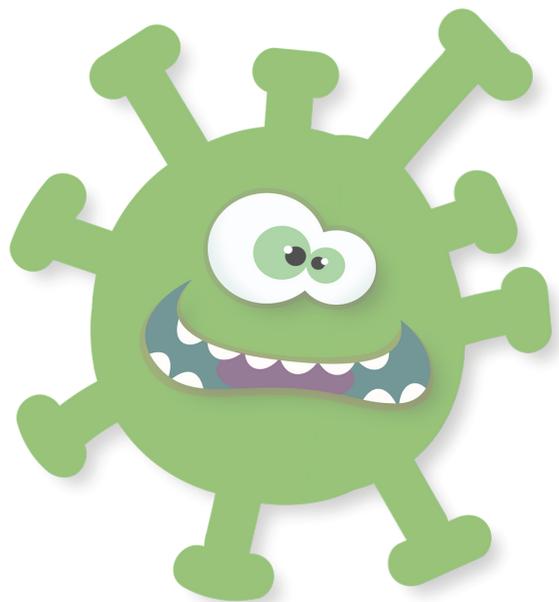
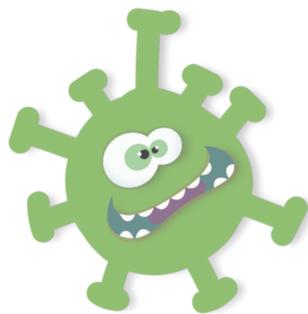




# Parenting

During COVID-19

Ages 5-12



# Parenting During COVID Lockdowns

As we know, news of the COVID-19 is everywhere, from the front page of all the papers, social media, conversations with others and the school yard.

Parenting is hard work in itself, and we know that parenting during the COVID-19 lockdowns can feel like a mammoth task. You're wearing more hats than ever before, and we really commend you that in the midst of all of that, you're taking the time to look at this information booklet. We recognise that each of you have your own unique set of circumstances, some of you may have a partner at home and maybe figuring out how to best balance parenting responsibilities with working from home, others may be single parents and juggling that same balance but having to do it all on your own. Still others may have recently lost jobs and you're trying to figure out how to adapt to some unexpected financial changes. We also know that there are parents who are still working outside of the home right now helping others and serving our communities and you may be worrying about how to best stay healthy and keep your family safe during this time.

So with that said we wanted to emphasise that the strategies we will present throughout this booklet can be implemented flexibly - it's not a one size fits all approach so feel free to pick and choose the pieces and techniques that seem most relevant for you, your child and your family's current situation.

*Some families may benefit from additional mental health supports. We have included some resources for you at the end of this booklet but also want to make sure you reach out to your local GP or helplines to access support immediately if required.*

## Content

- Managing feelings
- Talking COVID
- Dealing with Anxiety
- Managing Worries / postponing worries
- Mental health concerns
- Resources

# Managing Feelings

## Concrete vs Abstract Thinking



It's important to understand that children and teens partly react and take their cues from what they see from the adults around them. Parents are the nervous system of the family, just as teachers are the nervous system in the classrooms.

Whatever the parent is doing or the teacher is doing, the kids are feeding off energetically.

*Kids read more of what we do and less of what we say*

We all may have a particularly hard time making sense of what's happening at the moment, but especially children given that:

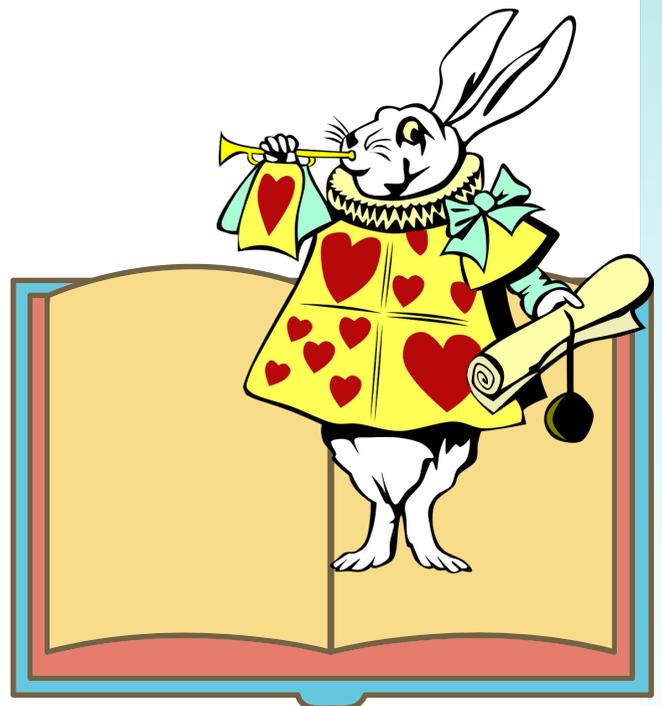
- their brains are far from maturation,
- they have a lack in life experiences that us adults have,
- and have increased vulnerability.

As such, each child may react differently, and a parent's response would need to be tailored to the individual situation and context surrounding their child.

The things that your child may be worried about may seem silly to you as a child's thought processes are in what we call a 'concrete' phase, meaning that what they're thinking is *IN THE HERE AND NOW - WHAT THEY CAN SEE*. Whereas adult thoughts are more 'abstract'.

