

# Child anxiety when parent(s) feel anxious too

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# The aims of this evening

To provide an overview of:

- anxiety in children, insight into the various ways that anxiety might manifest in children.
- parenting anxious children, and feeling anxious as a parent.

Focus on what are your 'hotspots' as a parent?

Provide practical tips for how best to respond to an anxious child and help them overcome their difficulties.

Direction to resources available to support parents of anxious children.



# Normal Childhood Worries and Fears

- What types of worries and fears are typical in childhood?
- What would you expect?
- What can you remember from your own childhood?



# When Might Anxiety Be A Problem?

- Some anxiety is developmentally appropriate
- Possible excessive anxiety when:
  - Fear is out of proportion to the level of threat.
  - Fear in the absence of actual threat.
  - Difficulty settling back to a normal state
- Anxiety becomes a problem when it prevents children from enjoying normal life experiences e.g impact on school, friendships or family life.

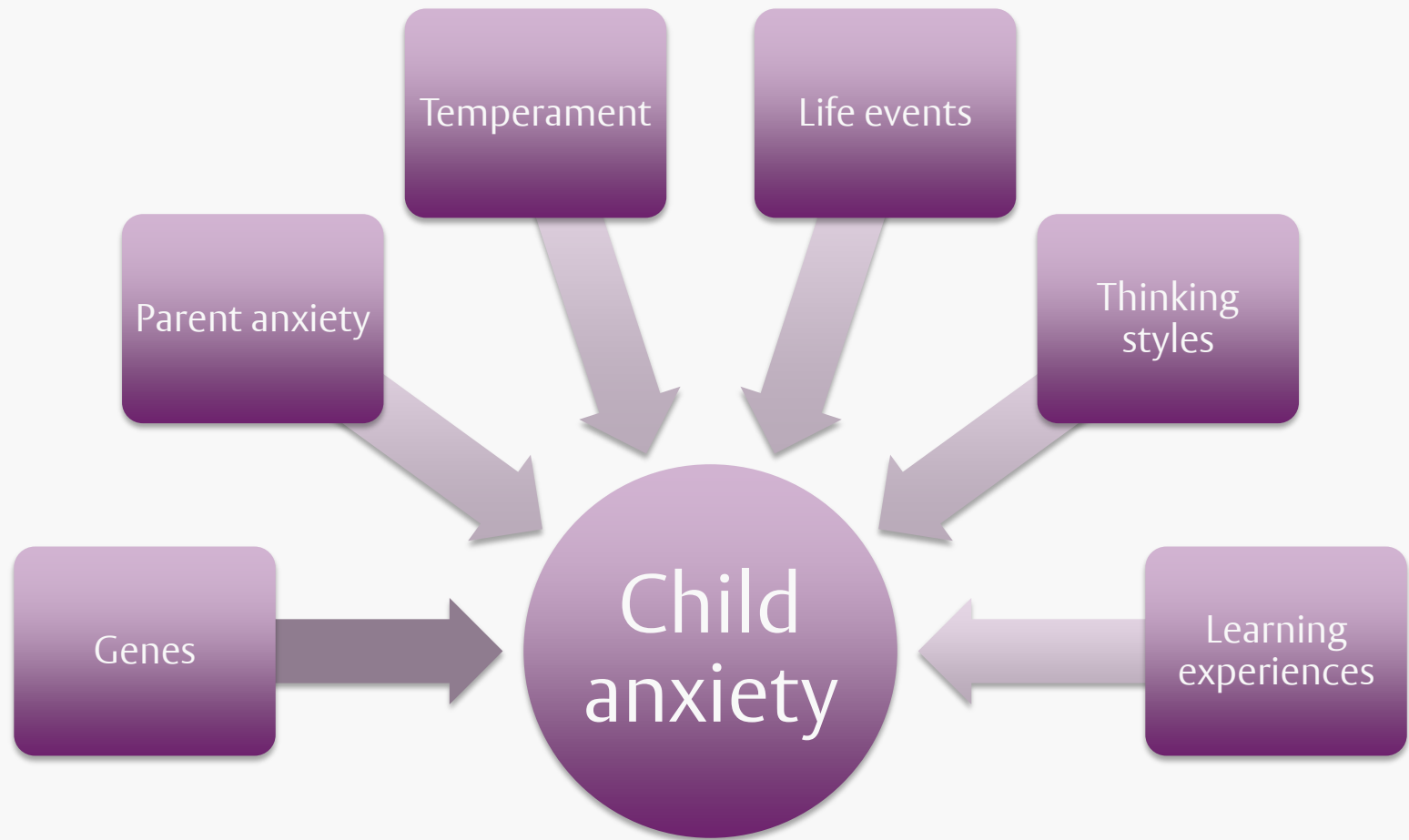
# Other Possible Signs to consider:

- Anger, restlessness, irritability.
- Asking questions about things that have or might have happened
- Crying
- Physical complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue.
- Avoiding things or places or refusing to do things or go to places
- Sleeping difficulties, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, nightmares, or night terror
- Perfectionism
- Excessive clinginess
- Poor memory and concentration
- Withdrawal from activities and family interactions
- Eating disturbances
- Rigidity and inflexibility.
- Pessimism and negative thinking patterns such as imagining the worst, over-exaggerating the negatives and self-criticism.

