language. It is important to know what you can say to a young person suffering from anxiety to help them, but also what you should avoid saying.

- “How are you?”, “Are you OK?”

It is important that we check in with our students. Asking them how they are doing or if they are OK is very helpful for anxiety sufferers who do not like to or are not able to tell others when something is wrong. Asking them “are you OK” gives them an opportunity to tell you if they are not. Additionally, this act of asking indicates to the young person that you are somebody who can be approached.

- “I’m Always Here if You Need to Talk”

A person with anxiety can sometimes talk through what they are struggling with. However, there may be times where they may not be able to express their struggles or may prefer to be by themselves for a while so they can sort out what is going on in their head. Telling the young person that you are always there for them if they need to talk is very reassuring for them to hear as people with anxiety can often feel like they are bothering or burdening the people around them with their anxiety problems.

- “Your Fears/Worries/Triggers Are Not Silly/Stupid”

A person with anxiety can feel that their fears/worries/triggers are silly or stupid. This may cause them more anxiety when they are trying to open up to you. Letting them know that the cause of their anxiety is not silly or stupid can be very helpful and reassuring as they can feel safer when they are sharing their fears/worries/triggers with you.

- “How Can I Help?”

Anxiety affects everyone differently and sometimes it may not be easy to predict what you can do to help. Asking the young person what you can do to help them can be very supportive as they can feel more in control. This open-ended question also provides options. This question also indicates kindness and shows your desire to support them.



- **“Take Your Time”**

Young people with anxiety can feel as though they are not being as productive as they could be. They may also feel that they should get over their anxiety attacks as quickly as possible. It is important to let the young person know that there is no time frame with anxiety. If they are having an anxiety/panic attack, allow them time to take a break and get back to their normal stability. If they are struggling with long-term anxiety, let them know that you will be there for them if/when they are ready.

- **“This Feeling Will Pass”**

Anxiety can be very overwhelming, and this can make them think, ‘when am I ever going to feel ‘normal’ again?’. When this happens, it can be very helpful for the young person to be assured that bad feelings will eventually go away.

- **“I Know You Can’t Control It”**

Letting the young person know that they cannot control it, they are not making the anxiety up or that it is not their fault is a form of validation. This will let them know that you are taking them seriously.

- **“Let’s Work Through This Together”**

It can be very helpful for a young person to talk through their anxiety. Talking about what is bothering them can be an outlet for all the bad anxiety feelings, and it can help to figure out what caused the anxiety in the first place.

- **“Your Dog is Waiting for You at Home”**

Anxiety can stop young people from living in the now as their mind can be busy thinking about their worries/anxieties. It is really useful for young people to be reminded of good, simple, real things that are there for them to enjoy now or in the near future.

Anxiety: Don'ts

- “Calm Down”

Anxiety involves being in a constant or near-constant state of stress. People with anxiety are not able to calm down on demand as their anxiety does not allow them. Moreover, telling someone with anxiety to calm down can actually add to their anxiety as they can become frustrated. They can also feel guilty about not being able to calm down when this has been asked of them.

- “It's All in Your Head”

Young people with anxiety are mostly aware that their worries/fears happen as their brains are hyper-aware. However, telling them that it is all in their head can make them feel like they are making this horror story up in their head that they fabricate for their own amusement.

- “It's Not a Big Deal”

You may think that the trigger for the young person's anxiety may be insignificant however it is not insignificant for them. They may be aware that their fears or thoughts can be irrational, however they are not able to control those thoughts or things that affect them. This statement will make the young person feel like you are invalidating their feelings and their anxiety.

- “I Know How You Feel”

The young person may feel like you are invalidating their feelings if you tell them you know how they feel, unless you have had anxiety yourself. Instead, try and understand what they are going through. You can also ask how anxiety affects their day-to-day life, what makes it better/worse. Listening to how they experience things can help you empathise with how they are feeling.

- “You Should Try Meditation/Yoga/etc”

It is not guaranteed that these activities will work for everyone. If a young person feels pressured into trying one of those activities and it does not work, it can be very frustrating for them. They may feel like a failure which could make their anxiety worse than it was before. You can suggest different anxiety reducing activities, however, be sure not to pressure them into doing anything they do not want to do.



- **“Why Won’t You Tell Me What’s Wrong?”**

It can be very difficult for young people with anxiety to communicate their feelings. They can feel ashamed or embarrassed about being anxious, or they might not have the words to explain their anxiety properly. Also, they may not want to share how they are feeling. It can be frustrating for you when trying to help a young person and they do not share what is wrong however if you use phrases such as “why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?” it can make them feel guilty. Instead, let them know that you are there for them if they need you.

- **“Everything Will be Fine”**

It can seem like this a comforting thing to say and can be. However, it cannot always be guaranteed that everything will be fine. If something does go wrong, any reassurance that “everything will be fine” will become invalidated. Instead, try to say, “It is unlikely that something will go wrong, however if it does, you can work through it.”

