



Understanding and managing anxiety during COVID-19

The current circumstances are a great source of anxiety for many of us. Our daily lives have been disrupted and we aren't sure what tomorrow may bring.

The worldwide impact of COVID-19 and the measures taken to control it (e.g. lockdown, school closures) are new to everyone, so we do not have previous experiences to help us predict what will happen or to know how best to deal with it. Additionally, many people are unable to do the things that normally help them to manage their worries. It is therefore understandable that many people are feeling more anxious than normal.

Some of the anxiety that children and young people are experiencing during COVID-19 may be inadvertently passed on by worried adults. We need to try modelling for children and young people how to react to stressful times by coping with anxiety in healthy ways.

There are many ways of doing this:

- Understanding anxiety – what is happening when we feel anxious?
- Gaining some control over our thoughts e.g. being aware of and catching negative thoughts
- Responding and behaving in healthy ways

This guide has been written to help you understand more about why we feel anxious, how we can recognise this in ourselves and how we can use this to support children and young people.

For further information and videos see the "Useful Websites" section at the end of this guide.

The treatment for anxiety isn't to make the fear go away, it's to manage the fear and tolerate anxiety

Jerry Brubrick

What is anxiety?

Everyday worry can cause us to experience unpleasant physical sensations and feelings. It can influence how we behave e.g. make us avoid situations. Usually this worry is linked to certain events or experiences (e.g. exams) and the feelings and associated symptoms go away after the event has occurred. This is both normal and useful (e.g. motivates us to study for exams).

When we experience high levels of worry or stress our bodies produce chemicals (e.g. adrenaline and cortisol) that prepare our body to defend itself (known as the fight, flight or

freeze reflex). This is helpful when there is a real threat to our safety as it can help us fight off the threat, run away or stay hidden by increasing our heart rate, sending energy to our muscles and making us breathe faster to get more oxygen.

However, the impact of our body's response to high and prolonged levels of worry or stress can have unpleasant side-effects:

- Feeling shaky, restless and unable to relax or sleep
- Tired and worn out
- Irritable and short-fused
- Sore stomachs and difficulties eating
- Headaches
- Difficulties concentrating or thinking
- Feeling overwhelmed or disconnected from people/situations

The term anxiety is used to describe high levels of worry which cause these unpleasant symptoms, interferes with day-to-day life and is difficult to control.



Some anxiety is helpful

It can be really helpful for all of us to understand anxiety, and that we all experience it from time to time – it is a normal experience.

Some anxiety can be useful, and we should not always seek to avoid experiencing it or the situations that might trigger it.

It can motivate us to act and increase our performance, e.g. act responsibly on health advice, revise for an exam, plan for the future or manage our money sensibly.

Without experiences of normal worry and anxiety we could put ourselves at risk as we would not see the need to take precautions.

Too much anxiety is not

High, prolonged and intense experiences of anxiety and stress can result in distress – we become stuck in a heightened fight, flight or freeze mode and cannot function well.

The emotional part of our brain (the amygdala) stops 'talking' to the thinking part of our brain (the cortex) and takes over, meaning our ability to think about and deal rationally with a situation has been hijacked by stress hormones.

This is sometimes referred to as an amygdala hijack. Have a look at this short [video](#) which explains just how this works:



What can we do in that moment of amygdala hijack?

