

Behaviour 101

www.behaviour101.com

BANKING ON ANXIETY



By Barry Whelan

Introduction

How do you ensure your finances are sustainable over the long term? You monitor your bank account. You check if you deposit more into your account every month than you withdraw. If you spend more than you make, it won't be long before you encounter difficulty.

What do you do if you're spending more than you earn? You've two options. You try to make more deposits to facilitate your spending. Or, you reduce the amount you withdraw. Anxiety can be viewed through a similar lens.



Certain elements deposited into a child's life ensure they live with sustainable levels of anxiety. Other elements are withdrawals. Reducing withdrawals to zero is not the goal no more than it is with your finances. It's not realistic in either sphere as spending money and occasionally feeling anxious are normal parts of life. The target is to guarantee more deposits in a child's life than withdrawals so they can live sustainably and thrive accordingly.

Deposits

Stripping away the complicated theory and jargon, nine actionable areas deposit calm, comfort and security in a child's life. These are sleep, diet, routine, choice, consistency, exercise, effective communication, predictability and hobbies. Nothing too complicated right?

With children, these elements should be factored in and scheduled as necessities. They should not be viewed as rewards. They are essential to a child's life to protect them from uncomfortable levels of anxiety.

Later in this eBook, you will find nine strategies that hit a cross-section of these deposits. These can be implemented easily with no training and will support you supporting students.

Withdrawals

Again, the goal isn't to eradicate withdrawals. It's to minimise them as much as is sensible and protect children's accounts from being overdrawn. Similar to the deposits, there are nine elements to be cognisant of.



These are change, uncertainty, socialising, lack of direction, excessive instruction, disorganisation, ambiguous expectations, lengthy to-do lists and information overload.

What else to consider?

I'm not for one second placing blame on parents, teachers or children for anxiety. Anxiety can arise through nobody's fault. I merely want to put the focus on what we can control as opposed to what we cannot. A child may have been living sustainably before coronavirus, for example, and then a massive withdrawal of change and uncertainty swept in leaving them anxious and stressed. This is nobody's fault. When a huge unforeseen financial event plunges you into debt, you dust yourself off and make changes to take yourself out of the red and back into the black by controlling what you can. This is what I'm suggesting we do with our students who feel anxious.

Before we get to the nine strategies that I promised, there are three principles I would like you to be aware of. These are controlling yourself, being alert to early detection of anxiety and double-bind messages.

Control Yourself



Children are impacted far more than adults by their environment. How they adjust to school and react will be influenced in some part by what they witness around them.

If they see adults worried, stressed or whispering uncertainties, they will pick up on this. If they see confidence, positivity and calm, they will pick up on this also.

All adults have a role to play. Parents and siblings will influence how children feel, but so will teachers. Once they cross the threshold of your classroom, they will adapt to the atmosphere.

Teachers need to prioritise their state of mind for themselves and the betterment of the students in their class. Teaching is stressful and there are two strategies to deal with this.

Direct-Action

Direct-Action is self-explanatory. It involves identifying the source of the stress, determining the reason it is stressing you and then deciding how to resolve it. You take action.

Stress is said to be the result of an imbalance between the demands you are facing and the resources you have to meet those demands. If you have lots to do, you may become stressed if you don't have the time.



If you are faced with a child who you find particularly challenging, you may become stressed if you feel you don't have the expertise to deal with it. If you have an inspection coming up, you may become stressed if you feel unprepared. Taking a direct-action approach to these examples, you will seek to manage your time, develop your knowledge and complete the necessary work respectively. You are working towards reducing and eliminating the source of the stress.

Palliative

Palliative techniques are the second strategy. It involves switching off and forgetting about your job. It is self-care and it is necessary. Self-care means different things for different people. Exercise, meditate, socialise or sleep. Whatever it is that takes your mind off your stress needs to be an essential part of your daily routine.

Combining these two strategies helps manage stress sustainably. You will be either working on the sources of stress or switching off to recharge. You won't be in the middle where you're neither working nor relaxing. Choose one or the other and when students enter the classroom, they will sense the relaxed and positive atmosphere in the room which will help them feel safe, secure and comfortable.

Early Detection

Remain vigilant during the first weeks of school. Children will need your support the most during the initial weeks as they readjust. Be alert for signs of traumatic stress in children. If teachers can detect initial signs that a child is feeling anxious, they can initiate strategies and systems to prevent a small problem becoming a bigger one.



Children who are destructively managing their anxiety may attempt to exert excessive control. This could be experienced as defiance or threats to others, property or themselves. When anyone is anxious they tend to seek control. They also are inclined to say no when asked to do anything as they are stressed. Be aware that behaviour may appear defiant or disruptive when it is, in fact, evidence of fear and anxiety.