# Some facts about anxiety

- There are different types of fear and anxiety (separation, fears, generalised).
- Around one child in every classroom has significant difficulties with anxiety (and more have some difficulties).
- Anxiety runs in families
- There are things you can do:
  - Tips today
  - Self-help resources
  - Treatments that work and are accessible

# Why children become anxious

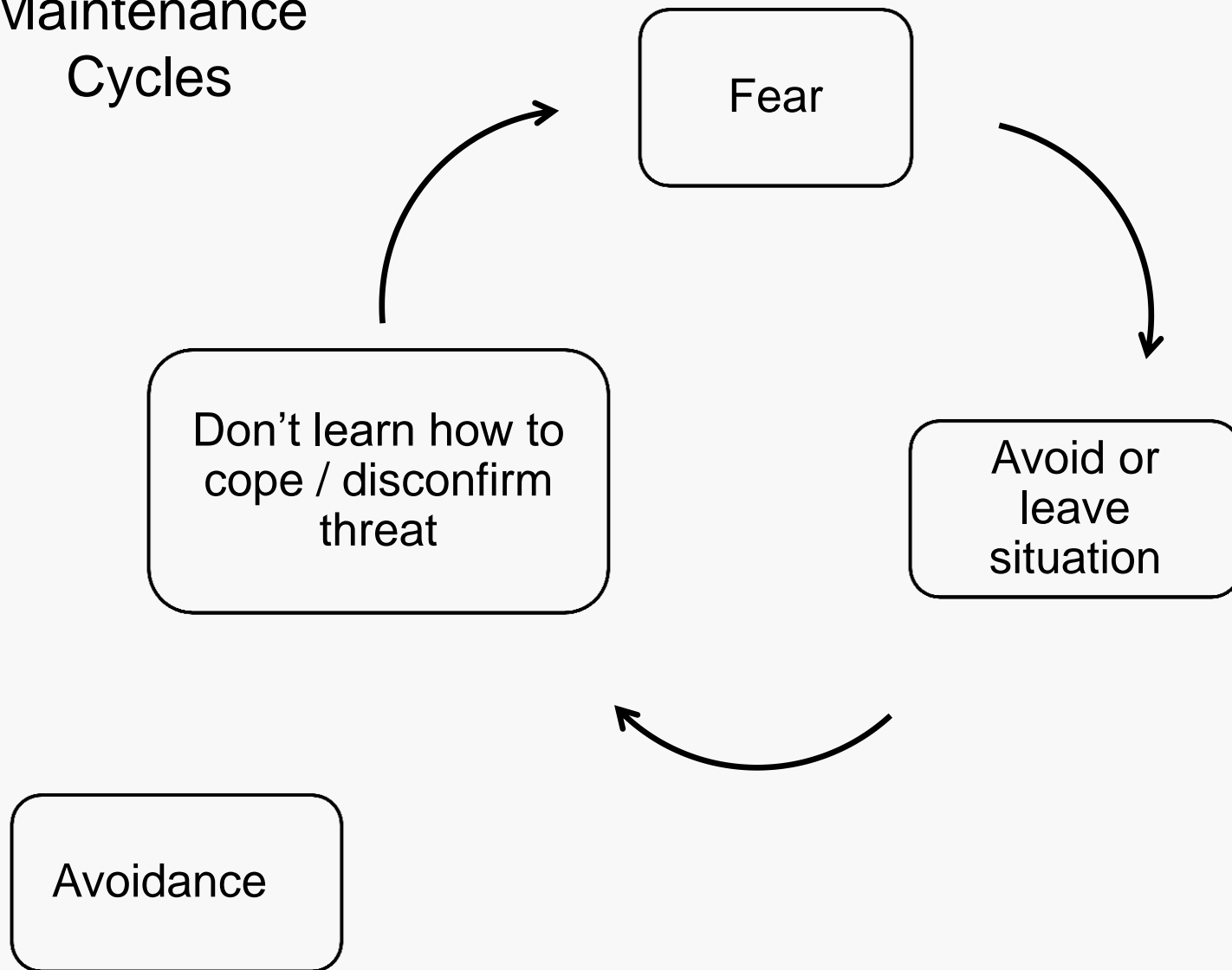


# Thinking about what maintains anxiety

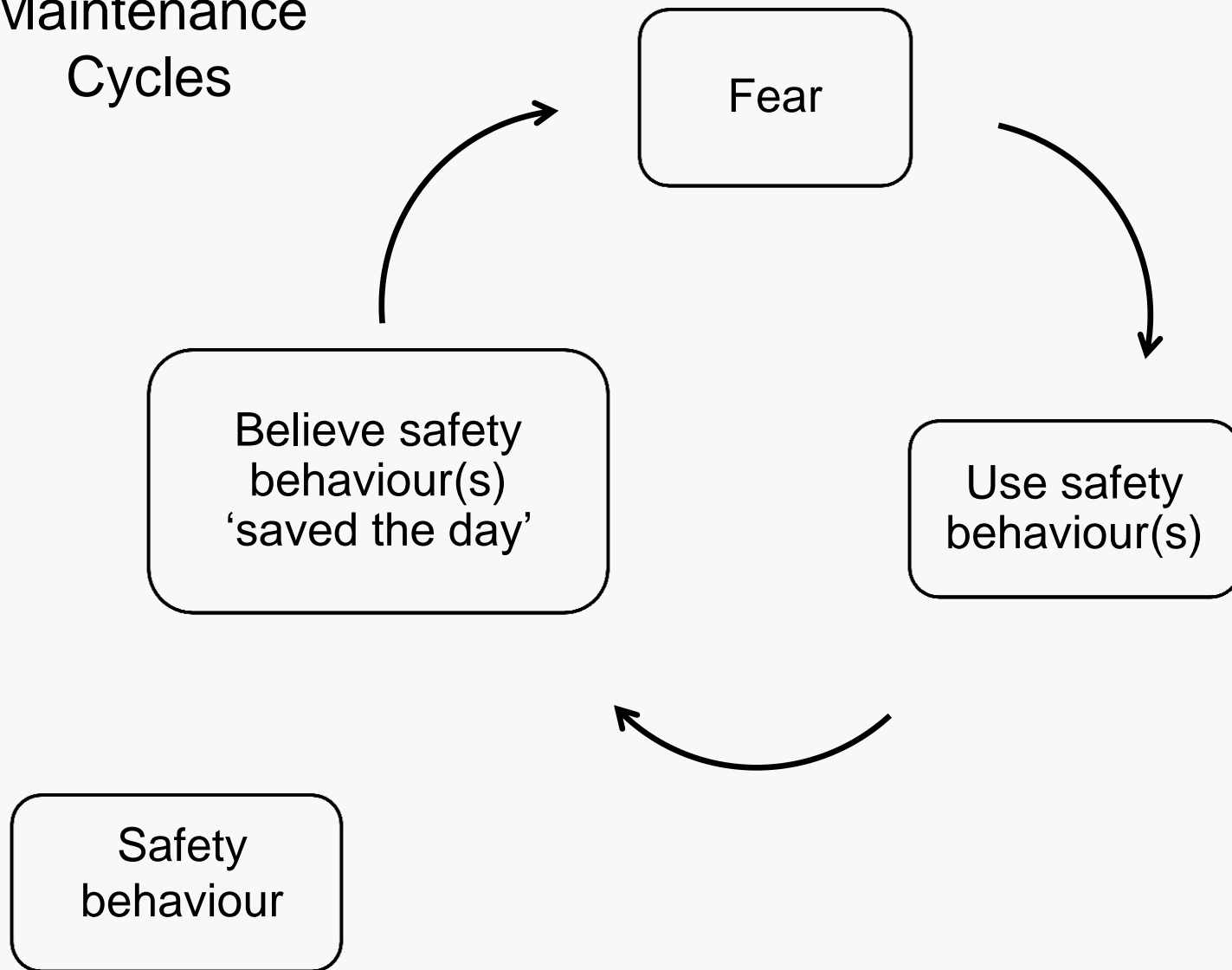
- Understanding cause(s) is not essential.
- More important now to focus on what is maintaining the anxiety.
- Some of these causal factors will also play a role in maintaining anxiety.
- Other common maintaining factors....



