Practical strategies to support children and young people with anxiety during COVID-19 times

be you | Beyond Blue

Be You In Focus webinar handout

Thank you for your participation in the Be You In Focus event, *Practical strategies to support children and young people with anxiety during COVID-19 times* on 27 May 2020.

This handout contains:

- A quick summary of key concepts.
- Links to resources.
- Attendee quesiton and answer responses.
- In practice reflective questions.

Quick summary of key concepts

Anxiety is a natural basic emotion that we all experience when we think something bad is going to happen.

Some people, including children and young people, experience this anxiety more often and more intensely than others. The anxiety can impact on their life.

During COVID-19 times, there may be increased anxiety. This is due to a range of factors including increased risk to health, changes in routine and increased uncertainty.

Six guiding principles for supporting children and young people with anxiety

1. Provide a safe supportive space.
2. Encourage approach (not avoidance).
3. Encourage realistic thinking.
4. Encourage independence and avoid reassuring too much.
5. Pay attention to courageous behaviour.
6. Be a calm and coping role model.

Links to resources

Please find below a selection of resources either shared during the webinar or used in preparation for the webinar.

Be You resources

Professional Learning

Professional Learning: Be You Early Support (Notice, Inquire, Provide modules)

(https://beyou.edu.au/learn/early-support)

Evidence-based tools and resources

[Wellbeing Tools for Students](https://beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-students)

(https://beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-students)

[Wellbeing Tools for You](https://beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-you) (educators)

(https://beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-you)

[Mental Health Continuum and BETLS observation tool](https://beyou.edu.au/resources/mental-health-continuum)

(https://beyou.edu.au/resources/mental-health-continuum)

About Be You – [Evidence base](https://beyou.edu.au/about-be-you/evidence-base)

(https://beyou.edu.au/about-be-you/evidence-base)

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and mental health

[Coronavirus (COVID-19): Supporting educators, children and young people](https://beyou.edu.au/resources/news/covid-19-supporting-schools)

(https://beyou.edu.au/resources/news/covid-19-supporting-schools)

[Coronavirus (COVID-19): Supporting early learning communities](https://beyou.edu.au/resources/news/covid-19-supporting-early-learning-communities)

(https://beyou.edu.au/resources/news/covid-19-supporting-early-learning-communities)

[Coronavirus: Adapting to changes](https://beyou.edu.au/resources/news/coronavirus-schools-adapting-to-changes)

(https://beyou.edu.au/resources/news/coronavirus-schools-adapting-to-changes)

Be You Fact Sheets

[Anxiety](https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/mental-health-issues-and-conditions/anxiety)

(https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/mental-health-issues-and-conditions/anxiety)

[Supporting children and young people experiencing anxiety](https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/mental-health-issues-and-conditions/supporting-children-and-young-people-experiencing-anxiety)

(https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/mental-health-issues-and-conditions/supporting-children-and-young-people-experiencing-anxiety)

Resources shared by Professor Jennie Hudson and Dr Sally Fitzpatrick

- [COVID-19: We've got this covered!](http://www.mq.edu.au/research/research-centres-groups-and-facilities/healthy-people/centres/centre-for-emotional-health-ceh/covid-19-weve-got-this-covered!)

  (http://www.mq.edu.au/research/research-centres-groups-and-facilities/healthy-people/centres/centre-for-emotional-health-ceh/covid-19-weve-got-this-covered!)

- [How do I know if a student is not coping?](https://www.mq.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/986740/FMHHS2191-CEH-COVID-19-Support-Resources_Teacher-Educator_1-Student-Coping_FA_DIGITAL.pdf)

  (https://www.mq.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/986740/FMHHS2191-CEH-COVID-19-Support-Resources_Teacher-Educator_1-Student-Coping_FA_DIGITAL.pdf)

- [Macquarie University: Cool Kids Anxiety Program](http://www.mq.edu.au/coolkids/)

  (http://www.mq.edu.au/coolkids/)

- [Anxiety in Children and Teens](https://www.mq.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/734064/AnxietyFactsChildrenTeens.pdf)

  (https://www.mq.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/734064/AnxietyFactsChildrenTeens.pdf)

Other resources

Beyond Blue: [Strategies to support anxious children](https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-6-12/mental-health-conditions-in-children/anxiety/strategies-to-support-anxious-children)

(https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-6-12/mental-health-conditions-in-children/anxiety/strategies-to-support-anxious-children)