Anxious children may also over-rely on routines and rituals which soothe them. This is unproblematic mostly but when a ritual is prolonged and prevents them from engaging with other tasks, it will need to be addressed.

Finally, a sign of anxiety to look out for can be emotional explosions. When fight-or-flight reaches a certain point, a child may erupt like a volcano and release their pent up emotional energy which hurts their relationship with others and themselves.

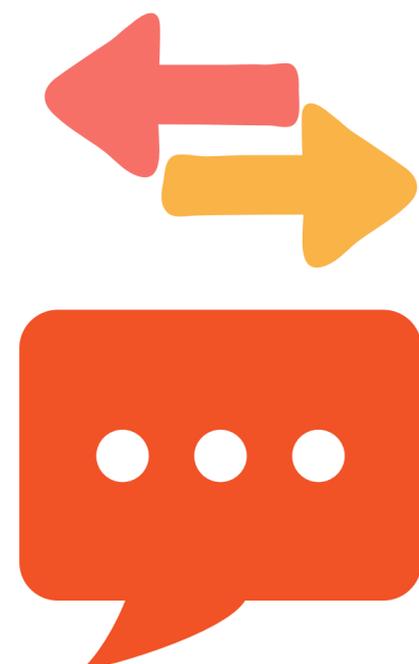


Be curious of all behaviour as opposed to judgemental and refrain from jumping to definitive conclusions.

Double-Bind Messages

Quality communication reduces anxiety. Messages are communicated clearly at the level of the child so there is clear understanding. When two or more conflicting messages are sent in the same communication, this is a double-bind message. Double-bind messages will increase a child's anxiety as they are confused and uncertain.

For example, a teacher might tell a child there is no need to worry. They might then proceed to hover over the child's every move. This is a double-bind message. They are sending one message with their words, but their actions are communicating a conflicting message.



A separate example would be a teacher letting a child know that they have everything in school under control before misplacing resources and being unprepared for lessons.

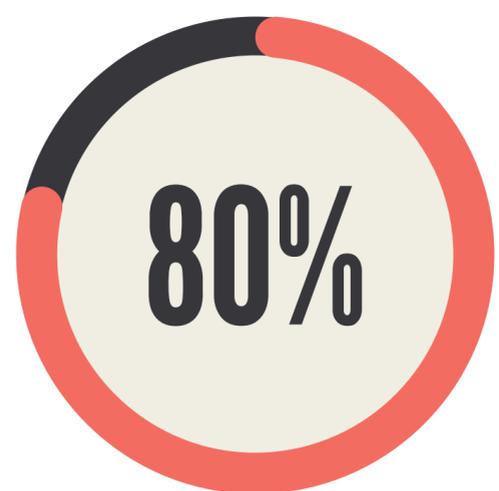
A different twist would be to consider the parent that remains to hug a child and reassure them at the classroom door as they verbally tell them to go into class and they will be fine. This is a mixed message that needs to be dealt with.

Syncing our spoken word with our body language and actions makes us a more effective communicator. It will also put a child at ease that they know what you are saying is unambiguous and understandable.



Strategies

Teachers are amazing at creating and adapting strategies. Give a teacher an idea and they will put their twist on it to suit their class and context. The goal of these nine strategies is to get you 80% of the way and give you the idea to make your own.



It is up to you to finish the final 20% of thought where you come up with the design and fine details of how you will implement it into your teaching. No two teachers are the same nor should they be. Read these strategies and think about how you can utilise them. Absorb what is necessary and discard what is not.

Strategy: Journaling

Suitable for: All ages, Whole class, Station Activity, Individual Work, Morning or Evening Routine.

Focuses on: Reframing their mindset to look for positives.

Resources: A copy, pencils, markers, crayons.

How To:

The benefits of journaling are said to set in when it is practised for over 21 days. This is a strategy that needs to be consistently implemented. It is a medium to a long-term solution which can help rewire a child's mind to search for positives instead of focusing on negatives.



Make journaling attractive by permitting the use of attractive journals, colours and pencils to maximise buy-in and cycle the journal prompt to prevent children from getting bored. Journal prompts include:

- Spend two minutes a day writing down three things you are thankful for. These must be new things each day and can be as big as your family's health or as small as your bowl of cornflakes.
- Spend two minutes a day writing about one positive experience you've had over the past 24 hours.
- Writing down 7 things you are excited for at the start of every day.