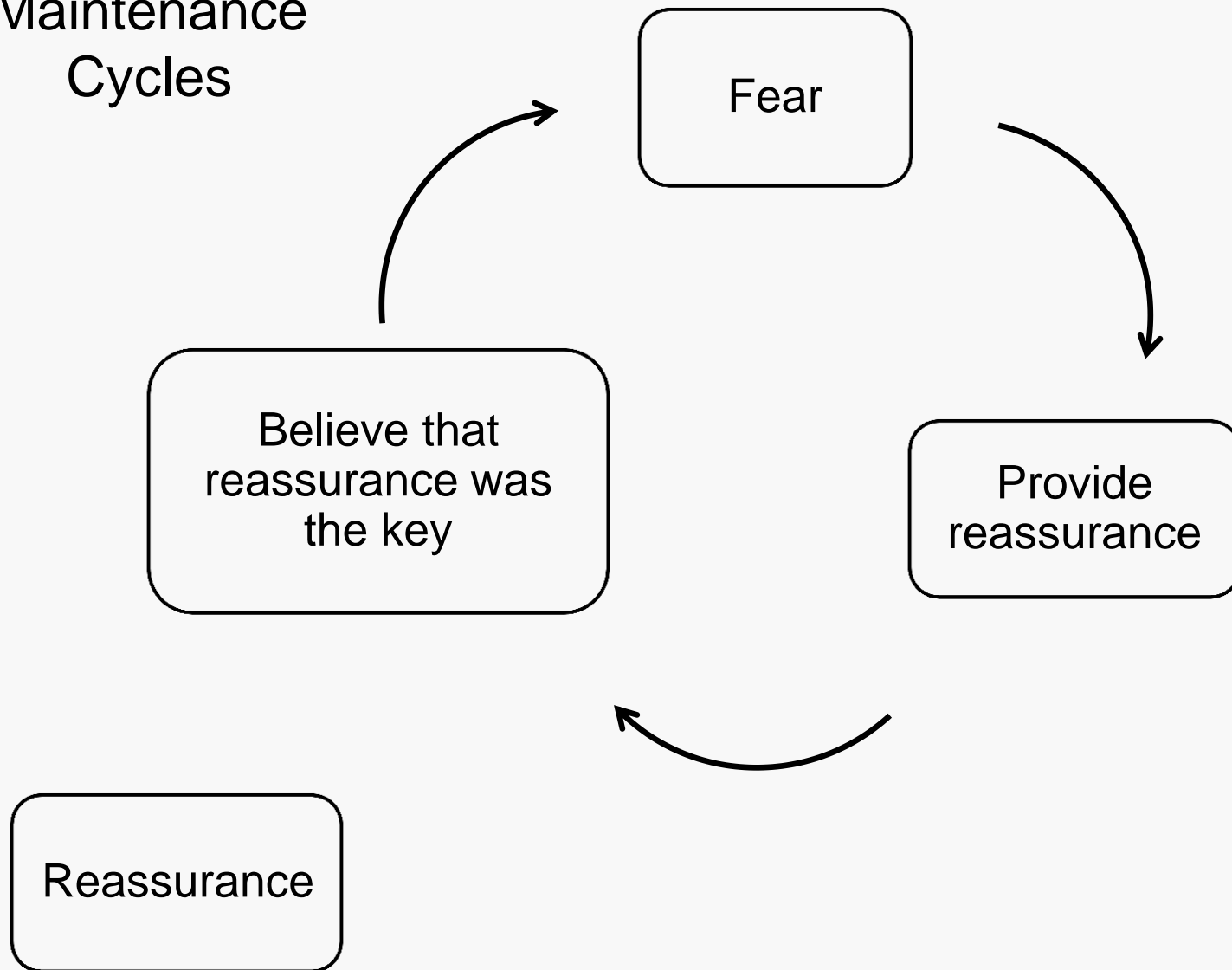
# Common Maintenance Cycles



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# Hotspots

We all have a personality...(agreed?)

So, we all have our own 'hotspots', 'buttons',  
'triggers'.

When we are tired, anxious, stressed,  
these might be more prominent.

Our own 'hotspots', 'buttons', 'triggers'.

For example, a hotspot might be when a child speaks in a whiney voice.

Perhaps you respond to this as you would like to when you're in a calm situation (e.g., help your child feel heard and composed so they can talk in their usual voice).

But, when you are trying to get something done in a hurry, perhaps you don't respond in the way you would like to (e.g., complaining about the whining, raising your voice).

Our own 'hotspots', 'buttons', 'triggers'.

Most relevant here might be identifying what makes *you* feel anxious (e.g., feeling under scrutiny in a social situation, driving on a motorway, feeling nauseous).

What helps *you* respond helpfully to that anxiety?

# If you can overcome your anxiety:

You can teach your child that failure isn't so bad and fear passes

...When parents feel anxious, they might give fewer opportunities for children to learn what they *can* cope with, for example, 'failure', fear.

If you can give your child space to make mistakes and feel a bit uncertain they have an opportunity to learn.

# If you can overcome your anxiety:

You can teach your child that feeling anxious or fearful isn't so bad and how to do what you want

...When parents feel anxious, they might choose to avoid what makes them anxious (e.g., dentist, going in a crowded lift).

If you can approach the situation, and show how to cope with it, your child can learn how to address what makes them anxious.



