



## **How to Teach Your Child Calm Breathing**

### **What is “calm breathing”?**

Calm breathing is a technique that teaches your child to slow down his or her breathing when feeling stressed or anxious.

### **Why is calm breathing important?**

When your child is feeling anxious, his or her breathing will change. When we are anxious, we tend to take short, quick, shallow breaths or even hyperventilate.

- This type of anxious breathing can actually make the feeling of anxiety worse!
- Doing calm breathing can help lower your child’s anxiety, and give him or her a sense of control
- Calm breathing is a great portable tool that your child can use when feeling anxious, especially in situations when you are not there to help him or her through it.

## **How To Do It**

### **Step 1: Explaining calm breathing to your child**

This is a tool your child can use anywhere, anytime! Other people will probably not even notice when your child is using this tool. For older children and teens, explain that taking short quick breaths actually increases other feelings of anxiety (e.g. heart racing, dizziness, or headaches). Calm breathing will slow down his or her breathing.

### **Step 2: Teaching the calm breathing technique**

- Take a slow breath in through the nose (for about 4 seconds)
- Hold your breath for 1 or 2 seconds
- Exhale slowly through the mouth (over about 4 seconds)
- Wait 2-3 seconds before taking another breath (5-7 seconds for teenagers)
- Repeat for at least 5 to 10 breaths

### **Calm Breathing for Younger Children: Bubble Blowing**

A fun way to teach your younger child how to do calm breathing is the “bubble blowing” technique. Using a toy soap bubble container and wand (available at any toy store), have your child practice blowing bubbles. The breathing required for blowing soap bubbles is the same as what is used for calm breathing. Simply make sure your child waits a second or two before blowing another bubble. Then practice “blowing bubbles” without a bubble wand.

**Important Hint:** Although “bubble blowing” is a great way to practice calm breathing, it is important to remind your child that he or she is doing this to learn how to breathe calmly. In other words, do not simply ask your child to blow bubbles without explaining this tool is used to help to manage anxiety.

Here’s a script of how to introduce bubble blowing to your young child

### Talking about bubble blowing

*“Today we are going to practice a new skill called calm breathing. This will be a new tool that you can use when you feel anxious, such as when you are at school. When you use calm breathing, you take slow breaths. A good way to practice it is to do some bubble blowing, because you have to take a slow, deep breath to make a big bubble, and you have to blow the bubble really slowly or it will pop! So let’s practice. Take a slow, deep breath in, hold it for a second, and then slowly blow some bubbles. Good job! Now let’s try that again.”*

### For Older Children and Teens: Belly Breathing

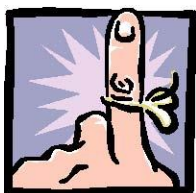
Since calm breathing involves taking slow, controlled breaths from the diaphragm, another way to explain this technique is to present it as “belly breathing”. The steps for this exercise are as follows:

- Inhale slowly for 4 seconds through the nose.
- Ask your child to pretend that he or she is blowing up a balloon in the belly, so your child’s belly should inflate when inhaling.
- Wait 2 seconds, and then slowly exhale through the mouth. Ask your child to pretend that he or she is emptying the balloon of air, so the tummy should deflate.
- Wait 2 seconds, and then repeat.

**Helpful Hint:** When belly breathing, make sure your child’s upper body (shoulders and chest area) is fairly relaxed and still. Only the belly should be moving!

### Step 3: Practice, practice, practice!

In order for your child to be able to use this new tool effectively, he or she first needs to be **an expert** at calm breathing.



**The only way to become an expert is to practice this skill daily!**

### Rules of practice:

- Until your child is comfortable with this skill, he or she should practice it at least twice a day, doing 10 calm breaths in a row.
- When you are practicing calm breathing, start when your child is relaxed, before he or she is feeling anxious. Your child needs to be comfortable breathing this way when feeling calm!
- Once your child is comfortable with this technique, he or she can start using it in situations that cause anxiety.

**As a final note...**

If you are using cognitive coping cards with your child (see [Developing and Using Cognitive Coping Cards](#)), calm breathing can also be used as a coping statement. For example,

- *“I’m feeling a little anxious right now. Maybe I should do some belly breathing!”*
- *“I don’t need to worry if I feel scared. I can always do some bubble blowing!”*



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## Developing and Using Cognitive Coping Cards

An important tool in your child or teen's anxiety toolbox is the ability to change anxious thoughts to more relaxed and balanced thinking. However, it can be very difficult for children and teens to remember to use coping tools when they are anxious. They are so focused on their feelings of being in danger that they forget they have a way of telling whether or not danger actually exists (and it usually doesn't).

With practice, however, your child can learn to use coping thoughts on his or her own. This is really helpful as you might not always be there to remind your child to use the tools (for example, when at school, or sleeping over at a friend's house).

**A good tool to help your child or teen is Cognitive Coping Cards!**

### What are Cognitive Coping Cards?

Cognitive coping cards can be small index cards with short sentences of some of the coping skills your child can use when experiencing anxiety. The cards are portable reminders to boss back anxiety!

