

# RETURNING TO SCHOOL

## SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is something we all have and need to take care of. We have all had to adapt very quickly to many unexpected changes, as we firstly isolated at home and now face a new challenge of the gradual return to a school day which will appear very different to the one many young people last faced in March.

There is a lot that feels overwhelming and uncertain right now. Everyone is adapting to a new way of learning, teachers and students alike, and these are incredibly challenging times to be supporting young people and families. Since schools closed to most pupils due to COVID -19, The Healthy Minds Team has continued to support young people and their families by delivering our core service via telephony or video call. Whilst this will continue, we also aim to support the return to school with a series of short videos with accompanying teacher and parental notes.

It is anticipated most young people will feel anxious regarding the return to school. The impact of COVID -19 has been far reaching and has affected everyone in different ways. A recent Place2Be survey revealed the following common themes that young people have raised to mental health professionals during the crisis:

- **Loneliness & isolation**
- **Academic worries**
- **Loss of rituals such as exams and end of school activities**
- **Family relationship difficulties**
- **(place2be, 2020)**

It is important that we are mindful of the negative affect these specific issues can have on our ability to manage our everyday worries and provide young people with explanation and advice which they can apply to any individual situation which causes anxiety. The following teacher notes can be used alongside the video resources to provide further explanation as required. Please contact The Healthy Minds Team via your school based link worker to discuss follow on activities or individual referrals.

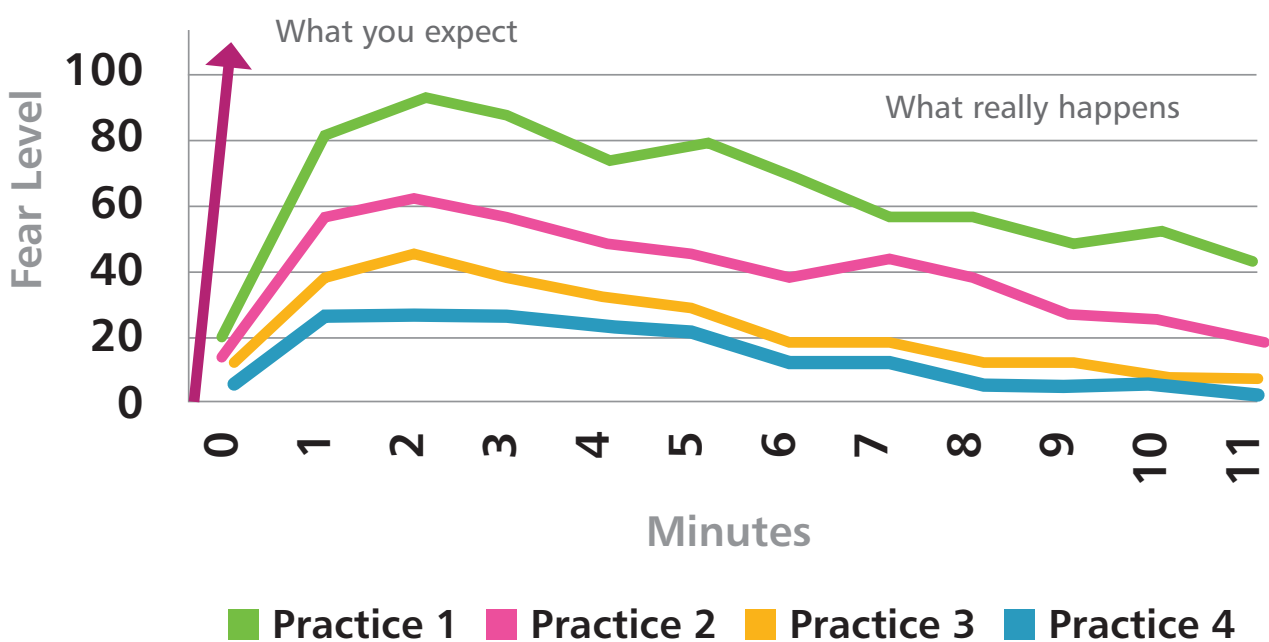


# 1. HABITUATION

We encourage schools to promote positive mental health and encourage young people to recognise and regulate their emotions as part of the school day. This will also allow students to acknowledge their experiences as a group and habituate to the 'new normal' school day. Habituation is a technique commonly used to ease fear and anxiety, and a skill The Healthy Minds Team have used successfully to deal with specific fears and phobias in young people.