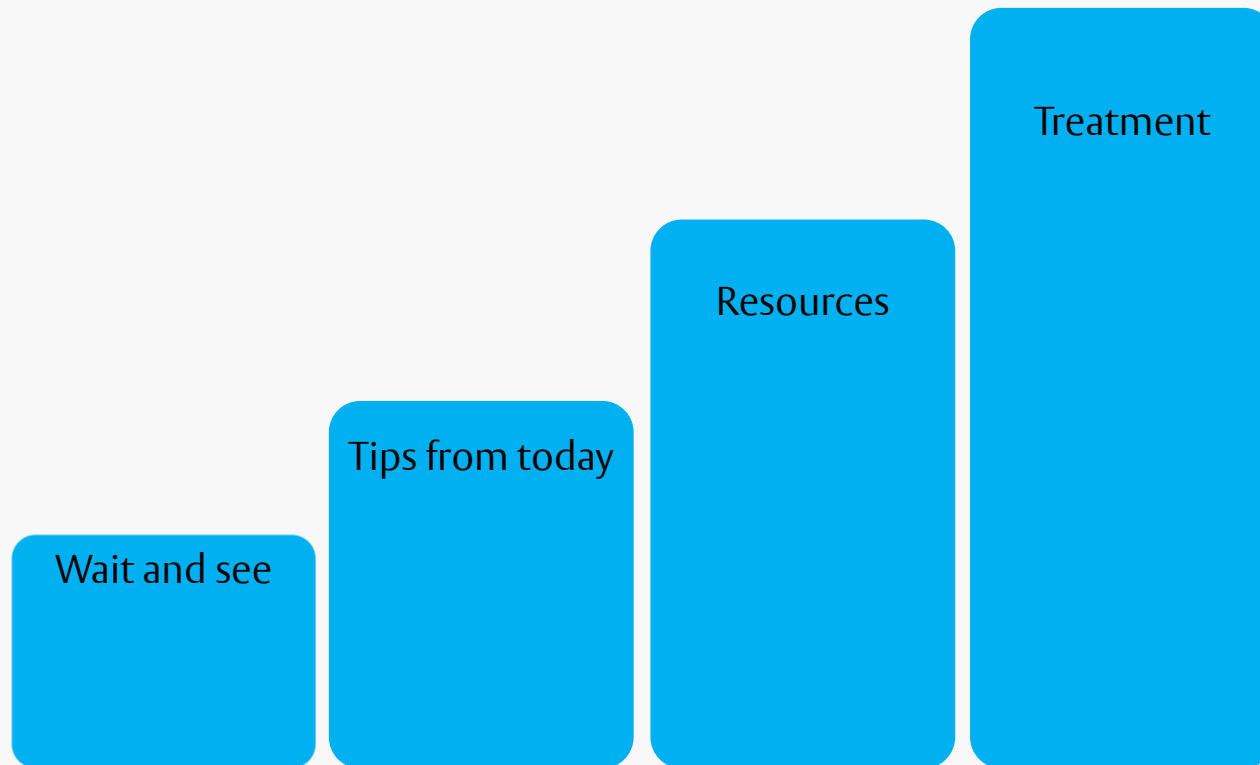
# If you can overcome your anxiety:

You can help your child develop independence and confidence to approach challenges.

...When parents feel anxious, they might, understandably, provide reassurance. For example, “It’s okay, you’ll be fine; I’m here”, is heard as “You’ll be fine *because* I’m here.”

If you can acknowledge your own (and your child’s) anxiety, you can help them develop confidence to cope independently.

# Things you can do



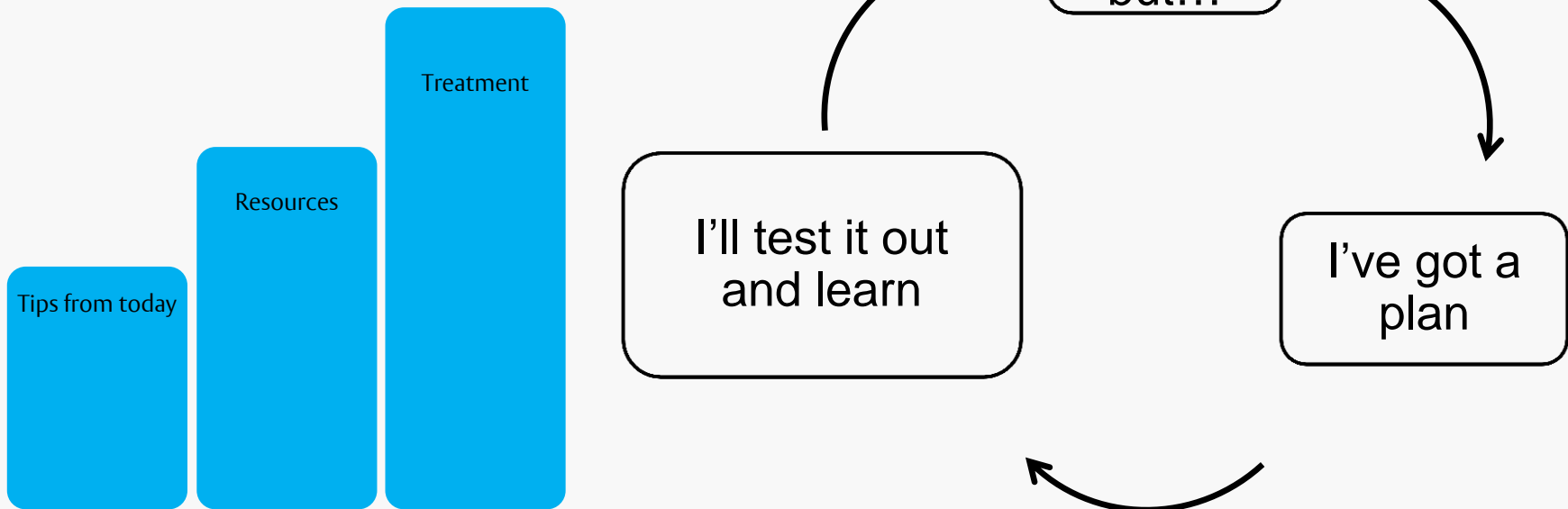
# Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- Aims to modify unhelpful thoughts, feelings and behaviors that maintain psychological difficulties.
- Most widely researched and evidence based treatment for child anxiety.