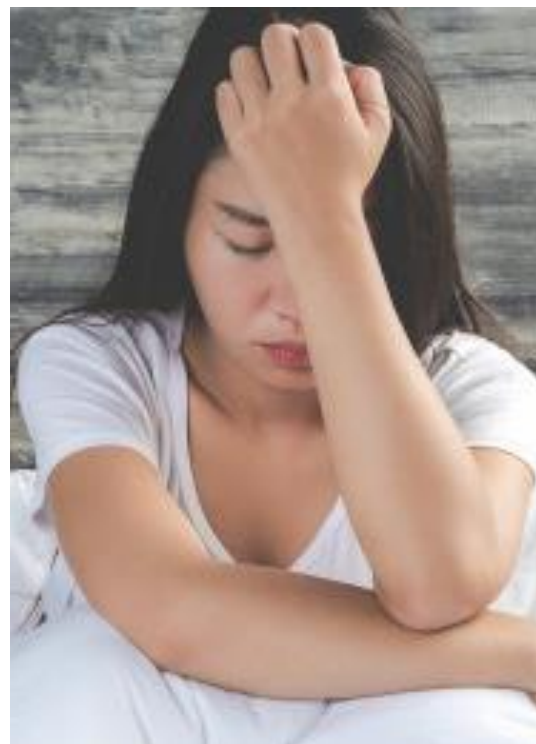
Name it - Notice when you've been triggered and identify what's triggering you. Notice changes in your tone, tightness in your chest or stomach, clenching in your jaw or hands, etc. In these moments, say to yourself, "I'm feeling triggered right now."

Remember the 6-second rule - It takes the hormones that are released during the amygdala hijacking about 6 seconds to dissipate. Using this time to focus on something pleasant will prevent your amygdala from taking control and causing an emotional reaction.

Breathe - Become aware of your breath and slow it down, breathe deeply. When you slow down your breathing and make it rhythmic, this calms down your nervous system and allows you to make thoughtful decisions in stressful times.

Draw on mindfulness - Look around you and notice things in the environment. This will help you to move out of your head and back into the present.

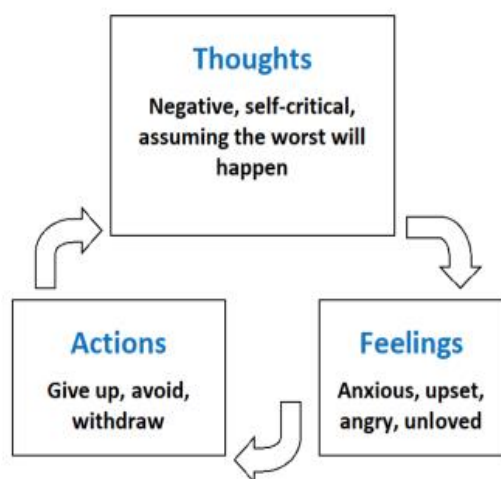
Take a timeout - If you are truly feeling out of control, excuse yourself from the situation you are in to get a hold of your emotions.



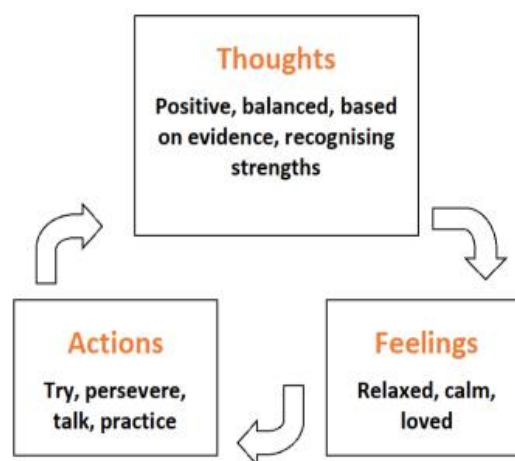
Gaining Control Over Our Thoughts and Anxiety

Thinking, Feeling, Doing – how the way we think impacts on the way we feel and behave

This approach stems from the understanding that the way we think about a situation affects the way we feel about it and thus how we behave. We can get caught in a negative cycle of thinking which can leave us feeling anxious and in distress and caught in a cycle of behaviour that is likely to maintain this anxiety and distress.



Negative cycle: maintaining anxiety



Positive cycle: achieving a healthy balance

It helps to take the time to think about our own thought cycles – have we been caught in a negative cycle that fuels our anxiety? Can we take some time to try and think differently and see the impact it has on our feelings and behaviours? Quite often getting stuck in a negative cycle is because we are making common thinking errors (or falling into thinking traps) - the next section explores this in more detail.