According to The Law of Habituation, the more you do something the less you fear it (Benito, & Walther, 2015). It is to be expected that young people will re-enter school showing symptoms associated with high anxiety. Habituation is like learning a new skill or visiting an unfamiliar place. When you do it the first time, you're apprehensive or anxious, perhaps having imagined a much worse situation than encountered, but with experience these feelings decrease and plateau.

## FEAR LEVEL OVER TIME



## 2. NORMALISATION

### Recognising Emotions - <https://vimeo.com/455584268>

The coronavirus pandemic has been an unprecedented event that none of us have experienced before and to that point we do not know what the exact impact will be with regard to children and families we work with. There will be both positive and negative experiences for everyone and it is important that we use methods to normalise feelings and experiences, especially those which are shared amongst peers and staff alike.

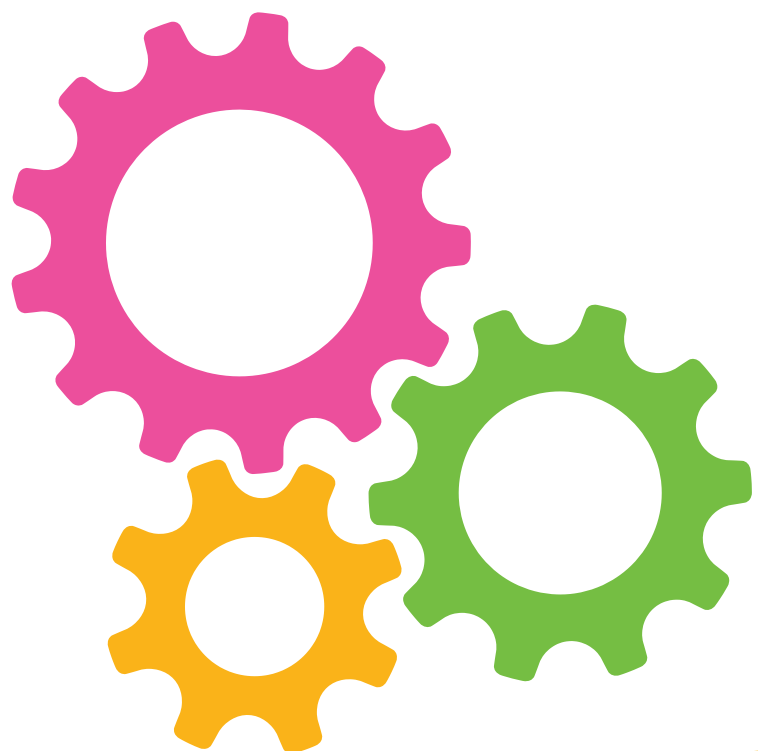
For a lot of children and young people, lockdown will have also brought experiences which may have had a positive impact on their mental well-being. Lockdown may have been a positive experience for some children and young people who may have enjoyed having more time and sharing new experiences with family and pets for example. Other children may have established new routines that work better for them, whilst others may have felt less pressure from tests, exams and associated stressors. During these uncertain times others may have developed new skills such as building resilience, problem-solving abilities and gained new coping strategies which help them deal with issues that would have previously caused worry or stress.

The pandemic will also have affected mental well-being for some students and their families in various negative ways, especially in the short term with fear about future uncertainty, fear of more school closures, confusion about new rules, health and hygiene anxiety or perhaps worries about missing learning and falling behind alongside loss of routines and lack of access to trusted adults. Many of these short term worries and fears can be alleviated once school returns and children and young people have more of an understanding of new routines and rules they are expected to follow.

Children and young people are often more resilient than we give them credit for and it is important to normalise uncertainty whilst also recognising and validating emotions. When a child is feeling anxious it is important to normalise worry as a reaction to not knowing or understanding, this can be done through modelling ways of managing anxiety and through open dialogue.