- Write about a “win” you had today. So it could be achieving a new personal best, an improvement in a skill, something difficult that you overcame. Write about why it’s important, how to progress and what your next step will be.

Journaling is not an English lesson so there is no focus on punctuation and grammar. Teachers should not read or get the children to read aloud their journals without consent. The teacher could model the act of journaling by openly completing their own alongside the class at the same time. If the child is feeling creative and has an original style or design: encourage them. The goal is to promote a life-long practice so let their imaginations run wild.

If a child or class aren't at the stage of writing, the prompts can easily be transferred to pictures. A trusted adult or child could help write for them. They could be used as prompts for an oral discussion. They could even record an audio or video journal if the technology is available. Some children might need prompts simplified to "I am happy because..", "I am excited to.." or "A good thing that happened today was..". The teacher must use their initiative to meet the needs of their class.

Journaling has been used by some of the world's most renown creators like Mark Twain, Leonardo Di Vinci and Marie Curie. If it is good enough for them, it is good enough for any classroom.



Strategy: Think Like a Scientist

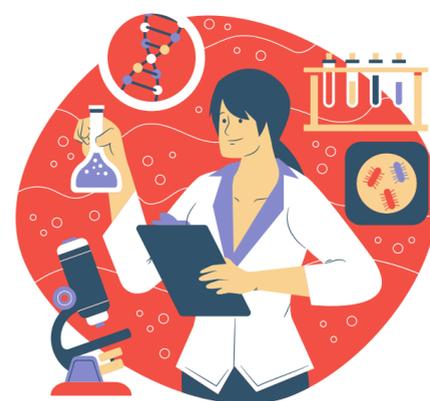
Suitable for: Phobic Behaviour, Individuals who can have a rational discussion.

Focuses on: Reasoning, Researching and Rationalising Fears.

Resources: A sheet, a pencil and access to appropriate information.

How To:

This strategy is grounded in the principles of cognitive behaviour therapy. It encourages children to be analytical and rational when discussing their fears. Instead of offering reassurance or telling children not to worry, we assist them to research realistic outcomes.



This method teaches children to use good sources of information to inform and reduce irrational anxieties. As the teacher, we can either provide or guide them to reliable sources to examine whether their fear is logical or illogical. Once this is established, they discuss what the realistic outcome and can choose to act accordingly. Here is an example of the table I would use:

Feared Situation	Anxious Thought	Realistic Outcome

Strategy: The Three Pens

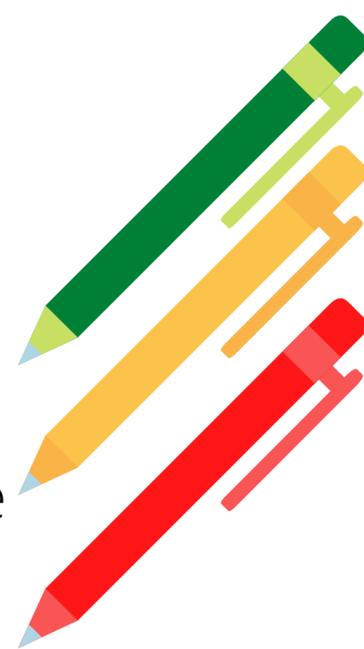
Suitable for: Mildly Anxious Children of All Ages

Focuses on: Subtlety, Empowering them to identify how they are feeling, Avoiding helicopter supervision.

Resources: Three pens, pencils or other items that may be kept on the desk

How To:

Provide an anxious child with three pens or pencils. One green, one orange and one red. The ink can be any colour but the physical colours must be distinct from each other.



If the child is using the green pen, they are communicating to the teacher that they are feeling comfortable and at ease. If they are using the orange pen, they are communicating that they feel uneasy but willing to continue with intermittent supervision. If they use the red pen, they are communicating that they are extremely anxious and would like immediate help from the teacher.

This strategy avoids the teacher assuming a child needs constant supervision. It encourages the child to identify and communicate their feelings. It is a tangible strategy versus telling the child not to worry or to relax which has little to no impact. Utilising this strategy comforts the child that the teacher is there for them if needed. No other child in the class needs to know. It is discreet and effective.

Strategy: Mindful Breathing

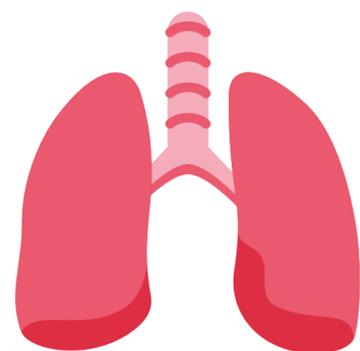
Suitable for: All Children, Transitions

Focuses on: Being present, Controlling their breath, A Long-term Solution

Resources: Hoberman Sphere, Apps or None at all.