Thinking Traps: challenging our thinking

We all get caught up in thinking traps or errors that may mean we end up in a negative cycle. Some of the most common ones are:

Common thinking traps	Example
Mind-reading: This happens when we believe that we know what others are thinking and we assume that they are thinking the worst of us. However, we can't mind-read so we don't know what others are thinking!	<p>"He thinks I'm really stupid/ugly" "She doesn't like me"</p> 
Overgeneralising: This is when we use words like "always" or "never" to describe situations or events. This is a problematic way of thinking because it does not take all situations or events into account. For instance, sometimes we make mistakes but we don't always make mistakes.	<p>"I always make mistakes" "I won't be able to cope"</p> <p>miStAkEs are proof that you are TRYING</p>
Critical self: Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility	<p>"I'm stupid" "I'm a failure" "I'm unlovable"</p> 
Filtering: This happens when we take note of all the bad things that happen, but ignore any good things.	<p>Looking through dark blinkers or gloomy specs – forgetting the good things</p> 
Catastrophising: Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen.	<p>"I'm dying" "I'll embarrass myself and everyone will laugh" "I'll freak out and no one will help"</p> 
Emotional Reasoning: when we feel that everything must be really bad because we are feeling negative emotions .	<p>"I feel bad so it must be bad" "I feel anxious, therefore I must be in danger"</p> 
Fortune-telling/prediction: This occurs when we predict that things will turn out badly. However, we cannot predict the future because we don't have a magic ball.	<p>"I know I will fail the exam" "I know we will get in another car accident" "I will faint/go crazy"</p> 

To avoid falling into these thinking traps it is important to **Stop** and recognise when you are having an anxious thought, take a deep breath before you ask yourself:

- Are my thoughts based on fact? What is the evidence?
- Am I falling into a thinking trap?
- What might be a better way of thinking?
- Am I worrying about something I have no control over?
- Why am I thinking this way?
- What would you say to a friend if they had this thinking?
- Can I try to identify some of the positive things about life at the moment?
- What can I do differently to deal with the situation, instead of being anxious about it?

Developing resilience and coping with difficult emotions

While we may imagine that only ever experiencing positive emotions would be best, it is human to feel “negative” emotions such as anxiety, grief, anger and sadness at times. These difficult emotions are normal and accepting them, rather than trying to ignore them, can help us to develop our resilience and coping skills.

This self-care is even more important during COVID-19. We need to be aware of and understand our difficult emotions, but we need to try to do this in a way we don't become 'stuck' in them. However, if we focus on them for too long, we can fall into negative thinking styles and traps.

The following questions can help you to support children and young people to understand the difficult emotions and plan to address them in a healthy way:

1. **What am I feeling?** Be as specific as possible as accurately labelling the emotion will help with the next two steps. See emotions charts at the end of the document to help you do this.
2. **What does this difficult emotion tell me?**
3. **What is within my control to address this?** I.e. your action plan

E.g. young person: “I’ve missed loads of school so I will definitely fail my exams and I’ll never get into my college course”

1. The young person may be feeling anxious and helpless
2. This tells you that they care about their education and future.
3. They could make a plan to [develop the skills to learn effectively at home](#) and talk to their teacher if there is a specific bit of learning that they are particularly concerned about.

Click [here](#) for an example of how a child is supported when they are upset about wanting to go out to play.



Responding and Behaving in Healthy Ways

How to manage our own anxiety during COVID-19

Think carefully about what you're reading. While we all want to make sure we are informed about how best to keep our families and each other safe, we should also be thoughtful about what we are reading online to make sure it is actually helpful. It is easy to inadvertently get drawn into reading every update as it comes in, or news stories that are inaccurate or that paint a catastrophic picture.

Consider putting a limit on the number of articles you read, or for how long you will read about the coronavirus each day. If you are looking at media that is making you anxious — pictures of supermarket queues or people hoarding supplies— take a break. Being informed is one thing; being overexposed is another.

Focus on what you're doing right now. Remind yourself that you are doing your part to minimise the risks by practicing social distancing and keeping your hands and your home clean. We know the benefits of being in the moment – focusing on what you are doing in the here and now. So, try and stop yourself if you notice that you are getting carried away with “what ifs.”