Through discussion and guidance you can help children and young people to identify positive coping strategies that help them to manage their worries and anxiety including doing physical activity, practising breathing exercises and mindfulness and meditation, talking about or expressing their emotions, having a regular routine and connecting with others. You can also give children and young people access to resources, such as The Healthy Minds team Padlet (available at :<https://padlet.com/joannecomerford/yfgynw4bu28wxl36>) or consider The Healthy Minds Team Resource Booklet distributed to your mental health lead as schools closed due to COVID-19.

It is important to remind children and young people of the internal and external support available to them and refer them to specialist support such as The Healthy Minds team for children and young people whose anxiety is maintained for longer periods or have more long-term anxieties. Familiarising children with relevant staff members who can offer support in the first instance may be beneficial to helping manage any low level anxieties and worries. It is important that the emphasis is on observing and monitoring what is happening during this initial period when schools return using a process called 'watchful waiting' which is a medical term to describe the process of allowing things time to play out before intervening with treatment, as it would be expected that many people's worries will begin to lessen and improve with time.



# 3. EVERYONE WORRIES

Everyone Worries Primary - <https://vimeo.com/455534151>

Everyone Worries Secondary - <https://vimeo.com/455726031>

Worry is the body's natural reaction to stressful, dangerous and unfamiliar situations, either real or imagined. No matter how resilient we are, everyone has been affected in some way by COVID-19 and will have some worries. It is important we share the following message:

- Anxiety and worry are normal emotions
- These feelings will pass (think about before a previously anxiety provoking situation for students, for example starting a new school or club – do they still feel anxious about this?)
- Anxiety and worry are unpleasant feelings and can distort our thoughts, feelings and behaviours - it is important we recognise that these feelings have an effect on how we think about a situation, and ensure we analyse the situation realistically.
- Anxiety and Worry can be both rational and irrational. For example, many people thought the hoarding of essential items in lockdown was irrational, but the anxious thought behind this behaviour was that the stores may run out, as we didn't know how long lockdown was going to last.
- We can make our worries seem bigger than they are by thinking about them without taking action to resolve them (overthinking or ruminating)
- We can pass these worries on to people around us without realising (mirror neurones in our brain pick up signals from others and allows us to subconsciously copy them)
- This is also true of non-verbal signals. Whilst we are trying to protect others from hearing how worried we are, acting out of character or a slight alteration in body language will alert those around you to the tension.
- Avoiding the anxiety provoking topic will have the same affect, which is why acknowledging the experience is advised. We all like to make sense of situations and sharing similar experiences embeds this as a 'new normal'.

- When we are worried our body reacts. Knowing that our brain produces chemicals to prime us for fight, flight and freeze can ease anxieties about physical illness, for example, feeling sick before coming to school.
- When we are worried we can stop socially engaging (our talk is shorter, more abrupt, it takes more effort to think of others). Knowing this is all normal as our bodies are flooded with stress hormones can ease the symptoms.
- We recognise the attention principle in terms of behaviour management, this is also the case with feelings of worry and anxiety- what we pay attention to is what we get more of.

Although worry is a normal feeling, it is important we all acknowledge our worries before they begin to impact negatively on academic performance, social life, sleep and our general mental health. To help young people break the cycle of negative 'worry' thinking, we first have to teach children how to recognise its physical signs and the different kinds of worry we all have.

## LEARNING WHY WE WORRY

Learning about Flight / Fight/ Freeze responses are an important part of understanding worry. These physiological responses are an automatic reaction to an event that is perceived as stressful or frightening. The perception of the threat activates the sympathetic nervous system and triggers a stress response that prepares the body to Flight / Fight/ Freeze. As these responses are evolutionary adaptations to increase chances of survival in threatening situations, we find the analogies below in resource 5 to be most appropriate for young people. Overly frequent or inappropriate activation of the Flight / Fight/ Freeze response is present in young people dealing with anxiety disorders. Research suggests improved understanding of the purpose and function of these responses aids recovery (Stallard, 2013).