Emerging Minds: [Supporting children during the COVID-19 pandemic](https://d2p3kdr0nr4o3z.cloudfront.net/content/uploads/2020/05/01111231/Emerging-Minds-COVID-19-Resources.pdf)

(https://d2p3kdr0nr4o3z.cloudfront.net/content/uploads/2020/05/01111231/Emerging-Minds-COVID-19-Resources.pdf)

headspace: [Tips to get back into life during COVID-19](https://headspace.org.au/covid-19/)

(https://headspace.org.au/covid-19/)

Black Dog Institute: [Coronavirus: Resources for Anxiety & Stress](https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/coronavirus-resources-for-anxiety-stress/)

(https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/coronavirus-resources-for-anxiety-stress/)

Attendee question and answer responses

1. How can we best support students with anxiety generally?

One of the first steps to supporting students with anxiety is to be able to **notice and identify** signs that someone is finding times more challenging. Anxiety can be seen in:

- behaviours (e.g. being more quiet or withdrawn than usual, constantly seeking reassurance, opting out or finding ways to leave class or activities)

- emotional responses (e.g. looking fearful or hypervigilant, oversensitivity to feedback or criticism, difficulty separating from the parent or carer)

- thoughts (e.g. always expecting the worst, fear of failure)

- learning (e.g. avoiding class participation, wanting work to be perfect, difficulty seeking help for tasks)

- social relationships (withdrawing from friends, avoiding large groups).

It can also be seen in challenging behaviours, and could be the reason for angry or frustrated outbursts. You could use the [BETLS](#) tool to **help guide your observations** and subsequent inquiry as to what might be happening for a student.

The next step is to consider who might be best to find out more about what is happening for the student, and to consider time, place and tone to have **a supportive, warm and curious conversation** to gather further information. This information can then support you to put into place strategies and actions to provide help to the student. These might include universal, whole-class or whole-school approaches, such as being a warm, calm presence, encouraging mistakes and modelling how to make and manage them, explicitly teaching skills of resiliency and problem solving, offering predictability and routine (within reason) and offering messages to all students about help-seeking and support.

More targeted approaches might include supporting the student to recognise and to describe what they might be feeling (e.g. 'wobbly', 'stressed', 'worried'), to recognise and challenge any self-talk that tells them they can't do or cope with something, to support the student to break down a worrisome task or activity into discrete chunks to complete or to work towards, and offering chance for manageable challenges that help to stretch the student and increase their sense of confidence and capability.

It's also important to consider how you will communicate with the student's family and offer a consistent and agreed approach to supporting them, and to **know the referral pathways and processes to access professional support both within, and outside the school.**

These resources can help:

- [How can I help students who are anxious?](#)

- [Where do I go to find the right help for my student?](#)

2. What strategies can we share with students to help them cope with anxiety?

Share with them your knowledge about anxiety and the role of avoidance. Teach them to create stepladders (gradually facing fear) to help them face their fears. Teach them to develop realistic thinking or detective thinking skills to conquer worried thoughts.

Some additional strategies might also be useful, such as breathing exercises, relaxation and developing problem-solving skills. [Study Without Stress (SWoS)](#), by the Centre for Emotional Health, is a program for students in grades 10 to 12. The program has some great techniques for students who worry about exams. Awareness that anxiety is a natural basic emotion that we all experience is helpful for students. This supports next steps to learn how to cope with anxiety. There are also a range of other resources listed on this document, which you can refer to.

3. How can we support students experiencing anxiety around COVID-19?

We feel anxious when we perceive we are under threat in some way. COVID-19 has meant that our health is more at risk. Family jobs and family finances may also be more at risk for many families. There's the sense that something bad is more likely to happen, so naturally we are more likely to feel anxious.

Also, when things are uncertain, when something bad may actually happen and situations are constantly changing, this can lead to children and young people feeling more anxious. Normalise this experience of anxiety and look back on the six strategies covered in the webinar:

1. Provide a safe SUPPORTIVE space.
2. ENCOURAGE APPROACH, not avoidance.
3. Encourage REALISTIC thinking.
4. Encourage INDEPENDENCE and avoid reassuring too much.
5. Pay attention to COURAGEOUS behaviour.
6. Be a calm, coping ROLE MODEL.

