

Ways to Soothe Anxiety and Depression in Children



My name is Angela Legh, creator of this guide to help parents soothe anxiety and depression in their children.

I've been working with parents and their children to achieve magical lives . . . one way is to help them embrace and implement tools that help them embrace emotional wellness.

Anxiety and Depression are both based on painful emotions, which can make you seem stuck in a hamster wheel of pain.

There are tools that can be used, including breathing exercises, mindfulness, and unconditional love. These tools are intended to supplement rather than replace professional psychological intervention.

When you play in the realm of emotional mastery, you open new possibilities for solutions to problems that have plagued you in the past. The strategies in this document are effective, empowering, and elevating.

Anxiety and Depression in Children

Factors, Exercises, and Advice to Relieve Symptoms (FEARS)

According to the Centers for Disease Control, it is not known why some children develop anxiety or depression. Many factors are at play, including biology, temperament, trauma, stress, and environmental or situational factors. As a concerned parent, your first step is to contact a healthcare provider so they can evaluate and set up a treatment plan.

Depression

Depression is defined as feeling persistent sadness and hopelessness. As identified by the Centers for Disease Control, Depression may be evident when a child:

- Experiences sadness, hopelessness, and irritability
- Feels unmotivated to do or enjoy fun things
- Has changed eating or sleeping patterns
- Has a hard time paying attention
- Feels worthless, useless, shameful, or guilty
- Shows changes in their energy level
- Exhibits self-injury or self-destructive behavior

Your child may not discuss feelings of hopelessness, and they may not appear sad. Unmotivated behavior, coupled with acting out, can indicate depression. As with anxiety, seek professional help if you suspect your child is depressed. Children experiencing depression often feel negative about themselves, their situation, and their future.

If your child is depressed, it can be challenging for your child to learn, make friends and make the most of daily life. If depression continues for a long time without treatment, children can fall behind at school, lose confidence in themselves and become more withdrawn. Seek professional treatment if you suspect your child is dealing with depression.

As well as working with mental health professionals, here are some simple and effective ways that you can help your child:

- Make time to talk with your child and listen to their feelings. Let go of any need to fix their issues; this is a time for you to listen. Minimizing their problems will not empower them to lift out of their emotions.
- Manage your child's stress and tension. Regular family routines that make time for exercise, relaxing, and socializing with friends can help. Encourage your child to get out and walk, especially if they can walk in nature. Encourage a regular sleep schedule to help your child's stress levels.
- Encourage your child to engage in relaxation strategies, such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, mindfulness, or meditation.
- Engage your child's schoolteacher and guidance counselor to determine what programs may be available to help your child.

Specific tools and techniques that can help your child manage their emotional balance are included in this document. Many of these tools have proven invaluable for me in overcoming adversity. Any of these practices can be of value to your child. While I offer these in the hopes that they help your child, I advise that you work with a mental health professional and use these tools under their advisement.

Anxiety

Anxiety is intense, excessive, persistent fear about everyday situations. Fear is an emotion that carries enormous energy; feeling fear is something we tend to avoid or reject. However, our resistance to our painful feelings unintentionally prolongs our pain.

It is said that perfect love casts out fear. This is so in our bodies; if we can truly embrace and love our feelings of fear. Tools for anxiety include mindfulness, breathwork, and unconditional love.

One of the first ways anxieties appear is in separation anxiety when the child is first left in daycare or school. This is a resistance to change. The child feels comfortable in the family environment, then is thrust into a strange and unknown environment. An exercise you might try with your children for separation anxiety is below.

Separation Anxiety

Start with a breathing exercise; inhale for a count of four and fill your lungs. Start at the bottom and fill them to the top. Hold for a count of five; exhale for a count of six. Breathe this way three times. Next, have your child feel their fear; notice where it shows up in their body; ask them to notice how it feels. Help them release any resistance to feeling this emotion, for it is in feeling it that they can find freedom. Can your child picture the fear? Is it a black cloud? Is it a sharp point? What does it look like? Examine the fear for a moment and ask your child to describe it the best way they can.