An example of concrete thinking in children is when the schools shut down again, a child's main worry was about not being able to return his/her library book, while yours was about how you were going to manage working from home, home schooling, finances and how to keep everyone sane!

Put on a scale of 1-10 how much these issues are worrying you, with 1 being not much and 10 being extreme stress, both you and your child would rate your own issue high in priority and worry.





## Talking COVID

Now it's really important to keep this concept of concrete thinking in mind when you are discussing the coronavirus. By now most children will be familiar with the virus so it's important not to avoid talking about it. In fact, not talking about it can have an adverse effect resulting in kids worrying more.

ALSO When discussing the virus, it's really important to be age appropriate - and to figure out how to speak to a child is to ask them what they already know. We don't want to talk past where a child is at; we want to deal with only what's up for them in the moment. Right there, we're going to get information from them about where their head is at. Be careful not to assume what it is your child may be concerned about as each child is different and what you're thinking is a concern. may not be their concern at all.

When your child confides their worry, for example *how am I going to return the library book now schools are closed*, acknowledge that your child's feelings are real to them and be careful not to dismiss, make fun or reject them. Let your child know that the feelings are normal considering what is happening and many other children and adults are experiencing similar feelings. By validating their feelings, it shows that you acknowledge and understand what is going on for them, resulting in your child feeling understood. Also validate feelings of anger and disappointment. *It stinks that you had to cancel your holiday plans. Or your sleepover party. Or your school play. It's OK to cry, hit the couch, even yell for a bit.* Simultaneously, model reframing by looking at things through a different lens which we will look at a bit further on.

## In Summary

### Find Out What Your Child Already Knows:

This gives you a chance to learn how much kids know — and to find out if they're hearing the wrong information.

### Keeping having conversations

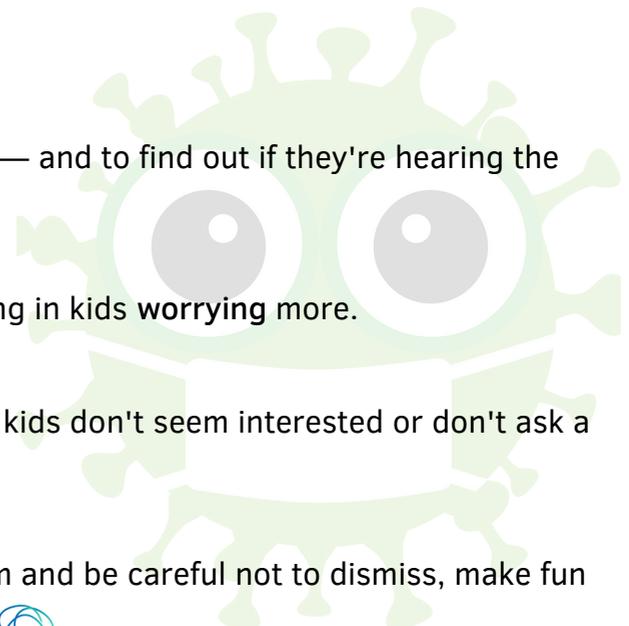
Not talking about it can have an adverse effect resulting in kids worrying more.

### Follow your child's lead

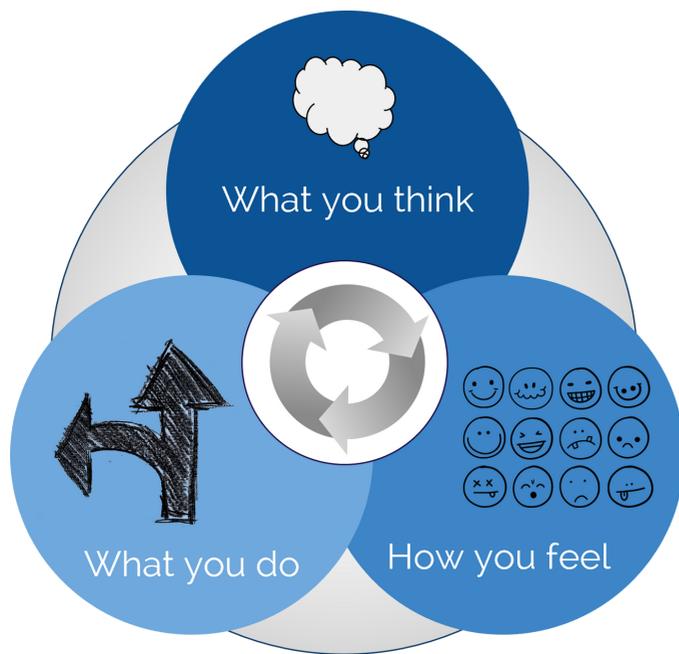
Some kids may want to spend time talking. But if your kids don't seem interested or don't ask a lot of questions, that's OK.

### Validate

Acknowledge that your child's feelings are real to them and be careful not to dismiss, make fun or reject them.



# The Worry Cycle



We know that thoughts are really powerful AND what we think can elicit strong emotions. Our thoughts are tied to our feelings and our thoughts can also shape our behaviour.

