EBPU
Evidence Based Practice Unit

A partnership of

UCL

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

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Mental health and the coronavirus research bite #1: Self-management strategies for young people experiencing anxiety

About this series

We are aware that parents, carers and those working with young people might have many questions about how to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic. We know that it can be hard to find evidence about the best ways to tackle some of these challenges. The Evidence Based Practice Unit (a collaboration between the Anna Freud Centre and UCL) is producing a series of 'research bites' based on very rapid reviews of existing research. These are not thorough or extensive reviews, rather they aim to offer concise and timely insights on some topical issues.

The question: what is the evidence for self-management strategies in dealing with anxiety among school-aged children and young people?

Someone who is experiencing anxiety may have feelings of fear, worry or dread, and might avoid situations which provoke these feelings. There is a lot of evidence about the effectiveness of interventions for managing and treating anxiety in children and young people, including cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) which examines the relationship between how we think, feel and behave. Much of this evidence is about treatment delivered by clinicians or therapists, or school-based programmes.

Home-based self-management strategies are being explored more at the moment as possible ways to reduce feelings of anxiety in children and young people. Self-management approaches include things like:

- breathing exercises;
- relaxation techniques;
- distraction;
- physical activity;
- learning about stressful situations.

Looking at the evidence for self-management approaches is important at a time when some young people are feeling anxious about the coronavirus, whilst face-to-face support from schools and services may be harder to access.

How did we answer this question?

We conducted a very rapid review of the research evidence, looking for systematic reviews[i] of self-management, self-help or home-based interventions or approaches for managing or treating anxiety in children and young people younger than 19. Because this was a quick search, we only looked for key systematic reviews published after 2005, using a small number of search terms. Conducting a literature search in this way is less rigorous than conducting a systematic review but helps us find relevant evidence quickly.

What did we find out?

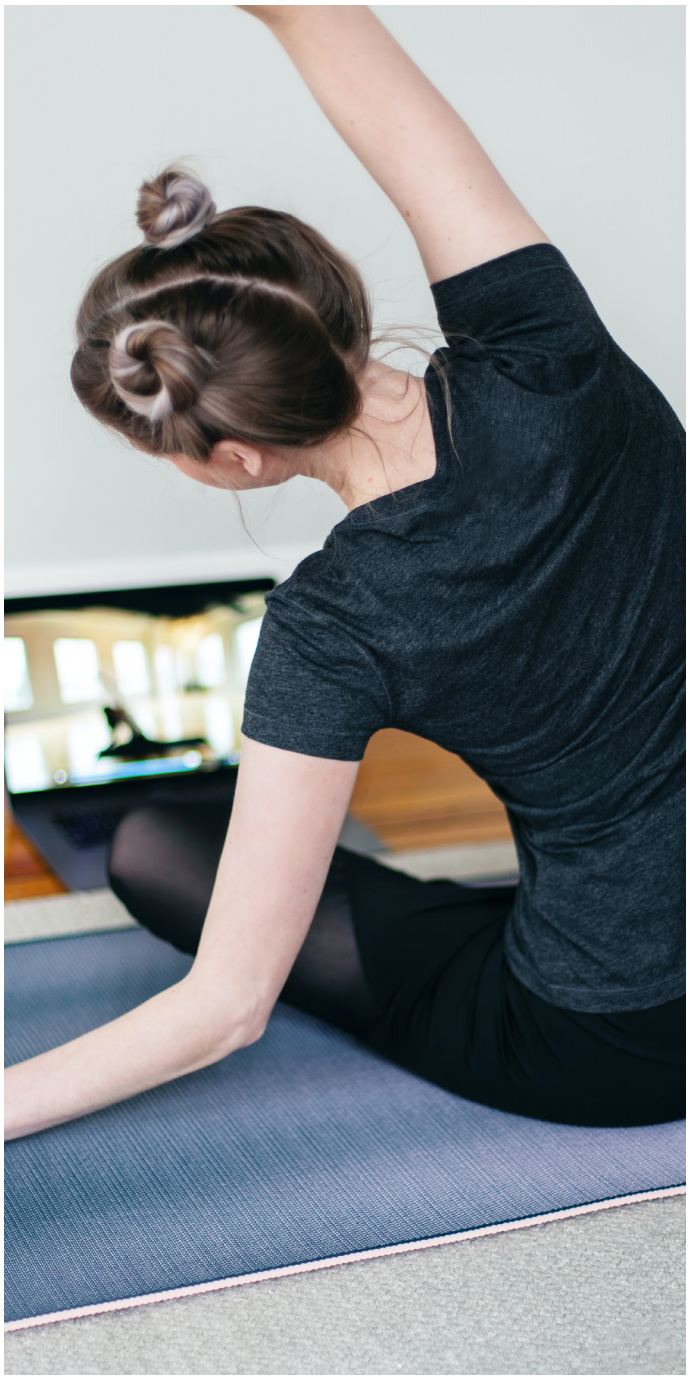
There are many variations of self-help. They range from general activities, like exercise, to approaches that directly address anxiety, like information leaflets and websites, interactive apps and digital self-help tools (see the Resources section on page 3 for some examples).