Next, have your child put their attention on their heart. Ask them to describe the feeling in their heart. Is their heart expressing love, or is it feeling fear? If they feel love in their heart, tell them to send their love to the energy of fear described in their bodies. You can help them with this exercise—concentrate on your heart and send your love to the fear they described in their body.

If your child feels fear in their heart, tell them the truth about their heart—it holds the energy of love. Fear cannot exist in the space of pure love. Ask your child to focus on their heart while you send your love into their heart space. Hold them in the space of your pure love and ask them to breathe in the love you are sharing.

Tell your child that there exists a silver cord connecting your two hearts. Through this cord, they can tap into your love whenever they need support. Remind them they are never alone, for your love is always with them. Remind them that their heart is pure; this pure love is the magic that dissolves fear. They have all the magic they need right inside their heart.

Help your child tap into the love they carry in their heart. This is a powerful force that can help them traverse the difficulties of life. Have them focus on their heart and feel the vibration of love. This love is pure and can be directed to any area of their body in emotional or physical pain. When we face our pain and surround it with love, healing begins.

The love between you and your child is an archetype of unconditional love. Pure love is giving without the need for return. In connecting with your child through your heart space, you are strengthening the bond between you.

Tools to soothe your child

Breathwork

Deep breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, reducing the 'fight or flight' response. Regular breathing exercises can improve focus and concentration. Basic deep breathing: Teach your child to place their hands on their belly, take a big breath through their nose, watching their hands rise as they breathe into their stomach. Slowly exhale through their mouth, and watch their hands return as their belly deflates. Repeat until the child feels calm.

Several breathing exercises are well known to calm. The first one is **6-7-8 breath**. For younger kids, you can teach them 4-5-6 breath, eventually expanding as they age to the full 6-7-8 breathing pattern.

Lay or sit down, and close your eyes. Breathe in deeply through your nose for the count of 6 seconds, counting in your head at an even pace. Hold your breath for 7 seconds; then exhale through your mouth for 8 seconds. You can make a woosh sound as you exhale or not. Repeat four to six times for best results.

For young children, inhale for the count of four, hold for the count of five, and exhale for the count of six. §

Another breathing pattern is **box breathing**. Lay or sit down, and close your eyes. Breathe in deeply through your nose for the count of four, hold for the count of four, exhale through your mouth for the count of four and hold for the count of four. Repeat for 30 to 60 seconds.

Feeling your feelings

Being present with feelings is a valuable tool that will serve your child throughout their lifetime. Teach your child to feel their emotions, notice where they appear, and describe how they feel. Help them acknowledge and accept their feelings.

Feelings are energy that moves through our bodies. Feelings provide information that helps us make better decisions. To allow a feeling is to let go of any judgment about it being good or bad; it is just a feeling. The biochemistry of an emotion, or feeling, lasts 90 to 120 seconds. Anything more than that, and you are in the concept of the emotion; you are in the story of it. Observing your feelings without engaging them is a secret to long-lasting emotional well-being.

An excellent exercise I found on PositivePsychology.com that you can do with your children to accept emotions:

Divide your family into pairs—have each team find a comfortable space where they can talk privately. The person with the longest hair goes first and shares an experience when they felt like a victim. First, they share the experience and how they felt, talking about the specific feelings and how those feelings impacted them. The listener will only listen; no questions nor facial responses; active listening. After about 10-15 minutes, they'll switch roles.

When the family reconvenes, it's time for a group discussion using these questions:

- How did it feel to share the experience?
- How did you feel after acknowledging and accepting your feelings?
- Did this exercise help with accepting how some experiences can make you feel?
- Did it help in accepting that it is ok for you to feel what you felt?

Exercise to help the recipient disengage

It hurts when we are thrown angry, blaming, hateful, mean, blaming, or shaming words. Telling your child to ignore the words that resonate through their cells can be harmful. When you teach them tools for disengaging from the words, your child will benefit and be stronger and healthier.

The best suggestion I saw in my research was by Dr. Tim Jordan on his website, Bullies beware! Your words no longer hurt me. He suggests we tell kids to replace the charged words flung at them with the word "tomato." Imagine someone saying, "you are such an (insert curse)," and you think the word tomato replaces the curse word. It's laughable, and it's been proven to work. It is worth reading. Good for you, as an adult, too!