Rely on routines. Establishing a routine that involves exercise, regular meals and healthy amounts of sleep is also crucial to regulating our moods and our worries. If your old routine is no longer possible because of COVID-19 precautions, look for ways to be flexible and start a new routine. Create routines together with children that include work tasks, but also fun and relaxing activities, together time and so on.

How to recognise anxiety in our children

It is not always obvious that children are feeling anxious - it can show up in many different ways. Signs to look out for in children include:

- Reassurance-seeking (Are we going to be okay? Is my grandpa going to be okay?)
- Reluctance to separate from parents
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach pains
- Increased moodiness or irritability
- Tantrums or meltdowns
- Trouble sleeping

Children may not always be able to express how they are feeling so we may need to find alternative ways to help them to do so. For younger children try creating a feelings chart (e.g. using emojis representing different emotions, or see end of document for other examples) and ask the child to point to the feeling they are having right now. You can create a feelings thermometer or traffic light to help them to show you how intense the feelings are: a red light means they feel overwhelmed, a yellow light is medium and a green light means they are OK.



Talking with children about worries and anxiety

Talking to children about anxiety and how it affects their body and behaviour can support them to develop the skills to manage it.

See below for some ideas to answer young children's questions about feeling worried or anxious.

"What happens to my body when I'm anxious?"

There are lots of different ways that anxiety can make our bodies feel. Some people feel butterflies in their tummy, cry, feel hot, feel a weight on their chest, find breathing difficult or breathe really fast, feel sweaty, have jelly legs, feel dizzy, shaky or sick.

"Is it normal?"

Feeling anxious about things is completely normal – everyone feels anxious sometimes. Anxiety is a reaction that can sometimes even be helpful – this can happen in different ways that are known as the Fight, Flight or Freeze responses.

Back in the caveman times, anxiety helped to keep them safe. If they came across dangerous animals like a sabretooth tiger, anxiety would help their hearts to beat faster so that they had the energy to fight off the tiger or run away.

Anxiety can also help keep us safe by making us stay very still – like rabbits who freeze when they see a fox to stay hidden.

"What if I'm anxious all the time?"

The reaction of feeling anxious can be helpful, but sometimes it can make things more difficult for us.

Our body reacts like a smoke alarm – it detects something dangerous like a fire and we feel anxious as a result, this keeps us safe.

Sometimes the alarm is too sensitive and reacts to something that is not dangerous, like burnt toast. When our brain's alarm goes off a lot or for a long time it can get more and more sensitive. This means we can have a big anxious reaction to things that are not actually dangerous.

This can make us think or behave in ways that aren't nice for us – like avoiding things that could be fun, worrying about what other people are saying about us, thinking badly about ourselves, finding it difficult to be away from our parents or getting angry and upset.

This [video](#) explains this in a way that may appeal to older children or teenagers.



How to help anxious children during COVID-19

Structure their day and stick to a routine

Children of all ages thrive when they have boundaries, routines and structure to their day. It helps them to feel safe and cared for and makes things feel consistent and predictable. Without structure, anxiety can increase.

Structuring their day whether at home or school will help. Alternate chores/responsibilities or learning activities with more fun activities and periods of free time. Make sure children are still getting the chance to exercise and socialise with friends via video chats and social media if they are on it.

Don't be afraid to discuss the coronavirus

Most children will have heard of the virus - you can take the role of making sure that what they know is factual and helpful e.g. they know they can help themselves stay safe by washing their hands. To avoid discussing the virus could make children more anxious. Click [here](#) to access the Educational Psychology Service website for more information about talking to children about COVID-19.

Model staying calm yourself

Make sure you are looking after yourself. If the child sees that you are calm, they will be reassured by this.

Engage in self-care

It's always important for children to get enough sleep, eat healthy food and engage in physical exercise. During times of anxiety, these self-care activities become even more essential. Teach children to use relaxation strategies, see later pages for suggestions. They can carry on using these long after this is all over.

Stay connected

'Social distancing' measures are meant to keep people healthy. However, children may be sad or even angry about needing to limit their face to face interactions with friends and family. Help them stay connected with others in new ways. Use technology like Skype, Zoom, Facetime or other apps to set up 'virtual playdates.' Let friends play a game or eat together. Set up regular times for children to talk with their friends on the phone. The same goes for adults!