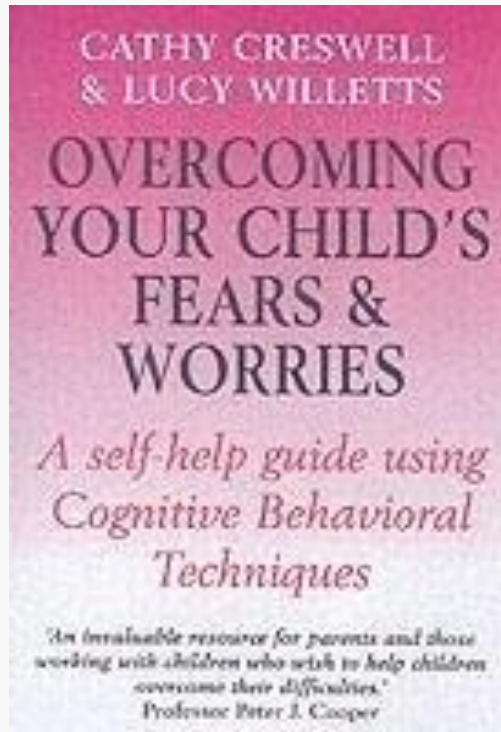


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# Resources for parents



- Parents learn skills and strategies for dealing with anxiety.
  - » Parents are real experts in their children and can use in the most relevant ways.
  - » Can see long term change.
  - » Immediate help.

# CBT strategies

- Talk about fears and worries
- Help your child to develop alternative perspectives by asking questions and testing out thoughts and assumptions.
- Promote autonomy and appropriate levels of independence
- Help child to problem solve and find different solutions
- Encourage child to face their fear (gradually!)

# Talking about fears and worries

- Talking about fears and worries **does not** make them worse.
- Don't make assumptions about what is making your child anxious.
- Ask your child simple questions:
  - What is worrying you?
  - What is frightening you?
  - What do you think will happen?
  - What is it about *this* situation that worries / frightens you?
- *Timing* and the *way* you ask are important considerations.

# Encouraging less anxious thoughts

- BEWARE of the reassurance trap
  - No matter how much reassurance you give, an anxious child will always want more.
  - It only relieves your child's anxiety in the moment.
  - Giving reassurance can actually send message that there is real danger and promotes reliance on others.
- Ask questions to help your child reach their own helpful conclusions.
  1. What is the evidence to support the thought?
  2. Is there any alternative evidence?
  3. Help your child to consider different possibilities
- There are no right answers



# Encourage 'have a go' behaviour

## 1. **Step back and promote independence**

- Lack confidence
- Need to learn coping skills
- Look out for opportunities where child can do things for themselves

## 2. **Encourage problem solving skills**

- Current choice of coping not working.
- Helping children to gain confidence in their own abilities to find solutions.
- Move away from rigid thinking

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# Encourage 'have a go' behaviour

## 3. **Observing others**

- Share your own fears....BUT
- Model being brave
- Reduces feelings of isolation or embarrassment

## 4. **Positive attention and praise**

- Be on the look out for non anxious behaviours
- You may take some of these for granted
- Encourage and praise

# Facing a specific fear:

## A step-by-step approach

- ◆ Learning to be brave
  - Gradually facing fears
- ◆ Start with smaller steps and build on achievements
  - Flexible and individual
- ◆ Increases self esteem
  - Opportunities for coping
  - Celebration and recognition of achievements
  - Moving towards goals