4. What are some strategies to support anxiety in students as they return to school?

It is equally important to embed anxiety management strategies into normal school operations. This includes:

- understanding the extent to which unhelpful levels of anxiety in students is occurring

- understanding the knowledge and skills that educators have about responding to anxiety, and the skills they would like to develop

- developing clear processes for supporting staff responding to anxiety – who to contact within the school, if needed

- developing an internal and external list of contacts and referrals that can be easily accessed by all staff

- evaluating, after a period, how these strategies have been implemented.

Also, refer to:

- Question 9 below: What strategies should we use to support students who have disengaged from learning and prevent school refusal?

- this resource: How can I help students who are anxious?

5. How do we identify when students are experiencing anxiety, particularly in the context of remote learning?

Please refer to this resource: How do I know if a student is not coping?

6. What can we do to support parents whose own anxieties may be impacting their children?

When a child experiences high anxiety, it is also likely that the parents experience high anxiety. We know there a moderate degree of heritability in the anxiety disorders (i.e. anxiety disorders run in families). There are different things you can do that can help support parents who also have high anxiety.

COVID-19: We've got this covered! discusses providing a safe, supportive space for young people to talk to you about their worries.

As a school leader, welfare support person or as a classroom teacher, you can apply these same techniques to working with parents. When a parent or carer approaches you, provide a safe supportive space to listen to their concerns and worries. Use reflective listening: "I hear you are worried about what is happening at school for your child."

Know that facing fears is critical. Avoidance keeps anxiety going, and gradually facing fears is an effective strategy to help reduce anxiety in the long run. The goal will be to help support the parent or carer to encourage the child to face challenging situations – but doing it in a gradual way, to make sure the child is more likely to have success.

Develop a plan with the parent or carer of how to best support the child to face their fears. Remember what you know about anxiety. Remember that when someone is anxious it is hard to think of alternative solutions and it is hard to think of anything but the threat (i.e. what the parent or carer is worried about). Work to understand where they may be coming from and work together to find the best solution for the child.

Encourage school staff or the principal to explain the reasoning behind their strategy to support the child, as Some families may not understand why a school is taking a specific approach.

Encourage families to access resources for their child. Are they receiving help? Importantly are they receiving evidence-based help? We know that most children who receive help for anxiety do not get evidence-based help.

If you need help to do this, check out this video and tip sheet on getting help for your students.

7. We have students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), who are returning to school after a break from routine. Can you suggest any strategies on how to help them handle the anxiety as they return?

It is worth noting that anxiety is a normal part of a person's development and experiences, can occur when we feel threatened or unsafe. Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may face the same fears as other students, but the expression and the experience of their anxiety might appear slightly different, and more intense. For instance, some students with ASD might find it more challenging to make sense of, and to understand, what other people are thinking, feeling or communicating in their reactions. This can mean their experiences feel unpredictable, which might increase a sense of worry or fear.

For some students, wanting regularity can mean changes to routine might be challenging to accept, understand and adapt to. Students with ASD may not have the same capacity to recognise, and to verbally explain what they are feeling, and may communicate their anxiety through other means, such as behaviour.

The same general principles for supporting children and young people apply here. Seek to understand what it is that a student with ASD might be especially anxious about. Include parents and carers in conversations about noticing and providing support to the student to help maintain consistent language and approaches across home and school.

You might like to find ways to help parents and carers rehearse with the student what to expect as they return to school, and you could draw upon the supports you may have previously put into place to help them transition into your class at the beginning of the year. For example, a visual timetable shared at the beginning of each day, and with moveable activities in case of last-minute changes, might help a student feel comfortable from knowing what to expect.

Other students might find the creation of a social story that describes how they will cope with an event or situation useful. Consider using the stepladder approach (gradually facing fear), or similar strategies, to help the student to practise, in steps or chunks at a time, how they will manage the situations or experiences that worry them.

Help the student to recognise anxious feelings, and to have access to strategies that they can use if they are feeling worried. You could provide visual representation of the strategies that the student finds helpful as a reminder for them, support them to create a calming kit, or rehearse relaxation techniques to use when they are feeling stressed.

8. How can we support educator wellbeing, so they are able to support their students?

It is important to recognise that the way that adults respond to children can maintain the anxiety children experience. While it is important to learn strategies to support children, we can also reflect on the role our own emotional responses have on responding to children.