Exercise seems to be one good way to tackle some feelings of anxiety. The research suggests that both high-intensity exercise (e.g., running, high-intensity interval training) and low-intensity exercise (e.g., walking, yoga) can be helpful.[1,2]

The availability of self-help treatments has expanded from self-help books to a range of self-help apps and websites. This is a promising step towards making supported self-help options more accessible. There is some good evidence for the use of digital self-help interventions, particularly computerised cognitive behavioural therapy.[3,4,5,6,7]

Research tells us that creative therapies such as music therapy with a professional can also be helpful for reducing feelings of anxiety.[8,9] Research with adults shows that creative arts, including art, dance, drama and music, can have an important role to play in improving wellbeing and reducing stress and depression.[10,11] Although many young people enjoy music and art, there hasn't been much research that can tell us whether doing creative activities at home can reduce anxiety in children and young people.

While many strategies have been suggested for helping with anxiety, the research evidence is not always clear in relation to children and young people. One review found 103 different self-care strategies, including social support, apps, exercise, relaxation and mindfulness.[12] However, many of the self-management strategies available to young people haven't been evaluated, or where they have, often there isn't strong enough evidence for these strategies to be confidently recommended.



i A systematic review summarises evidence about a topic by looking at the results of multiple studies.

What are the implications?

The research literature reviewed highlights that digital interventions and physical activity are potentially useful self-management strategies for school-aged children and young people experiencing anxiety.

There are lots of other strategies that young people have said they've used to make themselves feel better when they were going through a difficult time or were feeling sad, worried or angry. These include watching television, playing video games, reading, art, music, and practicing breathing techniques.[13] However, the research evidence isn't clear about how effective these strategies are in helping young people to deal with anxiety. This doesn't mean that these strategies aren't useful, it mostly means they haven't been explored enough through research. However, motivation is quite important in the success of interventions, so young people being able to choose strategies they enjoy might help.[14]

Take-away message

There are several self-management strategies and sources of advice which children and young people who are experiencing anxiety during the coronavirus pandemic could access. Evidence suggests that making use of online courses or apps and doing physical exercise could be helpful. While our rapid review did not find clear evidence for all available strategies, it does not mean that these strategies are not helpful to some people or that they should not be used, and the ability for young people to choose self-management strategies according to they like and find useful could be important.

Key resources

Online information and resources

- The Anna Freud Centre's self-care resources, developed with young people: www.annafreud.org/selfcare
- The Anna Freud Centre's guidance on supporting young people's mental health during periods of disruption: www.annafreud.org/coronavirus
- Recommended resources about supporting children and young people with worries and anxiety, from Emerging Minds: https://emergingminds.org.uk/recommended-resources-supporting-children-and-young-people-with-worries-and-anxiety-links/
- Advice for parents and carers on supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic, from the UK Government: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing

Apps

Lots of mental health apps for children and young people are available to download. A selection is included below. These apps have been through a vetting process by NHS Digital, ORCHA or Our Mobile Health.

Chill Panda

What it help with: stress, worry.
Age: 6-12, but can be used by children younger than 6 with an adult.

What is it? A family friendly relaxation, breathing exercise and activity app designed by a Clinical Psychologist and recommended by the NHS in the UK.

Chill Panda aims to help children and adults to start to understand how their bodies respond to different feelings. To start learning about this you can use the app to take your heart rate, use a simple scale to rate your feelings, and then do some play-based activities demonstrated to you by a panda avatar. It aims to enhance self-regulation of emotions by introducing ideas and skills that could help children and families understand the relationship between their feelings, body sensations and different activities.

Feeling good

What it can help with: low mood, stress, worry, anxiety, depression.
Age: 16+/ teens version for 11-15 years.

What is it? An audio mind-body programme that takes you through a set of 12 relaxation and visualisation exercises. This aims to allow you to switch to a helpful state of mind and let go of the negative emotional triggers which underpin distress, whilst simultaneously increasing your positivity and focus. The techniques aim to build a resilient mindset of positive motivations, removing the blocks to positive internal vision, and enabling goal focused outcomes.

Superbetter

What it can help with: anxiety and depression
Age: 13+

What is it? Superbetter is a game played in real life which aims to build resilience and success. Playing Superbetter unlocks heroic potential to achieve goals that matter. It aims to help to tackle challenges including anxiety and depression.

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About EBPU

The Evidence Based Practice Unit is a child and youth mental health research and innovation unit based at UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences and the Anna Freud Centre. Founded in 2006, this collaboration bridges cutting-edge research and innovative practice in children's mental health. We conduct research, develop tools, provide training, evaluate interventions and disseminate evidence across four themes: Risk | Resilience | Change | Choice

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