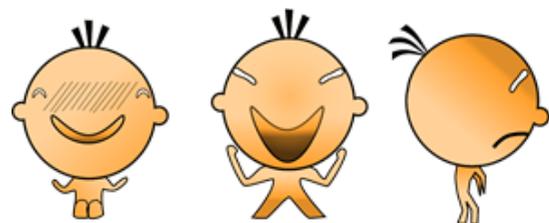
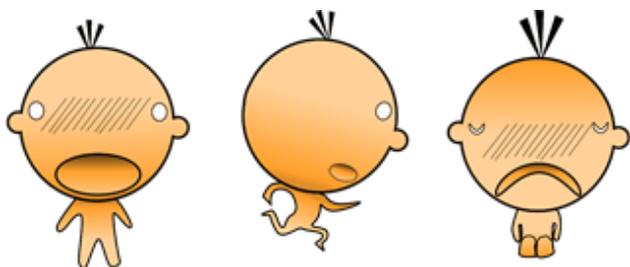
However thoughts are not the same as facts right?

Thoughts are not always accurate and particularly thoughts about the future are more like guesses. So by treating thoughts as guess and not as facts, and not as the absolute truth, we can move towards a more balanced viewpoint and reduce anxiety. Let's have a closer look at thoughts that cause us worry.

## THOUGHTS

What we think affects how we

## FEEL AND ACT

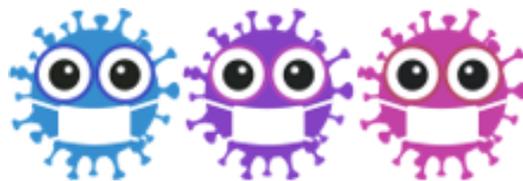


## BEHAVIOUR

What we do affects how we

## THINK AND FEEL

# How do we Manage Worry?



Worry is a cognitive process meaning it takes place in our thoughts and it's future oriented. This means that worries are often about what could happen or what might happen in the future.

In some ways worry / anxiety can be helpful - it may keep us safe. For example, I'm crossing the street and some degree of caution is helpful to keep me safe. It may also keep us motivated and productive - anxiety about turning assignments in on time or getting work tasks completed can be helpful and keep us working at the task in hand.

However worry can also be unhelpful especially if it becomes overwhelming or uncontrollable. If we shift to thinking only about worst case scenarios it leaves us feeling upset or exhausted and gets in the way of living life.

Anything can trigger worry however there are certain types of situations that might make worry more likely, and those are situations are ambiguous situations that are novel and new or situations that are unpredictable. SOUND FAMILIAR?



The other thing with worry and worrying thoughts is they can spiral out of control. From what starts of as a neutral 'what if' thought can expand into a catastrophic event!

We call this the worry chain - let's have a look at this on the next page.



# The Worry Chain



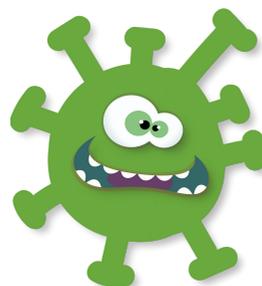
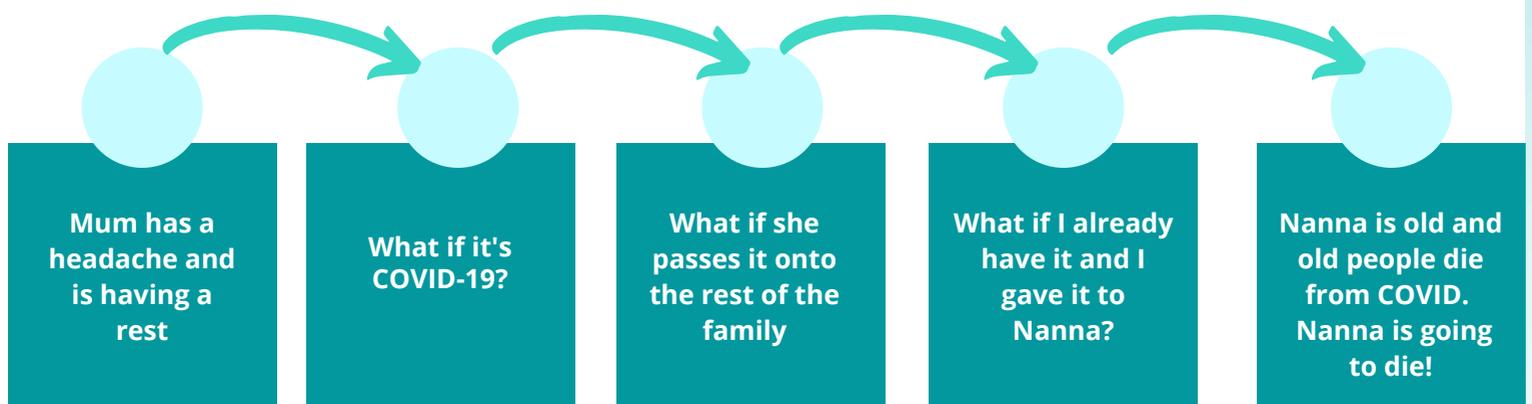
I want to just walk through an example of a worry chain which will show how a somewhat neutral thought about something, that might be happening in the moment, could actually spiral pretty quickly through a series of thoughts that may start to feel out of control or overwhelming.