Support children and young people to recognise and talk about their anxious feelings

Help them to recognise triggers, thinking traps and getting caught in negative thinking cycles

Focus on the positives while acknowledging and talking about anxious feelings and fears

Children with anxiety often perceive threatening situations to be more of a danger than they really are, and it takes longer for their bodies' stress response (or fight, flight, freeze) to 'turn off'. But reassurance from adults can go a long way toward calming them. Stay positive and talk about all the things people are doing together to help each other and stay healthy - help the child to make a plan based on what they can control, rather than worrying about what they can't.

One of the best ways to reduce anxiety is simply to make time to talk

For more information on supporting children's emotional wellbeing click [here](#).



Key relaxation strategies:

These strategies help us focus on something other than the thoughts that are making us feel anxious and can help our brains get out of the fight / flight / freeze state by sending it the message that the danger has passed. This restores our ability to think and problem-solve. Try the following strategies out to see what works best for you:

Grounding

Take notice of 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. Try to do this slowly, one sense at a time.

Counting backwards

Count backwards slowly from 10. Repeat. Doing this in a foreign language is extra challenging.

Deep breathing

Inhale through nose and hold for count of 5, push breath out slowly using whole body. Repeat 5 times. Put your hand on your stomach and imagine that you are inflating a balloon – this ensures that you are breathing deeply rather than holding the breath in your chest.

Visual imagery

Visualise calm place or picture – imagine the sounds, smells, textures, heat etc.

Visualising confidence

Visualise yourself successfully coping with or overcoming the thing that is worrying you. Imagine how this will look and feel.

Verbal rehearsal

select a verbal reminder to repeat to self as a reminder to keep calm. You could store this in your bag/diary to read when you need it.

Body scan

scan your body for areas of tension then consciously release e.g. soften your forehead, wiggle your jaw, drop your shoulders, release a slow breath and roll your neck in a circle.

Muscle relaxation

starting from your toes, purposefully tense, then relax your muscles working up to your shoulders and face.

Smiling

Smiling can boost the release of chemicals associated with happiness and reduced stress in the brain, even if the smile is initially forced. Laughing will have a similar effect - you could speak to your friends about something funny that has happened, or watch a funny video.

Listen to music

Listen to a song that you love and that makes you feel good. Try to give it 100% of your attention by listening for the different instruments, lyrics etc, and sing along either out-loud or in your head.