How To:

The focus here is on quality instead of quantity. Three good deep breathes outweighs three minutes of shallow disinterested breathing in my view.



Using a visual aid like a Hoberman sphere supports children to follow the pattern of breathing. Aim for four seconds breathing in, a four-second hold and a 6-second breath out.

Alternatively, you can use your hands. Run your finger up and down each of your five fingers on the opposite hand as a visual cue. Run your finger up your little finger for four seconds as you breathe in, hold it at the top for four and run your finger down the opposite side for six seconds while breathing out. Repeat on each finger which results in five mindful breaths.

This practice is a great transition between activities to afford children the chance to reset. Start small and build up the time they can spend mindfully breathing. If you want to work with an individual child in a one-to-one setting, I would recommend Mindful Gnats as an app.

Strategy: Movement Breaks

Suitable for: All Children, Transitions

Focuses on: Exercise & Endorphins

Resources: GoNoodle, Cosmic Kids Yoga or None at All

How To:

Worrying and anxiety can heighten through inactivity. A sedentary lifestyle can exacerbate anxieties and a simple remedy is to exercise, raise the heart rate and release those feel-good endorphins.



GoNoodle and Cosmic Kids Yoga provide lots of options to get children active via a screen. They are easy-to-use and the variety allows children to choose what they like which increases participation.

Excessive screen use is a whole other issue, however, so remember that simple old-fashioned exercise works wonders too. The teacher can lead a round of exercises as simple as 10 squats, 10 jumping jacks and 10 calf raises repeated 3-5 times.

They might be able to access outside for a quick playground game or running challenge. The Daily Mile encourages children to run a mile every day as part of their school day. It's a fun initiative which gets the children moving and feeling good about themselves.

Remember: The goal is maximum participation to get the heart rate up so choose the method that achieves this.

Strategy: Visual Timetable

Suitable for: EVERYONE

Focuses on: Predictability, consistency and good communication

Resources: Pictures of activities

How To:

There is no excuse. Visual timetables are a low hanging fruit. Predictability, routine and consistency reduce anxiety. Show children every morning how the day is planned out. It is a surefire way to reduce anxiety.



Display the timetable to answer questions an anxious child has before they have to ask. We all like to know what we are doing, where we will be and when our breaks are. Children are no different.

Organise pictures of the different activities and display them prominently in the room. Go through the timetable at the start of the day so the children are crystal clear.

Think long term and use a calendar to show when events are coming up to help them prepare. Increase the predictability and consistency in a child's life and watch how they thrive once they start to feel safe and secure.

Strategy: Harnessing Interests

Suitable for: All Children

Focuses on: Choice, Self-Soothing and Grounding

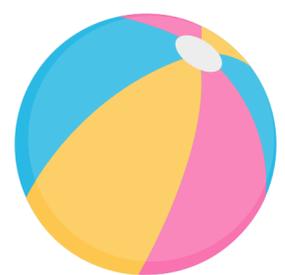
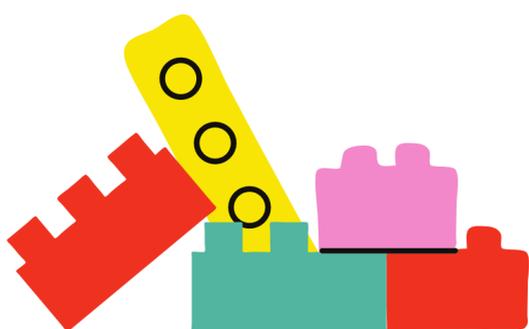
Resources: Dependent on the Interest

How To:

When a child engages in a hobby or subject of interest to them, they become immersed in it. They become fully present. When they're both of these things, it is difficult to feel anxious. They are fully focused on the task or topic at hand which lessens anxiety levels and allows them a break from their worries.

Depending on the interest, a teacher may teach a lesson through this interest. For example, if they are interested in lego, they could teach maths topics through the use of lego. Otherwise, the teacher may schedule in slots during the day for the child to engross themselves in their hobby whether it is at their table, an area elsewhere in the classroom or supervised outside.

Think of this time as a necessary part of an anxious child's day as opposed to a reward. This time will help a child engage with the rest of the day more effectively when these windows of respite are granted.