We are more likely to maintain anxiety when we don't know how to respond to children, when we don't know how our own anxiety inhibits or exacerbates our response, and due to our own belief system about anxiety (what it is, and the function it serves for children).

For some mental health tips, see:

- [What can I do to stay mentally healthy?](#)

- [Be You Educator's Handbook](#)

- Professional Learning modules on [Early Support](#)

9. What strategies should we use to support students who have disengaged from learning and to prevent school refusal?

If students are finding it hard to start school back up again and are anxious about attending, develop a plan with the parents that will provide a gradual return to school. This might mean that they have a respite from assessments and homework for a few weeks or it might mean coming to school for half days to begin with.

Consider a stepped approach, where the student is more likely to be successful. We want to provide them with more accurate information about the chances of something bad happening, and about their ability to cope.

Refer to these resources:

- How can I help my students learn independently and stay motivated?

- Be You Fact Sheet: School refusal

10. How can we talk to students about COVID-19 without exacerbating fear and anxiety?

Take a curious approach to their worries. Be factual. Don't focus on the negatives. Be realistic about the threat and teach them to be scientists about the information.

For more information, see:

- Tip sheet: How can I help students who are anxious

- A resource for parents by the Centre for Emotional Health: How can I talk to my children about their worries?

11. Can you recommend some tools, programs or online resources to support students with anxiety?

Stick with the resources that use cognitive behavioural techniques. If the program doesn't include strategies like stepladders (gradually facing fear) as a core component and other strategies like cognitive restructuring (e.g. realistic thinking), then it is not based on the current evidence. There are many packages available that claim to provide strategies for anxiety but they are not evidence-based.

There are a number of programs that use cognitive behavioural strategies. These include the Cool Kids Anxiety Program, as well as other evidence-based programs like BRAVE and Take Action. The Cool Kids accreditation program provides online or in-person training in the delivery of the program, and also includes supervision from senior clinicians in delivering the program effectively.

12. Can we please get a copy of the slides?

The In Focus recording and support materials including the transcript, post-webinar document, Q&A, research and resources links are provided on the Be You website's Events page (look for Previous In Focus webinar recordings).

13. How do we contact our Be You Consultant?

If you are a participating Be You school or service and you would like to get in contact with your Be You Consultant, visit beyou.edu.au. Log in to your account, then click on 'My Learning Community'. Click on 'Supports' and you will find your Be You Consultant listed there.

If you are not a participating school, then please complete this web form and we will get back to you. The following subject line should be selected: *Find out more about Be You for Schools*.

Register as a Be You Learning Community

1. **Register** as an individual user and verify your account
2. **Log in** to your account
3. **Get started** Go to your dashboard to register your learning community
4. **Confirm** an Action Team Leader
5. **Prepare** for contact from a Be You Consultant

You've started as a Be You Learning Community

In practice reflective questions

Use these questions in Action Team meetings or other relevant school meetings:

- Of the students you support, approximately how many do you feel would be experiencing anxiety?

- How might you apply this information to understanding a student's response to COVID-19?

- How do we address anxiety in times of uncertainty, unpredictability and change?

- What has worked for you in reaching out and working with families and communities to support a student with anxiety?

- How might you become aware of worries your students are experiencing, if they are learning remotely?

- How will the 6 guiding principles presented in the Be You IN Focus webinar align with your ways of practice?

- How will you recognise avoidance in your current context, and what might be ways of gently challenging this?

- In what ways do you think you could support students experiencing anxiety during these times (and beyond)?

Mental Health Services and Support

Beyond Blue

24/7 mental health support service

1300 22 4636
beyondblue.org.au

headspace

Online support and counselling to young people aged 12 to 25

1800 650 890 (9am-1am daily)
For webchat, visit: headspace.org.au/eheadspace

Kids Helpline

24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services for children and young people aged 5 to 25

1800 55 1800
kidshelpline.com.au

1800RESPECT

24/7 support for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic violence and abuse

1800 737 732
1800respect.org.au

Lifeline

24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services

13 11 14
lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back

24/7 crisis support and counselling service for people affected by suicide

1300 659 467
suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Mensline

24/7 counselling service for men

1300 78 99 78
mensline.org.au

QLife

LGBTI peer support and referral

1800 184 527 (6pm-10pm daily)
qlife.org.au (online chat 3pm-12am daily)

If you are concerned about someone at risk of immediate harm, call 000 or go to your nearest hospital emergency department.

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With delivery partners

Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

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