Without this understanding young people have trouble making sense of their behaviour. When they are able to notice and recognise these survival responses we can help them take steps to emotionally regulate. Try the following activities in your bubbles to help young people learn about these physical signs of worry and encourage conversation about the fight / flight / freeze response.

## LEARNING ABOUT FLIGHT /FIGHT /FREEZE

**Flight - Imagine you can see a rabbit being chased by a predator**

- How would its legs move – would the movements be precise or jerky?
- Think about its breathing - is it fast or slow?
- Would its heart be beating faster?
- How about the muscles – would they be relaxed?

**What would you notice about the rabbit once it is safe?**

- Does its breathing change?
- Does its heart start to beat slower?
- What does it notice in its muscles?

As the rabbit's body settles and it feels safe again, it will slow down and cool off. One way to help settle our bodies is to take a breath in and then breathe out slowly (practice together).

Now imagine being the rabbit. We are no different to the rabbit when we are stressed or scared. Sometimes we want to run too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences, adults and young people.

**Fight- Imagine you can see two tigers fighting**

- How would the tiger's legs run?
- What would it do with its claws?
- Would it roar?
- Would its breathing and heart beat change, like the rabbit?
- What about its muscles?
- How do think the tiger would feel? What would it be thinking?



### Now think about what happens when the tiger decides to stop fighting

- What would it notice in its body?
- Are there any similarities with the rabbit that ran?
- We are no different than the tiger when we are stressed or scared. Sometimes we want to fight too. These are the sensations that we can notice in our own bodies. This is something that everyone experiences, adults and young people.

### Freeze – Imagine you can see a mouse being chased by a cat - the mouse has nowhere to run so it pretends to freeze like a statue.

- Notice your breathing. Is it fast or slow?
- How do your muscles feel when you are being chased in a playground game?
- What are the similarities with flight and fight?
- What feelings are different?
- How do think the mouse would feel?

Even though the mouse is very still there is lots of energy used making its body still. After a while the cat loses interest, the mouse notices that it is safe and its body begins to settle, just like the rabbit that ran and the tiger that fought. Can you think of a time you froze? There is just as much of the stress response present when freezing as in fight or flight.

## SUPPLEMENTARY FIGHT /FLIGHT/FREEZE LINKS

- [https://youtu.be/FfSbWc3O\\_5M](https://youtu.be/FfSbWc3O_5M)
- <https://youtu.be/rpolpKTWrp4>