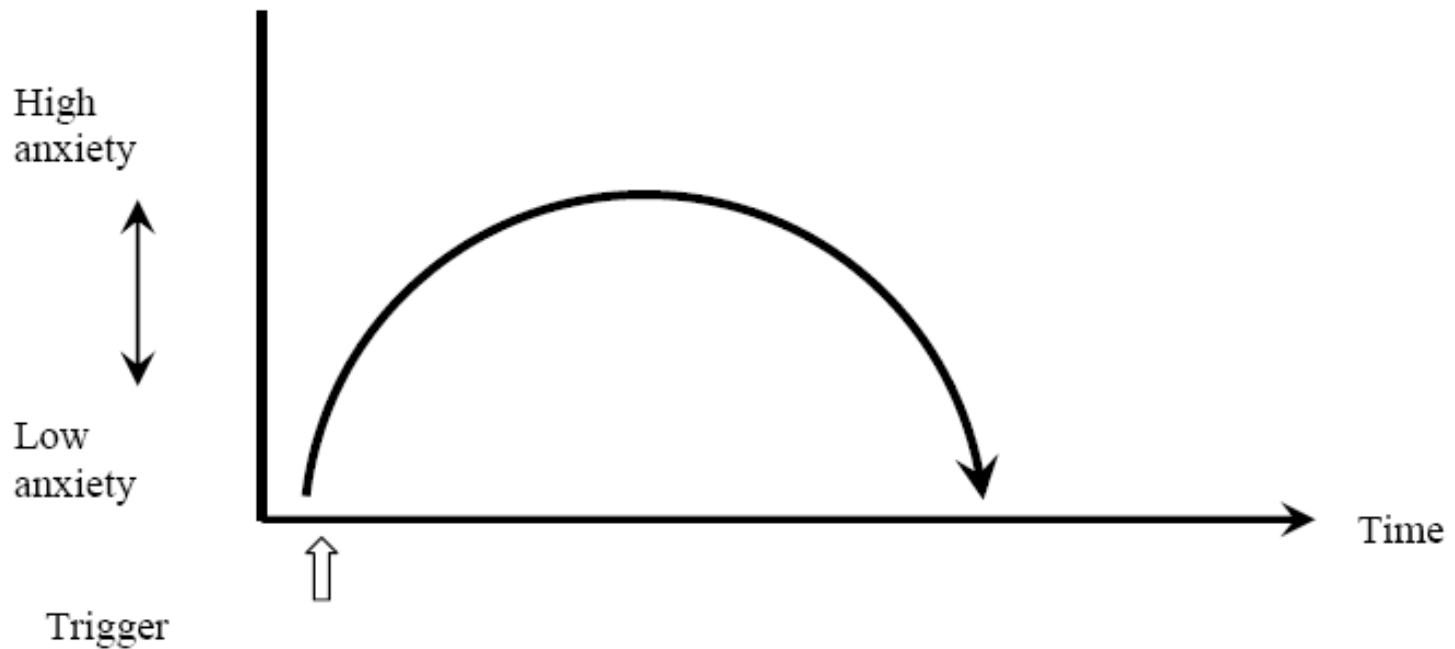


# Key messages for facing fears:


- Fears do not go away unless we stand up to them
  - If we avoid or run away from things that we are scared of, we never really find out whether they were really as bad as we thought or whether we could actually have coped.
- Need to face things in a gradual, step by step way
  - It is easier to face fears if we take it slowly one step at a time
  - Its important to that we stay in the difficult situation until our anxiety begins to reduce
- Recognise that this can be difficult
  - Going to practice this over next few weeks.
  - Celebrate achievements and attempts at trying

# Habituation curve: Normal course of anxiety

Graph showing what normally happens to anxiety



# Creating a step-plan



**Step by Step Plan**

Goal: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 10: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 9: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 8: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 7: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 6: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 5: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 4: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 3: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 2: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

Step 1: \_\_\_\_\_  
Reward: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Identify ultimate goal and reward
2. List steps towards ultimate goals
3. Rate the steps from least to most scary
4. Specify a reward for each step
5. Ensure steps are practically possible