Get Active

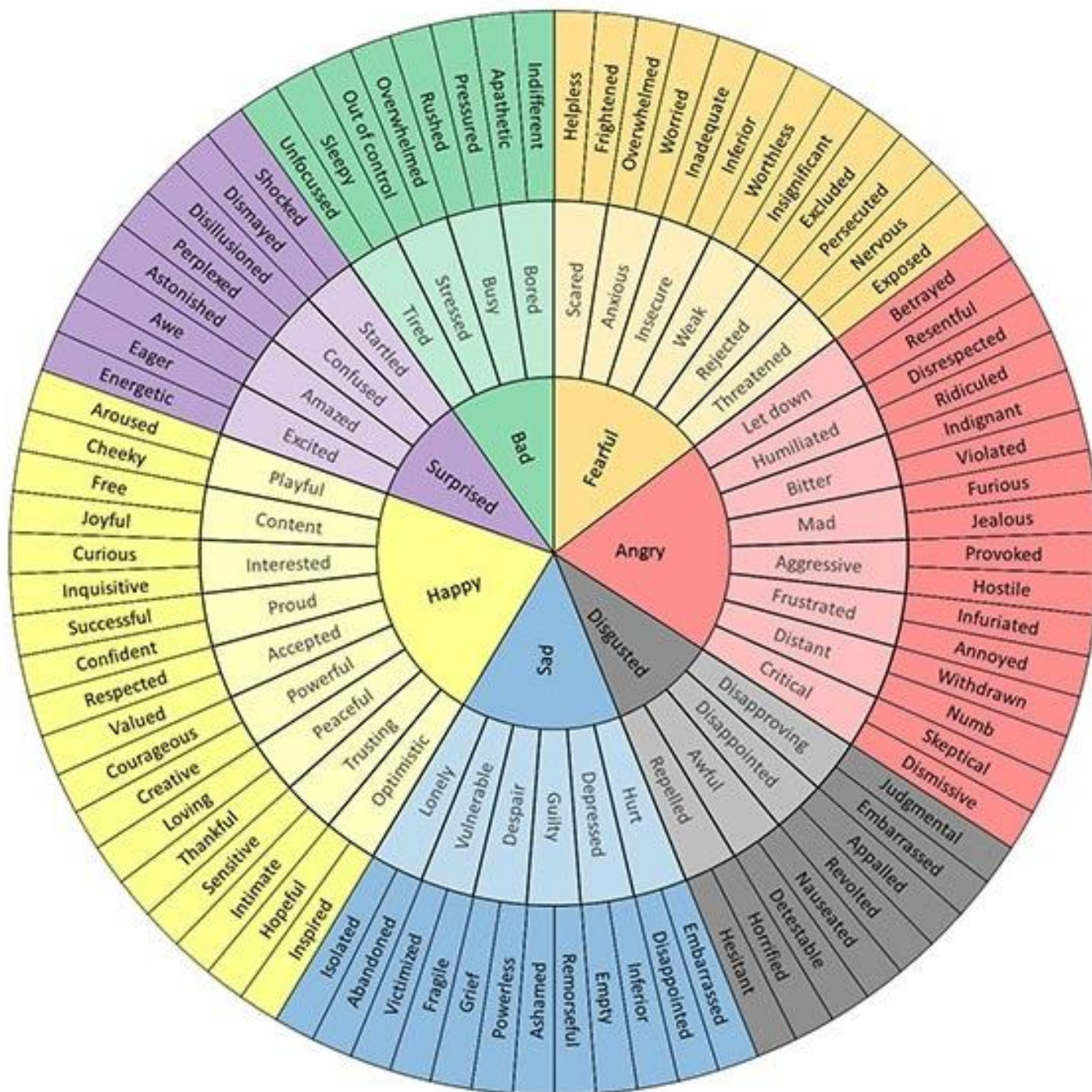
Do something active to help your body burn off some of the adrenaline that may have been released while you were feeling anxious.

Useful websites

Title and link	What is it?	Who is it for?
Fife Council Educational Psychology Service	Website providing information and approaches to supporting children and young people during COVID-19	Parents, carers and people who work with children and young people in Fife.
Hands on Scotland	Web-site providing help and practical advice for supporting children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing	Parents, carers and people who work with children and young people in Fife.
Fight, Flight Freeze video – You tube	An explanation of what anxiety is, how it is beneficial, what is happening neurologically, physically, emotionally and behaviorally	Appropriate for late primary and high school pupils
FACE COVID – How To Respond Effectively To The Corona Crisis	You Tube video with further advice on managing anxiety during COVID-19	Adults and young people.
Mood Cafe	NHS Fife website for mental health- link gives a description of what anxiety is and highlights how normal it is. Contains useful links to guides on relaxation, dealing with worry, panic, stress and understanding anxiety.	Resource for teachers to inform own thinking. Resource for high school pupils and adults to access.
Mood Juice	NHS website guide to anxiety- explanations and helpful thought training tools to help prevent catastrophising. There is other useful content in the main website eg. Problem solving handouts however difficult to navigate not updated since 2004	High school or adults to use
Scottish conflict resolution	Information for young people about brain chemistry – and what is going on in the brain when you are experiencing different emotions, including anxiety.	Late primary/teenagers with good level of literacy
Stress and anxiety in teenagers	Further information on stress and anxiety	Late primary/teenagers with good level of literacy
Anxiety Canada	Information about anxiety and approaches to support.	Interactive sections for children and for young people (particularly upper primary / teenagers), and one for educators.

