



# Back to School

## A Guide for Young People

If you are reading this guide, it is likely that you have spoken to someone at Centre 33 about feeling anxious about returning to school or college.

Our team of Children and Young People's Well Being Practitioners (CWPs) work with lots of young people who experience anxious feelings. We have created this guide to give you some tips that can help you manage your anxieties and concerns about returning to school.

**Returning to school after the break can make some people feel anxious. This may be for different reasons, there may be unknowns ahead, new classes, new courses, new schools or it may be that you are still trying to work out what to do after exam results over the summer. It may be that the impact of COVID over the last few years has felt particularly disruptive and this can make people feel more anxious than usual. At Centre 33 we have put a guide together to support you with returning to school or college.**

## 1. Noticing

A first step in overcoming anxiety is to recognise that you are feeling nervous. Sometimes this feels obvious but often it takes practice to identify clues. The following physical sensations can be common when you feel worried or anxious:

- **Feeling nauseous**
- **upset stomach**
- **trouble sleeping**
- **muscle tension**
- **headaches**
- **feeling more irritated or grumpy**
- **racing heart, sweaty palms**
- **rapid breathing/feeling breathless**

These sensations are uncomfortable but it is important to remember they are not dangerous. They actually occur because of a 'fight or flight' response. This is when your body responds to a message from your brain that you are in danger. This response was very useful when we lived in caves and had to be alert to attacks from Saber Toothed Tigers. We needed to be prepared to fight them off (fight) or to run away (flight). In 2021 though, this response is not always helpful. It can be useful to think of anxiety as a faulty smoke alarm that goes off even when there is no fire.

## 2. Thinking about thoughts

Anxiety loves to do two things;

- the first is to make us focus on the worst-case scenario even when there are more likely outcomes,

- the second is to convince us that we are not going to be able to handle what might happen.

It is normal to feel worried but try to remember that worries are not facts, there are alternative possibilities and outcomes.

## 3. Taking action

Actively challenging your worries can really help to turn down the volume on anxious thoughts and feelings, so developing helpful habits and routines is a really good place to start. The next part of the guide will include some ideas for activities you could try yourself.

### Make a daily plan

Many people find uncertainty anxiety provoking. By creating daily routines we can make some parts of life a bit more predictable, increasing our sense of control. Routines also help us remember to do activities which support wellbeing such as eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising, being creative and connecting with others.

Here is a simple example you could copy into a notebook - you could even keep reminders on your phone. Make it as detailed as you like, just remember to allow for some flexibility in the plan and be kind to yourself if sometimes things slip.

Time	Activity	Notes
8.15	Eat breakfast and get dressed	Don't skip breakfast - it will make me feel worse
8.30	Walk to school	Remember mask and hand gel. Meet my best friend by the shop
9.00	Registration	

# Take control

It is easy for things to feel out of your control at the moment and this can be a real source of anxiety. There are still LOTS of things you CAN still control and it can be helpful to remind yourself of these things. Try making a list of all the things where you have the power!

## OUT OF MY CONTROL

### IN MY CONTROL

Things I do to keep safe (e.g. washing hands, distancing, wearing a mask)

Things I say to myself (e.g. positive coping thoughts)

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# Practice relaxation

Focused breathing can be helpful to calm the body down when you are feeling nervous. Give this pizza breathing activity a try...



## Pizza breathing activity

**Step 1.** Imagine you a slice of pizza in the palm of your hands

**Step 2.** Bring your cupped hands up towards your nose and take a deep breath in, "smelling" your pizza.

**Step 3.** Breath out slowly through pursed lips to "cool down" your pizza.

**Step 4.** Repeat as many times as you like or until breathing regulates/calms.

Breathe in through your nose to smell that good pizza smell and breath out through your mouth to cool it down!

**Grounding yourself** helps to take your focus away from overwhelming worries or unpleasant physical feelings by bringing your attention back to the present moment. Here are two simple activities to try:

**Choose a colour.**  
**Then look around,**  
**noticing everything**  
**you see that is that**  
**colour.**

**Look around,**  
**name:**

- 5 things you can see
- 
- 4 things you can touch
- 
- 3 things you can hear
- 
- 2 things you can smell
- 
- 1 thing you can taste



It is a good idea to practice these exercises at times when you are not feeling anxious. That way when you are feeling anxious, they will be easier to remember and more likely to be helpful.