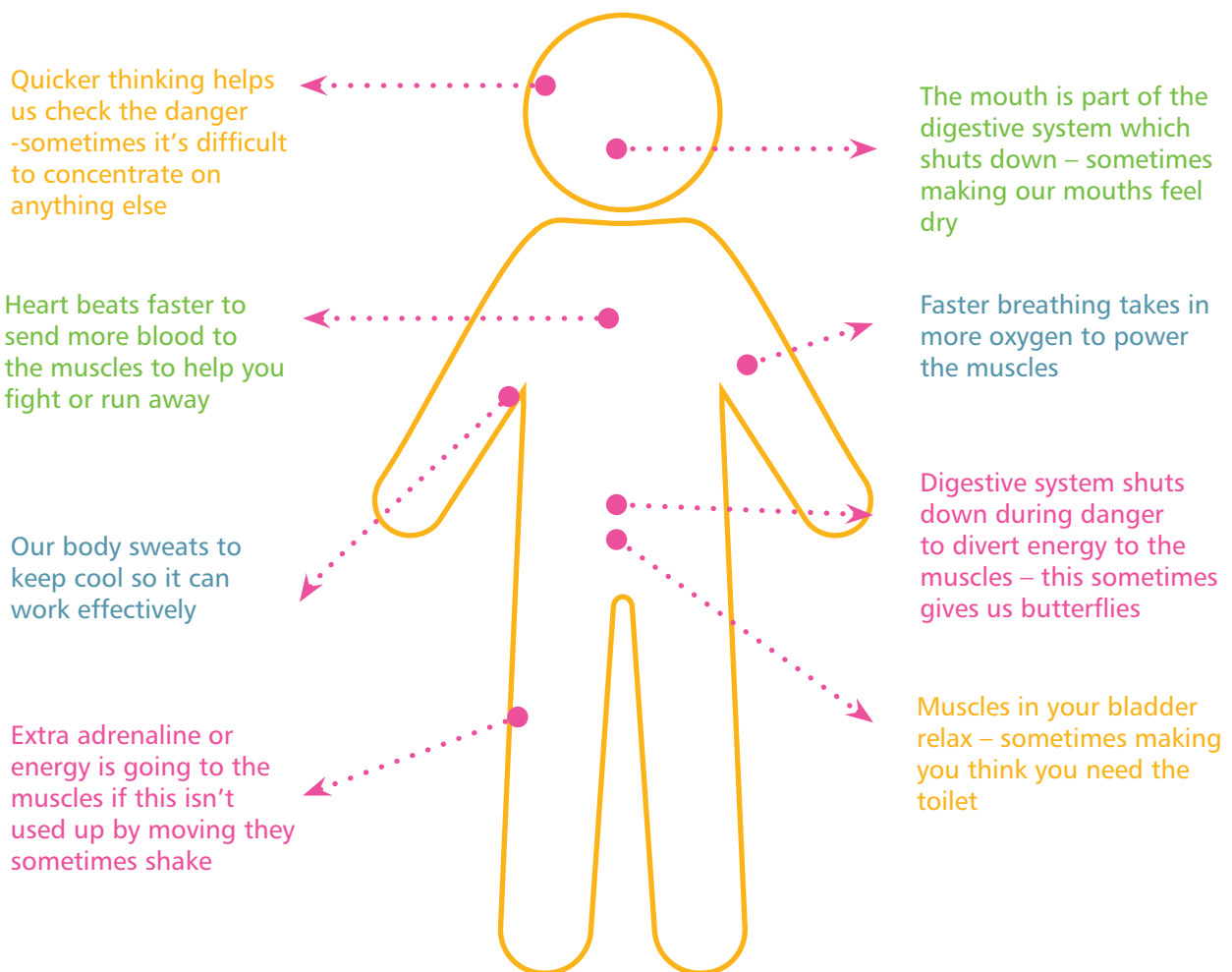




## RECOGNISING FLIGHT/ FIGHT / FREEZE IN OURSELVES

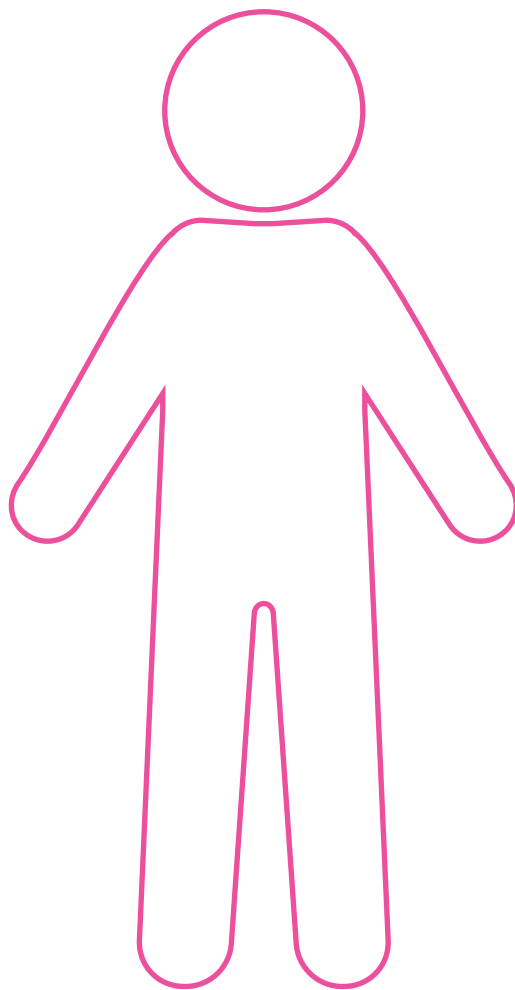
The fight / flight / freeze response is automatic and happens without thinking in humans and animals. These methods for spotting and responding to a threat have been passed down through the generations from caveman times all the way down to today. Although we don't have 'real' threats to survival, our survival response is activated when we feel threatened, whether this be real or imaginary.