# Goal: To play upstairs for 30 mins on my own without mum

**Step 7:** Play for 30 minutes in bedroom with mum downstairs

*Reward:*

**Step 6:** Play for 20 minutes in bedroom with mum downstairs

*Reward:*

**Step 5:** Play for 15 minutes in bedroom with mum at bottom of stairs

*Reward:*

**Step 4:** Play for 10 minutes in bedroom with mum downstairs

*Reward:*

**Step 3:** Play for 10 minutes in bedroom with mum at bottom of stairs

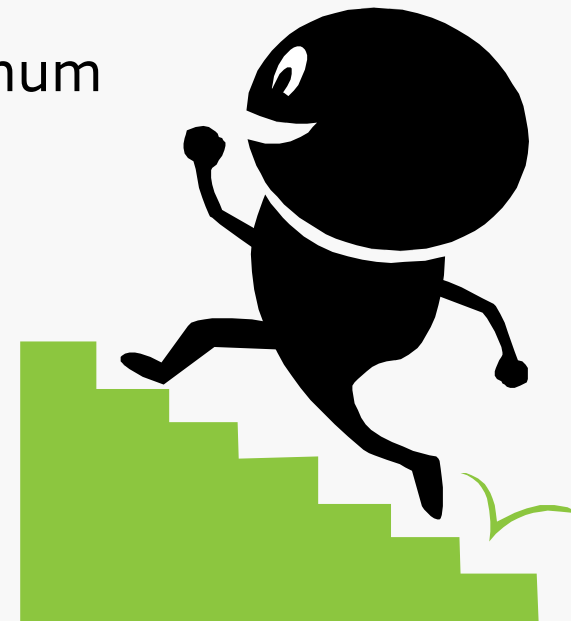
*Reward:*

**Step 2:** Play for 10 minutes in bedroom with mum half way up stairs

*Reward:*

**Step 1:** Play on landing for 10 minutes with Mum at bottom of stairs

*Reward:*



# Common problems:

- Parent feels too anxious (HOT-SPOTS)
- Child was too anxious to complete step
  - Acknowledge how hard it is for children to face fears
  - Help child challenge anxious thoughts about step
  - Break down into smaller steps
- Child forgot to do step / practicalities not thought through
  - Agree day/time for child to try step this week
  - Discuss with others/teacher if needed.
- Child refused to do step more than once
  - Praise efforts
  - Discuss what had happened and help child reflect on their coping skills.
  - Give additional reward for repeated attempts
  - Break down further

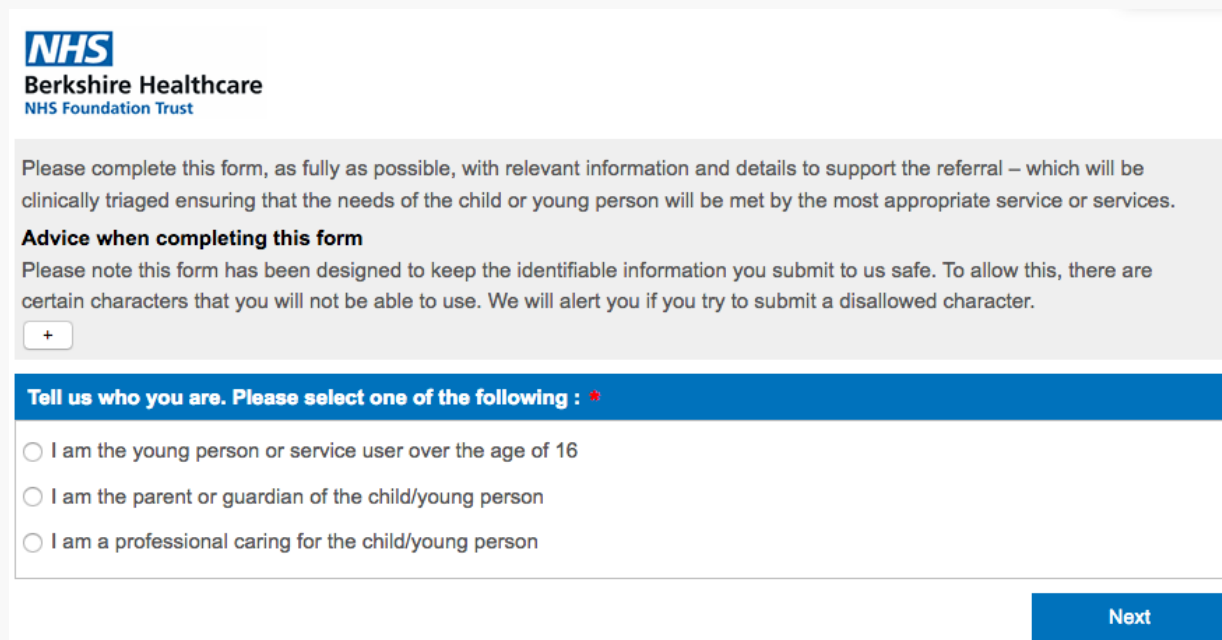


## Reflection points:

- *How could you celebrate your child's attempts at being brave? Do you have any concerns about how that will work?*
- *How could you encourage your child to be more independent?*
- *Have you tried to help your child to test fears already? What happened?*
- *Do you have concerns about encouraging your child to face their fears?*
- *How can you model brave behaviour?*

# Resources

Direction to resources available to support parents of anxious children.



**NHS**  
**Berkshire Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

Please complete this form, as fully as possible, with relevant information and details to support the referral – which will be clinically triaged ensuring that the needs of the child or young person will be met by the most appropriate service or services.

**Advice when completing this form**  
Please note this form has been designed to keep the identifiable information you submit to us safe. To allow this, there are certain characters that you will not be able to use. We will alert you if you try to submit a disallowed character.

**Tell us who you are. Please select one of the following :** \*

- ☐ I am the young person or service user over the age of 16
- ☐ I am the parent or guardian of the child/young person
- ☐ I am a professional caring for the child/young person

<https://forms.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/cy/pf/>

# Resources

- Direction to resources available to support parents of anxious children.
- The ANDY website:
  - <https://research.reading.ac.uk/andy/>

# Thank you

- Time for questions