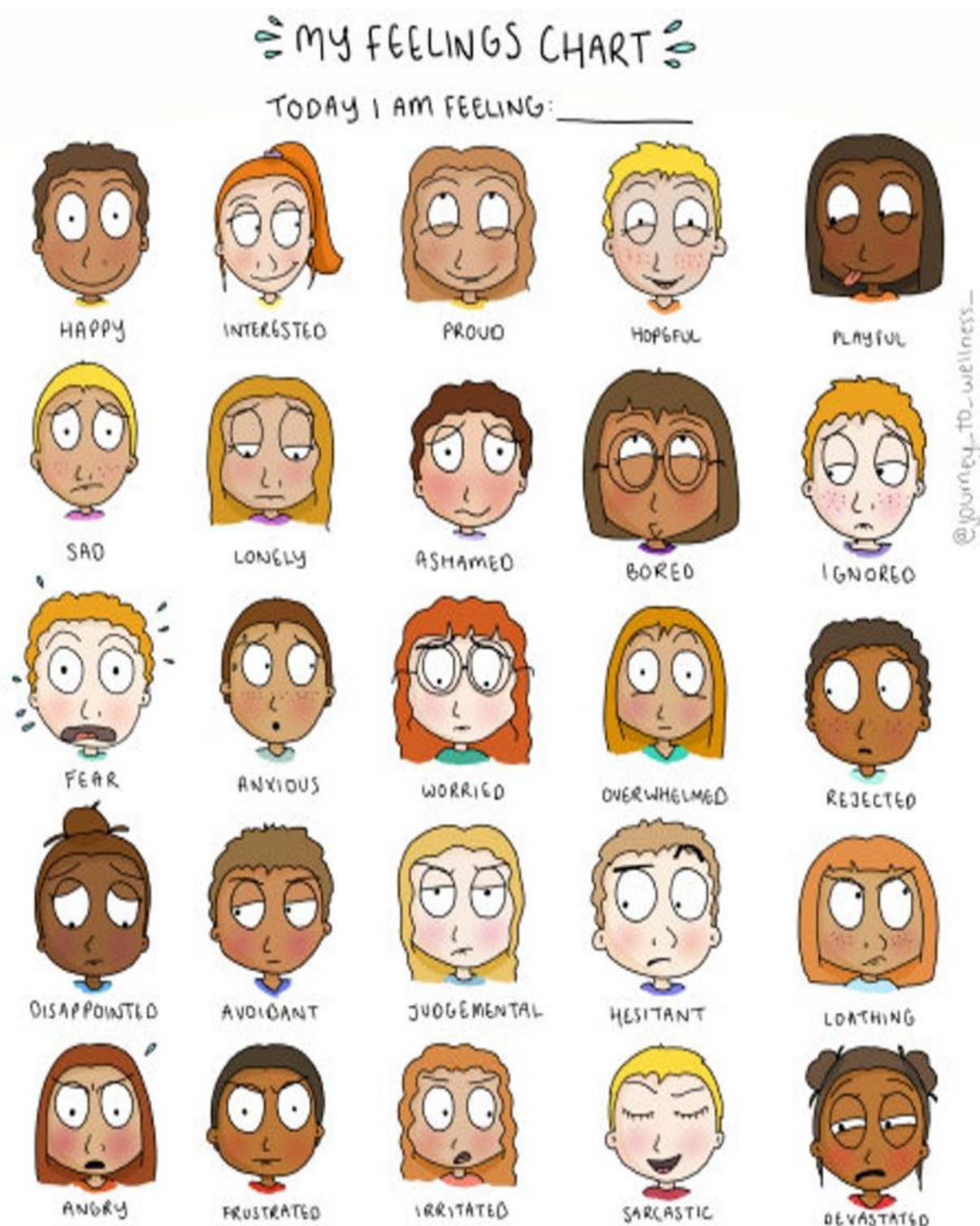
Emotions Charts

This chart is suitable for children and young people who have a good understanding of language. Start in the middle ring and work your way out to identify more complex emotions.



(image adapted from Willcox, 1982). <https://doi.org/10.1177/036215378201200411>

This chart might work better with younger children, or children and young people who find it harder to express themselves.



Improving life chances for all

www.fife.gov.uk/educationalpsychology