The charged words used by bullies to make their victims feel intimidated and unworthy carry a particular weight when their victims attach their identity to the words. A child may have heard the bully's words before from others, making it easy for them to connect it to their identity. Therefore, replacing a charged word with the word tomato can help. A child knows they are not a vegetable; they will not identify with that word. As silly as it sounds, the research reveals this is a perhaps silly but powerful tool.

Bringing in the Perspective of Love

Another anti-bullying tool proven to work is seeing the bullying person's value. When love and empathy are added to the mix, many of the qualities exhibited by bullies make for good leadership. Grandma Helice "Sparky" Bridges, founder of Blue Ribbons Worldwide, invited students to the stage to discuss when they were bullied and how it hurt them. They were asked to share their dreams and receive support and love from their peers. Grandma Sparky's program shows that love and respect can prevail.

One of the students shared, "I was the biggest bully in my school, homeless, a straight F student, and dumpster diving to find food for me and my drug-addicted mom who lived in a tent under a freeway. After the Blue Ribbon Week at my school, I apologized to everyone I hurt and stopped bullying. My principal was so impressed that she nominated me for the 'San Diego Unified School District Above and Beyond

Award.' I was one of five kids in the entire school district who received that award. I want every kid to know they deserve to feel appreciated and loved." (Identity protected)

We never know what is going on in the lives of others. If we look at what they are doing to us from the perspective of being their victim, we can never rise above our pain; we will always be the victim. However, when you open your heart to love and allow love to color your perspective of the person, you may see they are hurting. You may see they are working from behind a wall of pain, a wall they use to protect their tender and aching heart.

Uncertainty

One of the underlying causes of anxiety is the inability to cope with uncertainty. However, learning to accept uncertainty is a life skill that will benefit your child from youth through adulthood.

The quality of your life is determined by the level of uncertainty you can handle.

Some people have a very low tolerance for uncertainty; they are comfortable when everything is the same. They feel certainty brings security and safety. Yet, change is inevitable, something we cannot stop. It is in being resistant to change which creates discomfort. Conversely, being open to change allows the possibility for growth.

An excellent tool for handling uncertainty is curiosity. Knowing the quality of the questions you ask determines the quality of the answer you receive. Use questions that seek understanding rather than placing judgment or blame. Questions that put you in the energy of a victim only serve to keep you a victim. Instead of asking, "Why is this always happening to me?" which is a victim question, ask, "What is it I can learn from this situation?" The second question empowers you to seek insights into ways you can affect your world. Ask better questions, and you'll get better answers!

Other empowering questions that seek understanding start with:

- "How can I . . ."
- "I wonder how . . ."
- "I wonder what . . ."
- "Where is it that I . . ."

Teach your child to open their understanding when they find themselves in difficult situations by asking themselves questions that seek comprehension of the circumstances. Understanding will help them respond rather than react.

Psychologists have recommended several board games you can play to help your child deal with the fear of uncertainty. It is advised that these games are played with a parent who engages the child in conversation about worry. The parent may also discuss the weight we place on our choices and teach their children that failure is just an opportunity to rebuild.

- Jenga
- Operation
- Don't break the Ice

Board games that promote cooperation can also help children with anxiety because there is no defined winner or loser. These games may also teach perseverance because it takes time and collaboration to get to the end.

- Hedbanz
- Race to the Treasure
- Cauldron Quest

Mindset

The key to your child's belief in their wellness lies in your assessment of what is wrong. Western medicine's goal is to diagnose, label, and medicate. While this can help solve behavioral issues, it tends to place a box around the child, keeping them within the expected behavior of the diagnosis. What if you let your child know they are much more than any label or diagnosis?

An excellent example is Nick Santonastasso. He was born without legs and one arm; he could have easily been labeled as someone with little to offer the world. He speaks about how the most significant disability ever to hit humanity is a victim mindset. The doctors told his parents what his diagnosis was. The most significant gift for Nick was that his parents decided they would focus on what was right with their son rather than what was wrong.

Nick says his parents made him who he is. From his earliest age, his parents told him the world wouldn't stop for him because he was different. They kindly said he needed to figure out how to do each thing as he could. They let him figure it out; his mindset became "how" instead of "can't." By asking their son to do things for himself, they empowered him to grow and become resilient. By trusting their son to find his way, they made him stronger.