Depression: Do's

- **Tell Them We Care**

Telling a young person that you care about them can be very supportive as they can feel like the world is against them. It is important to let young people know that they matter to you.

- **“I’m Here for You If You want to talk”**

Young people with depression can feel as no one understands what they are feeling, or they can feel isolated. It can be very reassuring for the young person to know that you are there for them if/when they need you.

- **“How Can I Help?”**

It may not be easy to predict what you can do to help. Asking the young person what you can do to help them can be very supportive as they can feel more in control. This open-ended question also provides options. This question also indicates kindness and shows your desire to support them.

- **“You Are Not Weak”/ “It’s Not Your Fault”**

Young people with depression can feel weak or if there is something wrong with them. Depression is a mental illness, however young people who suffer from depression may feel like it is their fault. Remind them that it requires strength to deal with depression and they are much stronger than they think they are.

- **“You Don’t Need to Do Anything That Makes You Uncomfortable”**

Feeling pressured into something, such as taking part in a class activity can be upsetting for the young person. Knowing these events can be prevented if needed can help a person feel relaxed.

- **“Take Your Time”**

It can be very difficult for a young person to complete easy daily tasks as they can feel overwhelmed. They may not be able to participate during class lessons/activities due to extremely low mood. Allow them extra time to do these tasks which may help with their mood/anxiety.



- **“Do You Want Some Space?” or “Do You Want Some Company?”**

It is very important to show support to the young person by making sure they know that you are there for them, however it can be helpful to allow some alone time to the young person for them to digest how they are feeling or just to recharge their batteries. Offering to give the young person support if they really need it can be very useful.

On the other hand, some young people can want company when they need to digest how they are feeling as they may feel isolated if they are left alone.

Depression: Don'ts

- “Don't Think About It”

Young people with depression can repeatedly go over a thought or problem without completion and it can increase feelings of worthlessness or helplessness. Telling a young person to stop thinking about their problems can trigger them to engage in this repetitive thought behaviour.

- “Think Positive”

Telling a young person with depression to “think positive” may make them feel you are being dismissive of their depression that causes their symptoms. They can feel that you are blaming them for their symptoms or illness.

- “It Could be Worse”

When a young person is seeking support from you, they are looking for empathy and compassion. Making a comparison with the young person to other people can make them feel ashamed and they can be reluctant to seek for help in the future.

- “Get Over It”

Depression is a serious mental illness and telling a young person to move on or get over it will not resolve it. This kind of statement lacks compassion and will likely make the young person feel shamed and misunderstood.

- “I Know How You Feel”

This statement can seem empathetic and is meant to help the young person feel understood however it can feel invalidating. It is normal to feel sad, however depression is a mood disorder that can negatively impact a person's ability to attend normal daily activities. Statements like this can make the young person think you are minimizing their pain.

- “Be Grateful for What You Have”

People with depression can feel guilt, shame, worthlessness, and helplessness. Statements like this can imply that the young person is depressed because they cannot see what they have.

Helpful Tips for Talking About Mental Health: Do's

- **Set Time Aside with No Distractions**

Provide an open and non-judgemental space with no distractions.

- **Let Them Share as Much or Little as They Want**

Do not pressure the young person to talk to you about anything they are not ready to talk about. Let them lead the discussion at their own pace.

- **Do not Make Assumptions**

Try not to make any assumptions about what is wrong or suggest your own solutions or diagnosis.

- **Listen Carefully to What They Tell You**

It can be useful to repeat what the young person has said back to them to ensure you have understood it. You do not have to agree with what they are saying, however show that you understand and let them know you respect their feelings.

- **Offer Them Help in Seeking Support**

You can offer to help them talk to a friend/family member. You can also provide them with information about where they can seek help.

- Do reassure
- Show empathy not sympathy
- Show your own attitudes about emotions and how you respond to them
- Do validate and be accepting.
- Naming the emotion, calming.
- Positive reinforcement/praise – just as important for when a young person has done something as well as when they have not (i.e., not had a meltdown).

Helpful Tips for Talking About Mental Health: Don'ts

- Do not shout/show frustration.
- Do not lose patience.
- Do not be refraining and dismissing.
- Do not ignore.
- Do not isolate.
- If they self-harm, do not ask them to stop – this only adds pressure.
- Do not overload the young person with a group of staff members – it will only exasperate the situation.

Sensory Awareness Grounding Techniques – 54321 Game

- Name 5 things you can see in the room with you
- Name 4 things you can feel (“chair on my back” or “feet on floor”)
- Name 3 things you can hear right now (“fingers tapping on keyboard”)
- Name 2 things you can smell right now (or 2 things you like the smell of)
- Name 1 good thing about yourself

Cognitive Awareness Grounding Exercise

Re-orient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all these questions:

- Where am I?
- What is today?
- What is the date?
- What is the month?
- What is the year?
- How old am I?
- What season is it?

Cognitive Awareness Grounding Exercise

This is a quick game you can play with your students when their anxiety is heightened;

- Name as many dog breeds as you can
- Name as many cities as you can
- Recite the alphabet backwards
- Practice simple times tables