Let's say that you just told your child that you have a headache and are going to go and rest for a while. Your child might simply think "mum has a headache", or this might lead to a worry about a hypothetical 'what if' scenario!

*"I know that headaches are a symptom of this COVID. Mum might pass it on to me, and what if I've already got it? I saw Nanna just before lockdown and she's 75 so she's more likely to get really sick - at least that's what I've heard in the news that people above a certain age are more at risk, what if Nanna has to go to the hospital and there aren't any ventilators, and what if Nanna dies alone in the hospital and we aren't even able to visit her!"*

In this example hopefully you can see how a thought about something happening in the moment, *mum having a headache*, may actually pretty quickly lead to a series of worries about what ifs that are increasingly overwhelming and upsetting.

## Example of the Worry Chain



# Types of Worries

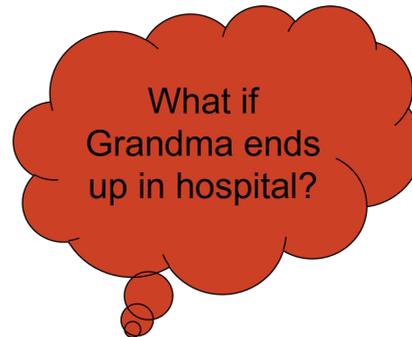
## Real Problem Worries

Actual problems that are affecting your child right now



## Hypothetical Worries

Things that do not currently exist, but which might happen in the future



There are two types of worries:

### Real problem worries

- These are worries about actual problems that are affecting your child right now
- Real problem worries may actually have a solution that can be undertaken in the moment
- Or if you can't solve the problem you can maybe think about it in a more concrete way

An example of a real problem worry might be my family is currently out of soap or hand sanitizer - so with that worry there may be some brainstorming that could happen around solutions. For example maybe a friend could drop some of, or maybe you could place an online order, or get it at the supermarket when you next visit. There may not be an easy solution but with a real problem worry it, but it can feel more like there's something we can do in the moment because it's affecting us right now – we're in control!

### Hypothetical Worries

A hypothetical worry is the other category of worry and hypothetical worries are about things that do not currently exist- which may or may not happen in the future. An example of a hypothetical worry might be what if Nanna ends up on a ventilator and in hospital (to go back to the previous worry chain example). Hypothetical worries may feel less controllable than real problem worries simply because there's that element of uncertainty with something that is not currently going on - it might happen in the future.

It can be hard to know how to address those types of thoughts so the strategies that we're going to walk through are meant to give you some tools for how to address hypothetical worries if your children experience them.

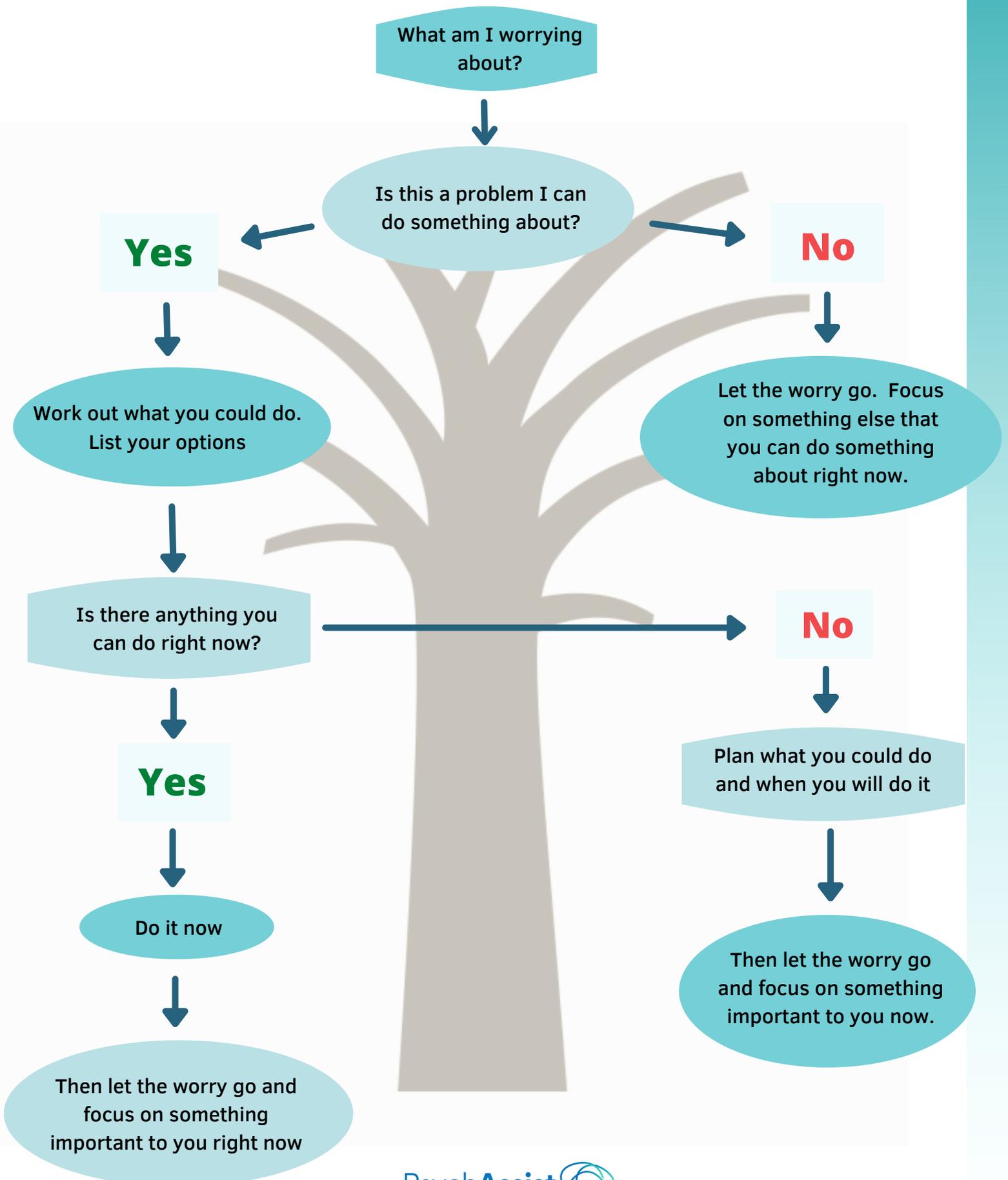
The first strategy is restructuring thoughts : this is a really helpful strategy when worries come up and start to feel overwhelming. We know that thoughts are really powerful but thoughts are not the same as facts remember?