Nick learned from his childhood that you are the only person who will make a drastic change in your life. We have one choice, look at all the negatives in life and focus on that, or look at what good we have in life and focus on that. When Nick focused on what he could do, he thrived. If he focused on what he couldn't do, he dug a hole of self-pity.

Help your child focus on what they can do and focus on what is right with them. Allow your child to pursue their dreams, even if it seems a huge stretch, given their current abilities. The human spirit can achieve almost anything; if we, as parents, get out of the way, allow, and support. Help your child ask "how" instead of saying "can't." Help your child find gratitude in what is present for them and gratitude for what can be possible for them.

Communication

Lastly, it is crucial for you to be vulnerable and open with your child as a parent. As children grow, they can place their parents on a pedestal, thinking that they can't understand the child's concerns because their parent is perfect. Parents who seek to maintain this illusion of perfection will find that their child fails to communicate issues with them for fear of not meeting the parent's expectation of perfection.

When your child is facing an issue, such as teasing or bullying, and you share stories of your feelings and experiences of facing the same problems in your childhood, you help your child see that it is possible to overcome such issues. Further, you let your child know that you are human and experience the same ups and downs as the child.

Being vulnerable and admitting that you don't have all the answers is one way to keep the lines of communication open with your children. As children age, they seek independence from their parents. This pulling away can be difficult for a caring parent. Because the teen years are filled with important decision points, parents must stay involved without resorting to direct questioning.

One practice that promotes communication with teens or pre-teens is to listen without judgment, without rushing to provide a solution. A parent willing to listen to their problems, which gives the child the space to speak about what is going on, is worth their weight in gold. When your child begins talking about an issue affecting them, let them speak without your interrogation. Validate how they feel; do not downplay how this affects them.

Another practice that opens communication with teens is to trust that they can come up with the answer. Offer advice if they seek it and hold your advice if they do not ask for it. Let them find possible resolutions, even if their approach to the problem differs from yours. As a parent, if you do not allow your child to experience the consequences of a poor decision, they are not equipped to face the world.

Keeping the lines of communication open with your teen can be challenging. The more you hold onto them, the more they will push for separation. Give them space by allowing them to make their own decisions in areas that have few consequences.

Trust that when it comes to your child's future, they seek a path that resonates with their hearts. Let go of expectations of what success looks like and what they will do for a living. Let them follow their hearts. If they fail, help them to see that it is an opportunity to start anew, it is not the end of the world.

During the challenging teen years, it is essential that you hold onto the understanding that the love between you and your child is an archetype of unconditional love. In connecting with your child through your heart space, you are strengthening the bond between you.

Letting words flow

Another exercise to decrease anxiety was found on PositivePsychology.com, called Act Like Fog.

Act like a fog! Imagine you are a fog. When someone throws a stone at you, you absorb the stone without throwing the stone back. This is a straightforward and effective technique to use for people who are continually criticizing you.

They say	You respond
"You just don't understand."	"Yes, I just don't understand."
"You are lazy."	"Yes, I am lazy sometimes."

"You are always late."	"Yes, I was late."
"You just don't take responsibility."	"Yes, I am sometimes irresponsible."

When you can accept criticism from a space of neutrality, it tends to disarm the person criticizing you. You can practice this with a loved one—agree to fire criticism rapid-fire at each other, with each responding with the fogging technique.

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Special issues your child might face

Bullying

Hurt people hurt people. Many bullies come from homes where they are or were abused, yet not all bullies had an abusive childhood. Children are born innocent; those who choose to promote fear and exert control are taught these behaviors at some time in their young lives.

Bullying is a way for a child to exert control over other children. Bullies often target those they deem inferior, different, shy, weak, or expressive.

The underlying energy behind bullying is fear. Beneath any effort to control another person is the energy of fear. According to goodtherapy.org, control is typically a reaction to the fear of losing control. People who struggle with the need to be in control often fear being at the mercy of others. This fear may stem from traumatic events that left them feeling helpless and vulnerable. As a result, they may crave control in disproportionate and unhealthy ways.