Strategy: Spending Time With A Favourite Person

Suitable for: All Children

Focuses on: Self-Soothing and Grounding

Resources: None

How To:

This is a calmativ strategy. When anxiety is high, spending time with a favourite person will soothe a child and help them feel safer, more secure and comfortable. This may be an adult or a best friend in the class. Spending time with whoever it is can be scheduled into the day to alleviate the levels of anxiety a child may be experiencing.

If this is a student in the class, you can sit them together permanently if possible. Alternatively, you can put them together for pairwork, eating times or send them on jobs together to double up as a movement break.



Strategy: Map of Limits

Suitable for: Children Afraid of an Object or Location

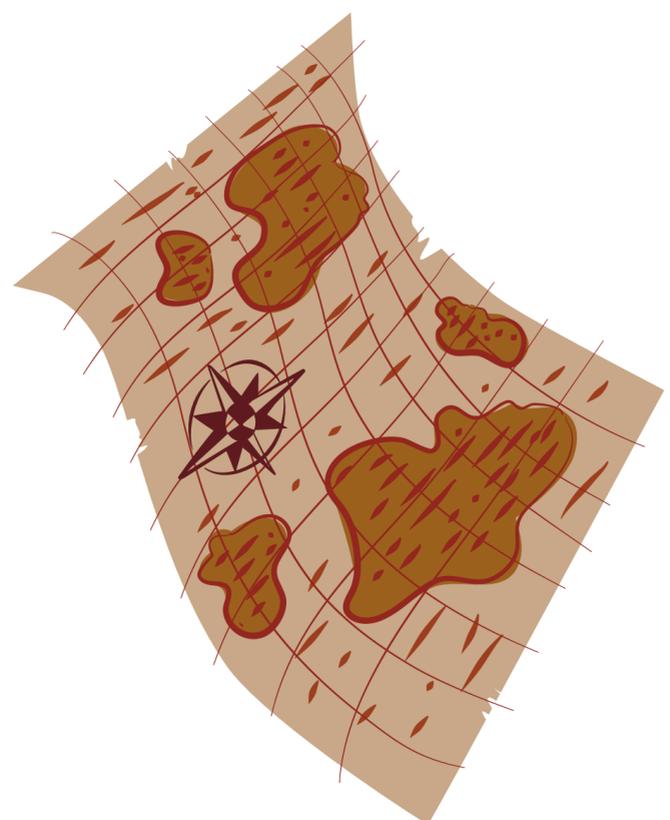
Focuses on: Gamifying Fear and Shifting the Focus

Resources: None

How To:

This strategy is presented as a game to the child. The child is challenged to measure their limit in front of their feared location or object. They are asked to measure how close they can get to the feared item or situation. They count how many steps they can take from a starting point towards the object. Once they feel too uncomfortable, they note the number of steps and take two steps back. They can then leave the situation. No pressure is applied by the teacher.

The objective is to shift the focus from their fear to the act of counting. Once this is presented in a fun manner, the child's anxiety may be alleviated as they now try to overcome their current high score. A competition with themselves emerges that motivates them to overcome their fear. By getting closer to the object, they become more familiar with it. It is a gentle way to support a child to overcome fear.



Concluding Thoughts

Different people will return to school with different emotions. This includes adults as well as children. Some will have had different experiences over the past six months. A portion of the people will have thrived. A separate group will have found it extremely challenging. Others will be in the middle. It will be important to be empathetic and compassionate towards everyone over the initial few weeks - including yourself. Avoid projecting how you feel or how you think people will feel about returning and maintain a neutral and curious outlook. This eBook has discussed strategies to prevent and intervene with feelings of anxiety but there is a possibility they won't be needed.

Dealing with others is complex. There is no single strategy, theory or method that conquers all. I advocate selecting what is useful to the child you're supporting, your context and your teaching style and discarding what is not. Hopefully, you have picked up something of value in the previous pages.

Thanks for reading,

Barry.

Want to Support Me?

If you like what you've read, I would appreciate you sharing it widely online or by printing it out and passing it around. You can find me on instagram, twitter and facebook: @TheBehaviour101 or visit my website behaviour101.com. I'm also available at the email address: barry@behaviour101.com

Every week I send an email with one strategy for behaviour, one for inclusion and a random thought I've been having during the week. Sign up at behaviour101.com/mondaymail

Recommended Reading & Sources

The strategies and ideas laid out in this eBook are the accumulation of watching, reading and listening to various teachers, lecturers and other lead practitioners. It is impossible to accurately attribute every source so I am providing a short list of some of the most helpful:

- Winning without Fighting: A Handbook Effective Solutions for Social Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Students
- www.middletonautism.com
- www.ncse.ie
- Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties: A Continuum of Support
- Pragmatics of Human Communication by Paul Watzlawick