Thoughts are not always accurate and particularly thoughts about the future are guesses. So by treating thoughts as a guess and not as fact, and not as the absolute truth, we can move towards a more balanced viewpoint and reduce anxiety.

So the acronym that we're going to use to restructure thoughts is called **STOP**. Let's have a look at that further.

# The Decision Tree

Use this decision tree to help you notice real problems vs hypothetical worry



# Addressing Worrying Thoughts

## 'STOP' Model

Situation  
Thought  
Other  
Praise



Restructuring  
Thoughts

## Applying the STOP Model

### Situation:

Ask your child what is the situation that is making them feel worried right now

### Thought:

The T - the worry thought. Ask your child what is their very thought, what are they worried about right now. Then at this point you can support your child in using what we call *detective thinking* to look for evidence both for and against this thought. We will talk through how to support your child with detective thinking in the next section.

### Other:

3. The O, is to ask your child if there's another more balanced thought (other) to that they, like a different alternative.

### Praise:

4. This is where you can use praise your child for their hard work in coming up with that alternative thought.

# Detective Thinking

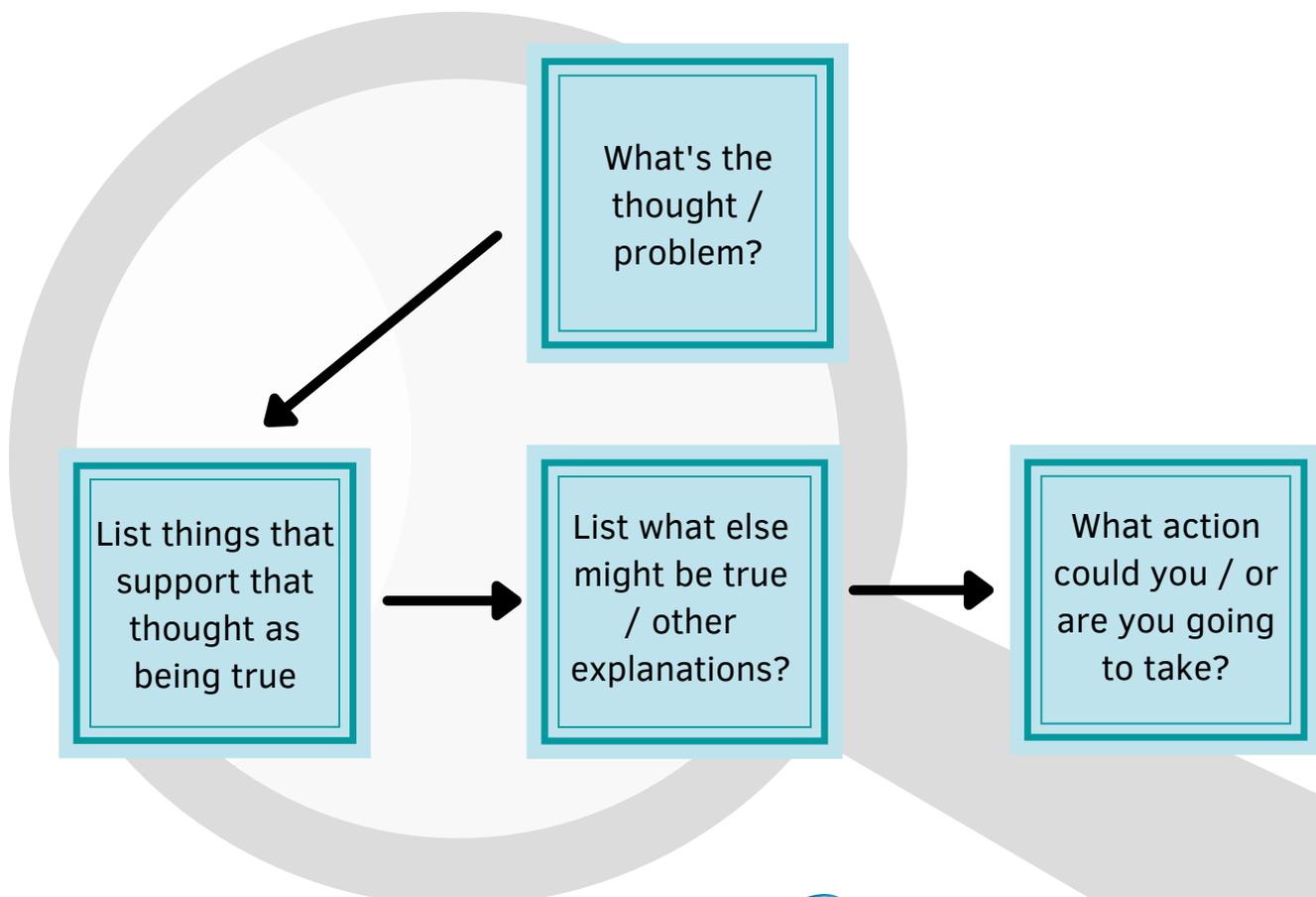
So let's look into detective thinking in a bit more detail: to support detective thinking and to prompt a more balanced thought process you can ask your child questions like:

- what are the facts
- do you know for sure what's going to happen
- what else might be true
- is there another possibility or explanation



It can be really tempting in using this skill with your child to jump in and provide your own answers to those questions, and I know that temptation comes from a place where we want to protect and fix problems for our kids. However if you can hold back on that impulse and encourage your child to use their own detective thinking skills and think of answers to these questions on their own, that is going to help them exercise their own thought restructuring muscles so to speak. This will help them to learn to think through their thoughts / problems and empower them to use this skill on their own, as well as with your support in the future.

Here's a bit of a diagram that you can use to work through "detective thinking" with your child. You can also get creative and make up your own detective sheet that you know your child will love!



# Putting STOP into Action

So now I'm going to talk through an example of how you could help your child use the stop scale to restructure thoughts, and just remember that this is also a skill that you can use with yourself! Lets talk about a social worry, let's say the situation is that your child can't reach their friend on FaceTime and they are worried or upset.



## Scenario: *Your child can't reach their friend on FaceTime and they are worried or upset*

**Step one - S:** ask your child to describe that situation to you that's making them feel worried right now.

**Step 2 - T:** ask your child what is their worry thought, maybe your child's worry thought is that their friends don't want to talk at this point.

Now we bring in the detective thinking to look for evidence both for and against this thought. Some questions that you could ask in this situation to support your child in using detective thinking might be questions like:

- have you been able to talk to your friend this week
- what are some other ways that you could stay connected or reach out instead of using FaceTime
- what else do you think your friend could be doing in their home right now
- are there other reasons that they might be busy or not able to pick up

**Step 3 - O:** after working through these questions with your child you can bring in the o of those stop skill: ask your child to generate another example of an alternative, more balanced thought that your child could have? Remember it's important to guide your child to try and come up with answers themselves. Some answers could be:

- my friend might be busy with their family right now
- my friend's phone may be flat
- my friend might be watching a movie on tv

**Step 4 - P:** praise your child for their hard work and coming up with alternative thought and good thinking.

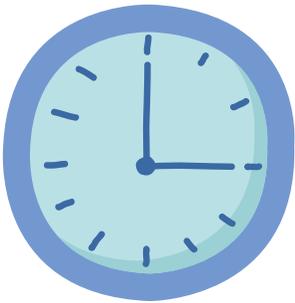
# Postponing Worry

OK, so we've talked about one strategy using this stop skill to support your child in restructuring thoughts, and now we're going to move to a second strategy which is postponing worry.

Postponing worry is a strategy that may be helpful if your child is experiencing worry that seems uncontrollable or very time consuming.

This strategy would involve you suggesting that your child deliberately set aside some time in the day to work through those worries, almost like parking them until an agreed time to talk about them. This is an especially handy technique if you're working from home and can't address your child's concern with them at that immediate time.

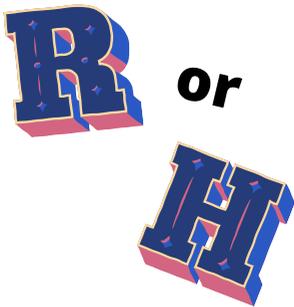
## Step 1: Preparation



Decide the timing and duration of worry time together.

- 'Worry time' is time you set aside every day for the specific purpose of worrying.
- What time of day do you think you will be in the best frame of mind to attend to your worries? Involve your child in determining the time.
- When are you unlikely to be disturbed?
- If you are unsure, 15 to 30 minutes every day at 4:00pm is often a good starting point.