# Positive self talk

Something else that can help if we're feeling stressed or worried is to say positive statements to ourselves to boost our confidence and feelings of being able to cope in anxious situations. Have a look at the examples below and see if any of them sounds helpful or use the blank lines to add some of your own.

## What positive coping thoughts could help you? Keep these to hand to remind yourself when you're feeling anxious:

- "I can do this"
- "This will pass, I won't feel like this forever"
- "I can feel anxious/nervous/etc and still deal with this"
- "I have done this before, I can do it again"
- "Thoughts and feelings are not facts"
- "It's OK to feel this way, it's a normal reaction"
- "Right now, I am not in danger. Right now, I am safe"
- "I can use my coping skills to get through this"
- "I can learn from this and it will be easier next time"
- "I am more able to do this than I think"

- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....

# Having fun

Making sure we are fitting in fun and relaxing activities into our days and weeks also helps to look after ourselves and provide us with enjoyable experiences. Have a think about what relaxing and enjoyable things you already do, and what new activities you could start doing.

## Things I enjoy doing:

- .....
- .....
- .....

## Things that help me relax:

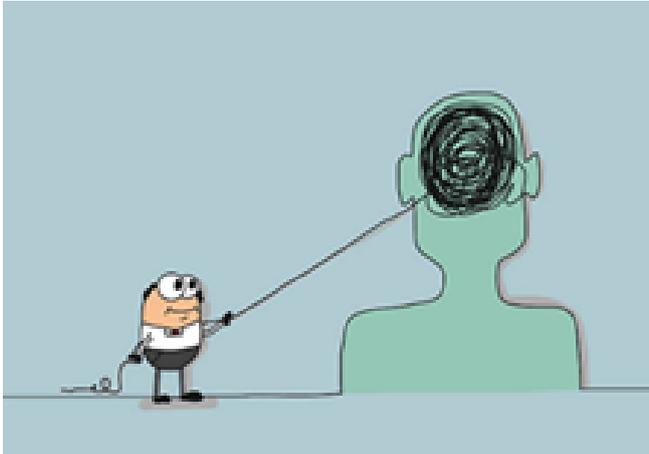
- .....
- .....
- .....

## New activities I could try:

- .....
- .....
- .....

# A problem shared is a problem halved

It is important that you talk to someone that you trust about how you are feeling about returning to school or college. Sharing our thoughts with others can help us to untangle the knots in our busy minds and make sense of some of the things that are worrying us. By speaking with others, you may find that you are not alone in your feelings and that others are going through similar situations.



Take some time to think about some people that you trust and feel safe with when talking about your worries.

This can be called your **'back-up team'** and could include:

- Friends
- Family
- School staff
- Local support services.

## Facing your Fears

Understandably, the prospect of facing your fears about returning to school may feel very difficult. However, research has shown us that taking small steps which gradually expose us to our fears is likely to be the most effective way of overcoming our anxiety.

Avoiding an anxiety provoking situation can seem like a really good idea as it helps our anxiety reduce quickly. However, the next time we are in a similar situation, we will likely feel very anxious again. Avoidance can quickly become a vicious cycle.

What we know from research:

- Anxiety comes down naturally over time usually at most after 20 mins.
- Anxiety will reduce if we remain in the situation which feels threatening.
- The next time we face the same situation our anxiety is likely to be slightly less than before.
- Each repeated exposure reduces anxiety even further until its hardly noticeable at all – this is called 'habituation'.
- Therefore, the more we face our fears and expose ourselves to situations we perceive to be threatening, the less anxiety we will feel.

# Further support

If you feel that you are unable to share your worries with the people that you know, there are lots of local services that you can access for information and support:

**Keep Your Head** - a mental health website for children and young people that provides quality information on keeping well, self-help, and support services. Further information can be found at [www.keep-your-head.com](http://www.keep-your-head.com)

**Kooth** – a free online emotional support and counselling service for young people aged 11-19. Services can be accessed up to 10pm in the evening. Further information can be found at [www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com)

**Young Minds** - a mental health website for children and young people that provides quality information on keeping well, self-help, and support services. Further information can be found at <https://youngminds.org.uk>

**Centre 33** – a range of services to support mental health and wellbeing for young people across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough  
<https://centre33.org.uk/>

You might also want to explore the following apps which offer a range of exercises that can help to reduce anxiety:



- Virtual hope box
- Mind shift
- Headspace
- Clear Fear
- Chill Panda