Talking about bullying with your child can make them feel safe enough to reveal what they have experienced. Your job, as the adult, is to listen . . . without judgment. Being vulnerable with your child by sharing your experiences and feelings from your childhood will often deepen the parent-child bond by indicating an understanding of the feelings resulting from being bullied.

It can be damaging when you tell your child to ignore bullying. Mr. Rogers of the Mr. Roger's Neighborhood TV show was told to ignore the bullies as a child. He didn't know it was okay to feel angry over how he was treated. He didn't know how to express all the feelings he had experienced. Further, Mr. Rogers realized that pretending it wasn't happening did nothing to relieve his pain and loneliness. His TV show promoted teaching children to feel their feelings because he understood the power of words.

Spoken words are vibrations and have energy. Say out loud, "I love me." Feel the feelings the words evoke. Say out loud, "I love me, yes . . ." Feel how that feels. Now say out loud, "I love me, but . . ." Be aware of the difference in what you felt when saying these phrases. Notice the last time you said it brought in lower energy. Now you know the difference in energy caused by these simple words. Imagine the power of the bullies' words being thrown at your child.

Child Abuse

Anxiety might be present when a child is being abused or bullied. In a safe space, open a conversation with your child. Share stories of when you felt abused, dismissed, or made to feel insignificant as a child; let your child know they are not alone in their feelings. When you are vulnerable and share your feelings, your children are given permission to share theirs.

Help them express what is happening to them; give them papers to draw on, expressing their feelings through color. Give them toys to play out roles or situations that are weighing on them. Then, when they begin to talk, follow the suggested behavior creating a safe space for them to disclose difficult information (information from Rainn.org):

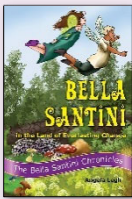
- **Be aware of your tone.** Be conversational. As difficult as it may be, make the conversation casual. A non-threatening tone will help put your child at ease and more amenable to revealing more accurate information. If you start the conversation in a serious tone, your child may be scared and more likely to give you answers they think you want to hear rather than the truth.
- **Talk to your child directly.** Ask questions using your child's vocabulary but are a little vague. For example, "Has someone been touching you?" In this context, "touching" can mean different things, but it is likely a word the child is familiar with. The child may respond with questions or comments to help you gauge the situation, "No one touches me except my mom at bath time," or "You mean like the way my cousin touches me sometimes?"
 - Understand that sexual abuse can feel good. The child may be confused, but the abuse may feel good to your child, so asking if someone is "hurting" them may not reveal the information you seek.
- **Listen and follow up.** Allow your child to talk freely. Do not interrupt with your questions. Wait for them to pause, and then follow up on things that concern you. Avoid facial expressions which may confuse, frighten, or send other messages to your child. Instead, allow your child to express themselves fully.
- **Avoid judgment and blame.** Avoid placing blame by using "I" questions and statements. Rather than beginning your conversation by saying, "You said something that made me worry . . ." consider starting your conversation with the word "I." For example: "I am concerned because I heard you say you are not allowed to sleep in your bed by yourself."
- **Reassure your child.** Make sure your child knows they are not in trouble. Let them know you are simply asking questions because you are concerned about them.
- **Be patient.** Remember, this conversation may be frightening for the child. Many perpetrators threaten what will happen if someone finds out about their abuse. For example, they may tell a child they will be put into foster care. Or, they may threaten them or their loved ones with physical violence if they tell anyone what's happening.

The full article is available at <https://www.rainn.org/articles/if-you-suspect-child-being-harmed>.

Seek professional assistance for you and your child if you feel your child is being abused. You and your child may feel anger, betrayal, and confusion. Professionals can provide therapies and other interventions to help you and your child.

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THE BELLA SANTINI CHRONICLES



The Bella Santini Chronicles series is written to help kids value themselves and learn the tools needed to face all their feelings. In this series, characters unite to stand up against a bully. Bella, who considers herself an ordinary girl, learns that she can stand up for her values.

Book one, *Bella Santini in the Land of Everlasting Change*, is available [here](#).

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My goal is to inspire 200,000 kids to love themselves through my stories in 2022. The tools in my books will help parents walk their children through many exercises in this guide.