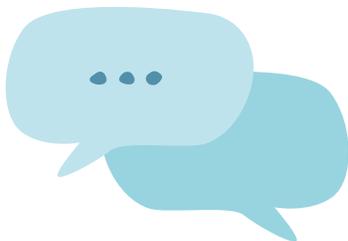
## Step 2: Categorise worries when they arise



During the day if your child expresses worries or is experiencing worries you can ask them to think about whether those are real problem worries- you know is this something we can solve or act on right now, or if the worries are hypothetical.

You can encourage your child to postpone thinking about them until worry time and you can also help your child redirect their attention and focus on the present moment maybe by saying something like *remember we will have time to think about that later during our worry time, but right now can you help me make lunch.*

## Step 3: Worry Time



During this time your child can use their dedicated period of time to look at their worries with you - remember to keep this time limited and to focus on the worry. During worry time older children may find it helpful to write down the worries they remember having during the day and consider whether they are still worried about them now. Younger children might need some prompting from you, so for example asking questions like "do you remember what you were worried about earlier are you still worried about that now?" During this time parents can encourage reflection on the worries – do they give you the same emotional 'kick' when you think about them now as they did when you first thought of them? Can any of the worries be converted into a practical problem to which you can look for a solution?



# Mindfulness

Another strategy I'd like to talk about briefly is practicing mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a really really helpful skill in managing and responding to worry thoughts, so when a thought comes up it can be helpful to support your child in practicing some mindfulness by purposefully paying attention to surrounding emotions.

When worry occurs encourage them to describe what sensations they notice - maybe they notice that their muscles are tensing up or hands are sweaty. They notice that they're feeling scared or sad. Then encourage your child to describe what thoughts they notice.

Mindfulness is really about paying attention to the present moment in a non judgmental manner. By supporting your child and practicing mindfulness you're helping them to redirect their focus to the here and now rather than getting swept up in the "what if ". This may be especially helpful in tolerating uncertainty and enabling kids, or yourself if you're using this, to focus on one thing at a time.

## Other mindfulness exercises:

### The five senses

You might take ten to fifteen minutes to do some yoga and stretch. Go outside, and tap into your senses. We can't help but be present if we're using our senses. Label all the things you can see, hear, touch, smell & taste. This can be a fun game outside with your child that brings them in the moment.

What about going for a mindful walk? When you're walking, talk about all the things you're seeing, stop and pick up a pebble and describe to each other how it feels, talk about the sun on your face, what does that feel like. Be in the moment with your walk!

Headspace has a great section for kids, and parents can sit and do the meditations with kids. These are two- or three-minute-long meditations. Doing something like this consistently can help lower anxiety and bring more awareness to the fearful thoughts, which makes it easier to pause and step back and get a little more realistic about it.

Another idea: If you have a printer, try downloading a picture of a mandala off the internet and color it in with your child. Grab one that's pretty detailed, maybe a little more advanced than your child would normally do, so it takes some time, and then you and your kiddo can sit and color for fifteen minutes a day or a half an hour a day. Just connect and color and be present—that's a mindful practice.

# Other Strategies

## Stability Rock

A 'stability rock' is a thing, process or practice that adds something reliable to your life when it feels like things are spinning out of control. 'Stability rocks' are really grounding and help you to remember that there are some things that are within your control and always stay the same. It can be a material thing or part of a routine. Maybe you could make a stability rock and name it with your child?



Put together a resource list that includes dance, yoga, art, music, and all different kinds of things that kids can do that allow them to express themselves in whatever way they want to.

You can do that through rolling in the grass or staring at the clouds, too. Make it part of the daily routine because it's a huge anxiety buster. It's a way for families to connect and have some fun, especially if they do something like a dance video together.

If your child isn't opening up another approach is having laid-back discussions either during dinner, or while taking a family walk. And this relies on a simple yet clever approach that gets people to open up.

I suggest a game: Like a rose.

There are three components to the rose.

The petal: 'Tell me something you liked about today.'

The thorn: 'Tell me something you didn't like.'

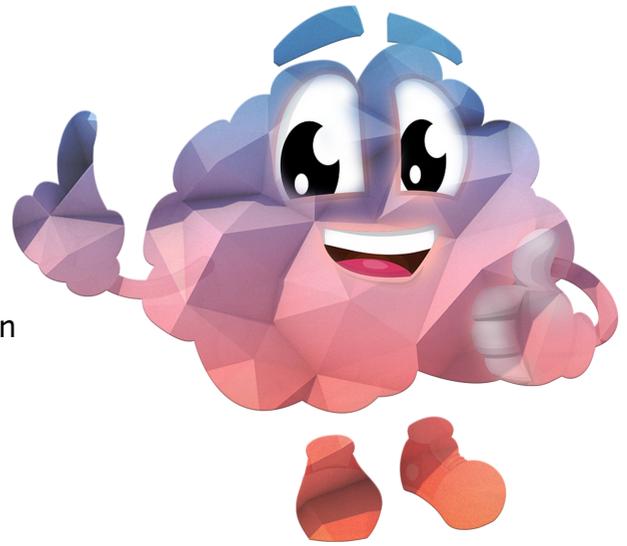
The bud: 'Tell me something you're looking forward to in the future.'