Here are some of the reasons why these changes happen in specific parts of the body.



## WHAT ARE YOUR PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS WHEN WORRIES OR FEELING SCARED?

These physical symptoms let you know your survival response has been activated. Being aware of yours will help you regulate your body and feel better.



## CLASSIFYING WORRIES

Now we can recognise worry in our bodies it is important to know there are two main types of worry as we deal with both in very different ways.

**Hypothetical worries** – these are worries we don't have any control over. We often refer to them as 'what if' worries and no matter how long we ruminate, the worry never goes away. This can be overwhelming and tiring.

*For example:*

- *'what if it rains?', 'what if the teacher asks me a question?'*

**Practical worries** – these 'real' worries are usually about a current situation that we can do something about. It can be easier to ignore or put off dealing with these worries as it may be something we are not confident in or have never tried before. However, if these worries pile up it can have implications for us in real life. Even if we don't solve the problem or we do not perform well at the task it can give us experience in problem solving and confidence to face the next worry productively.

*For example:*

- *'I've been eating unhealthily' (problem solve – change in diet)*
- *'I have to do a presentation in class' (problem solve – I can rehearse with friends)*

## WORRY DIARY

A worry diary is helpful to focus young people on the observations of the worry as a process rather than focus on the content of worries. It also provides a record of what may be the young person's main worry. The process of writing down worries not only depersonalises the worry but frees up head space for more rational thought processes.

This can be completed over a period of time most suited to the young person. If they have several worries a day may be sufficient, a week is used most often to identify patterns. This can be personalised in the form of a journal to complete every night or a specific notes page on an electronic device.



Once you have kept a worry diary for a period of time and have got used to classifying your worries, you may find that most of the worries seem less scary or not as important. If you are still struggling with worry, The Healthy Minds Team can offer support to manage these worries effectively.

**If you are finding it difficult to take your mind off your worry, try one of these grounding techniques.**

• **Colour breathing**

- Sit or stand in a comfortable position. You can close your eyes if you wish.
- Imagine your favourite colour, or a colour which helps you to feel calm.
- Take a breath in and imagine that they are breathing in this colour.
- As you breathe out, imagine blowing a bubble made of this colour.
- You can repeat this process for a few minutes, see if you can take longer, slower, deeper breaths (both in and out) and blow larger imaginary bubbles

• **Feather breathing**

- Imagine that there is a feather or ball of cotton wool in front of you. If they have a feather or cotton wool they can place this in one of their hands and hold their hand out in front of them.
- Breathe in through their nose and breathe out slowly through their mouth, in order to make the object float.
- Repeat this a few times.

• **Take 5**

- Take a deep breath in and use your senses to notice



Five things you can SEE



Four things you can TOUCH



Three things you can HEAR



Two things you can SMELL



One thing you can TASTE

Five things you can SEE	Four things you can TOUCH	Three things you can HEAR	Two things you can SMELL	One thing you can TASTE

# REFERENCES

(<https://www.place2be.org.uk/about-us/news-and-blogs/2020/may/common-worries-for-young-people-and-families-during-covid-19-pandemic-survey/>)

Benito, K. G., & Walther, M. (2015). Therapeutic Process During Exposure: Habituation Model. *Journal of obsessive-compulsive and related disorders*, 6, 147–157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jocrd.2015.01.006>

## FOR FURTHER SUPPORT

- Please contact The Healthy Minds Team via your school link worker
- Alternatively via email on [Stsft.mhadminteam@nhs.net](mailto:Stsft.mhadminteam@nhs.net)
- Padlet - <https://padlet.com/joannecomerford/yfgynw4bu28wxl36>
- There are two courses Exploring Psychological Resilience is for young people aged 13-18 and Developing Resilience (under 12's) which helps children learn more about what resilience is and how they can be more resilient. Courses can be accessed through [www.recoverycollegeonline.co.uk](http://www.recoverycollegeonline.co.uk)

## NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT?

- Samaritans—116 123
- Childline—0800 1111
- Lifecycle—0191 2832987
- Early Help—0191 561 4084
- Young Minds—020 7089 5050