# Mental Health Concerns

## Recognising signs of stress in your child

Signs of stress and mental health challenges are not the same for every child or teen, but there are some common symptoms to be aware of listed below:



### Toddlers and young children

May show backward progress in skills and developmental milestones. They may also have increased problems with:

- fussiness and irritability, startling and crying more easily, and be more difficult to console.
- falling asleep and waking up more during the night.
- feeding issues, constipation or loose stools, or new complaints of stomach pain.
- separation anxiety, seeming more clingy, socially withdrawn, hesitant to explore, and seeming to fear going outside.
- hitting, frustration, biting, and more frequent or intense tantrums.
- bedwetting after they're toilet trained.
- urgently expressed needs while seemingly unable to feel satisfied.
- conflict and aggression or themes like illness or death during play.

### Older children and adolescents

May show signs of distress with symptoms such as:

- changes in mood that are not usual for your child, such as ongoing irritability, feelings of hopelessness or rage, and frequent conflicts with friends and family.
- changes in behavior, such as stepping back from personal relationships. If your ordinarily outgoing teen shows little interest in spending time with, texting or video chatting with their friends, for example, this might be cause for concern.
- a loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed. Did your music-loving child suddenly stop wanting to practice guitar, for example? Did your aspiring chef lose all interest in cooking and baking?
- a hard time falling or staying asleep, or starting to sleep all the time.
- changes in appetite, weight or eating patterns, such as never being hungry or eating all the time.
- problems with memory, thinking, or concentration.
- less interest in schoolwork and drop in academic effort.
- changes in appearance, such as lack of basic personal hygiene (within reason, since many are doing slightly less grooming during this time at home).
- an increase in risky or reckless behaviors, such as using drugs or alcohol.
- thoughts about death or suicide, or talking about it.

**Important: If you have any concerns about your child and suicide, it is critical to seek help immediately by calling kids helpline: 1800 551 800 or lifeline: 13 11 14**

# Mental Health Concerns

## How to have a Mental Health Conversation



Having sensitive conversations with children can feel a little challenging, but the most important thing to keep in mind is to make the young person feel comfortable. Here's some tips to help set the scene to encourage your child to talk:

Firstly check in on yourself. How are you feeling at the moment, are you feeling anxious, heightened, or racing to complete a deadline? If so, make sure you balance yourself before having a conversation. Try some breathing exercises, a mindfulness activity and time in nature.

Pick the place, it often helps kids to open up while doing an activity or going for a walk, or throwing the ball. A great tip is to try and position yourself side by side or mirror their body language - this really helps kids/teens feel more comfortable in having difficult conversations. Avoid sitting directly opposite as this can be confronting. Be prepared to check in again, your child may not open up the first time.

### Starting the conversation:

There's no right or wrong way to start a conversation about mental health concerns with a child, however I always suggest using "I" statements. Such as:

*"hey, I've noticed you seem a bit sad lately and I'm worried about you. Is anything troubling you?"*

or

*"It seems like you haven't been yourself lately, how's everything going?"*

or

*"I've noticed you seem anxious/worried, what's happening for you? I'm here to listen and we can try to work it out together"*

It's also important to consider that your child may not want to talk with you, but would feel more comfortable talking with someone else. I know that can be pretty tough to understand, but please don't take it personally and offer that option to them.

*"It's ok if you don't want to talk about it with me, but you can talk to..."* (recommend another close adult to your child like sporting coach, aunty, uncle, family friend. They may even feel happier chatting to a helpline online. Check out [www.headtohealth.gov.au](http://www.headtohealth.gov.au) about online chat services for young people.)

Once you're child voices their concerns, then you can use some of the problem solving strategies we've worked through. Headspace also has some great fact sheets on having a mental health conversation with your child or don't hesitate to consult your GP if you're concerns are anything greater than general worries. If you would like any additional information you can also contact us at [info@psychassist.com.au](mailto:info@psychassist.com.au).



# Resources



<https://www.headtohealth.gov.au>



<https://www.beyondblue.org.au>



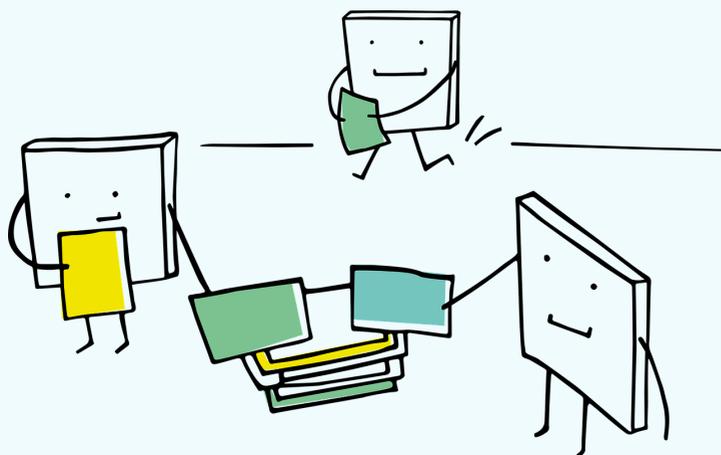
<https://www.kidshelpline.com.au>



<https://www.emergingminds.com.au>



<https://www.headspace.org.au>



[www.psychassist.com.au](http://www.psychassist.com.au)