#### **What sorts of things are helpful to put onto a coping card?**

- A reminder that physical symptoms (e.g., sweaty palms, stomach-aches) are just anxiety
- The name your child has given to anxiety (e.g. "Mr. Worry", "the pest", "the bug")
- A reminder that anxiety is not dangerous and doesn't last forever
- Positive coaching statements (e.g. "I can get through this!")
- A reminder to use some coping skills (e.g. I can do relaxed breathing)
- some calming facts your child or teen has used before (e.g. the odds of getting kidnapped are really low)

## HOW TO DO IT!

### Step 1: Make sure your child is involved

In order for coping cards to be useful, your child needs to feel that the coping statements will actually be personally helpful! Children and teens are more likely to use them if they have been involved in developing them. It is NOT a good idea for you to simply write them up and hand them over.

#### **What to say to get your child involved:**

*"You have been really good at bossing back your anxiety these days! Now we can learn another way for you to be the boss. Why don't we try to figure out some things you can tell yourself when your anxiety is acting up? We can write down some things on cards that can help you feel calm. These cards will be another tool in your anxiety-fighting toolbox!"*

**For teens:** Although you should encourage your child to develop coping statements, older children and teens can be more independent when writing out their coping cards. They can decide what skills are most helpful for them. You can explain that when we feel anxious it is sometimes difficult to remember all the skills we've learned to battle that anxiety. Writing out those skills on coping cards might help them remember what has been helpful for them in the past, and what skills they would like to use next time.

### Step 2: Make it a game!

Making up the cognitive coping cards should not be a chore! Have fun trying to come up with good statements that your child will find helpful in managing his or her anxiety. Here are some ways you can make this tool a fun task:

- **Get the family involved!** Like all the tools in the anxiety toolbox, the whole family should work together on the goal of tackling anxiety. Parents, brothers, and sisters can all get involved in making these coping cards!
- **Make it an art project!** Decorate the cards with coloured ink, sparkles, stickers, gold stars, and different colours of poster board cardboard. This turns developing and using coping cards into a fun project.

### Step 3: Remember to praise your child

As always, it is very important that you give lots of praise whenever your child is successful at managing anxiety, or whenever he or she tried to manage anxiety (but was not quite able to do it). This can include saying, "You are doing a great job! I'm so proud of you", but it might also involve small, simple rewards (story time; playing a fun board game together; having a fun family day; or getting a new video game if your child has been working hard to boss back anxiety for a while).

### Some examples of coping cards:

#### Coping card #1: Billy

Billy has panic attacks, and is afraid he is going to have a heart attack. He has started to boss back his anxiety by doing muscle relaxation, and facing his fears about his panic attack symptoms.

#### **My Coping Card to Beat Anxiety!**

1. Anxiety is not dangerous. It can't hurt me! It's just a bully!
2. I can boss back my anxiety. I have done it before!
3. If my heart is racing, I get sweaty, and my tummy hurts. That means that my anxiety is acting up. I'm not in danger.
4. I could do some relaxation now.
5. Am I falling into a Thinking Trap?\*

\* For more information on Thinking Traps, see [Realistic Thinking for Teens](#).

#### Coping card #2: Susan

Susan gets very anxious when she is at school. She is worried that the other kids don't like her, and that, if they knew she had anxiety, that they would laugh at her and make fun of her. She has been learning to recognize her anxious thoughts and to try to challenge them and think of more realistic thoughts.

**My Coping Card to Beat Anxiety!**

1. My face is getting hot and my head is getting dizzy! My anxiety is acting up again!
2. Maybe I need to use the STOP plan now! \*
3. If I'm feeling anxious, I could do some calm breathing to calm down.
4. I have lots of friends at school, and they like me even when I get anxious. They told me so.

\* For more information on the STOP plan, see [Healthy Thinking for Young Children](#).

## BUILDING DISTRESS TOLERANCE

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Situation	Your Thoughts & Feelings	Leaning In/ Rescuing	Leaning Back/ Allowing Space
Child/teen is crying, asking me for more information ("What if...?")	<p>"I need to help."</p> <p>"Crying equals pain, my job is to reduce pain."</p> <p>"I can't watch this."</p> <p>"I'm a bad parent if I let this continue."</p>	<p>Telling my child/teen everything will be OK.</p> <p>Reducing the stress to reduce the distress.</p> <p>Promising a fix.</p>	<p>Saying nothing.</p> <p>Label this as "anxiety talking" and ask my child to use their skills.</p> <p>Walking away and offering assistance once calmer (allowing anxiety/ distress to pass).</p>

\*Resource provided by Anxiety Canada's Scientific Advisory Committee member, Dr. Daniel Chorney

*“Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There.”*

## Keys to Remember:

- 1) Is my way of “helping” actually “helpful?”
- 2) Has what I’ve been doing actually been working? If no, why am I continuing to use this strategy?
- 3) Are my own thoughts and feelings (and resulting distress) not allowing my child to experience distress? Is this removing their chance to building tolerance and coping skills? Can they build a skill if never allowed to practice using it?
- 4) Am I choosing **short-term** pain/distress relief instead of working towards **long-term** relief?



## CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THINKING

### Questions to ask yourself to help challenge your negative thoughts or self-talk:

- Am I falling into a thinking trap (e.g., *catastrophizing* or *overestimating danger*)?
- What is the evidence that this thought is true? What is the evidence that this thought is not true?
- Have I confused a thought with a fact?
- What would I tell a friend if he/she had the same thought?
- What would a friend say about my thought?
- Am I 100% sure that \_\_\_\_\_ will happen?
- How many times has \_\_\_\_\_ happened before?
- Is \_\_\_\_\_ so important that my future depends on it?
- What is the worst that could happen?
- If it did happen, what could I do to cope with or handle it?
- Is my judgment based on the way I feel instead of facts?
- Am I confusing “possibility” with “certainty”? It may be possible, but is it likely?
- Is this a hassle or a horror?



Anxiety Canada is proud to be affiliated with HeretoHelp. HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use information. The BC Partners are funded by the Provincial Health Services Authority.

### Helpful Thinking

Situation	Feeling (0 = no emotion - 10 = most intense emotion)	Anxious Thought	Helpful Thought (*Use the Questions in Challenge Negative Thinking tool)	Feeling after Helpful Thought (0 - 10)

## How to Address Excessive Reassurance Seeking

Children and teens look to their parents for information about the world. It is normal and helpful for parents to provide children with information about challenging situations. This information may help children understand that those situations are not dangerous, and show them how to handle them effectively (e.g. what to do or say). For some children and teens, however, asking for reassurance about the same situation over and over again becomes an unhelpful way of coping.

### What is *excessive* reassurance seeking?

When your child is feeling anxious, he or she will probably turn to you for help in feeling better. One of the ways in which your child might do this is through reassurance seeking, which involves asking you lots of questions, or asking the same question over and over in order to hear from you that things will be okay.

#### Some examples of reassurance seeking:

- “Are you sure you locked all the doors?”
- “Tell me again that I’m a good girl!”
- “Did you wash your hands before you cooked dinner? Are you really sure?”
- Calling mom or dad over and over again on the phone from school to make sure they are okay.
- Asking parents to check homework repeatedly to make sure there are absolutely no mistakes.

### What is the problem with giving reassurance?

- Most parents already know that giving reassurance over and over again can be exhausting! Giving your child reassurance quickly becomes a **bottomless pit**: no matter how much reassurance you give your child, he or she will always want more! In fact, the more you give reassurance, the more you’ll have to keep giving it. In a way, it becomes addictive for kids!
- Giving reassurance is a **band-aid** solution: it only relieves your child or teen’s anxiety in the moment. More importantly, giving reassurance actually **keeps your child’s anxiety alive**, because it maintains the problem in the long-term.
- Giving your child or teen reassurance also sends the message that there’s actual danger that he or she needs to be protected from, when it is in fact the anxiety that is driving the reassurance seeking.

### What is the solution?

In order to help your child face fears and cope with anxiety in a healthy and adaptive way, **YOU NEED TO STOP GIVING YOUR CHILD REASSURANCE**. If your child does not rely on reassurance seeking to relieve anxiety, he or she can gradually learn to cope with anxiety on his or her own: this can give your child a sense of independence and competence.

### Easier said than done?

- For most parents, not giving their child or teen reassurance sounds very difficult. When your child asks for reassurance, he or she is obviously very upset, and many parents feel it is “cruel” to

deny their children the reassurance they seem to need. However, if you want to help your child manage anxiety over the long term, he or she needs to learn a more effective way of coping.

- There is a way to help your child to stop asking for reassurance without feeling as if you are being “mean” or “uncaring”.

## How to Do It!

### Step 1: Make a Clear Plan

Before you start any anxiety management skill with your child, you need to have a clear idea of what exactly you will be doing. For example:

- **What specific behaviours are you trying to change?** (e.g., “Whenever my child asks me if the house is clean, I will no longer give reassurance that it is”, or “I do not want my child to call me at work several times every day to make sure I am okay”)
- **Is everyone in the family on board?** If you plan to stop giving reassurance to your child, it is important that everyone else in the family agrees. If your child can simply get reassurance from someone else, this strategy will not work.
- **Make sure your child or teen understands and agrees with the plan.** When he or she is calm (not experiencing anxiety), explain what the plan is, and why you are doing it.

### HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE NEW PLAN: AN EXAMPLE

**Parent:** “We are going to set up a new plan in the house to help you to boss back your anxiety. For example, whenever you get anxious or worried that your homework isn’t perfect, what do you usually do?”

**Child:** “I ask you to read it.”

**Parent:** “That’s right. And you do that many times every time you have homework. The reason you do this is because your anxiety starts bullying you around, telling you that you made a mistake and that not being perfect is really bad. But is your anxiety right or wrong when it tells you that?”

**Child:** “Well, I guess it’s wrong.”

**Parent:** “Exactly. That’s because anxiety can be a big liar. So we need to stop anxiety from bullying you. We are going to do that by not listening when anxiety tells you to call me. So your job is going to be to try to do your homework without asking me to read it, even if you get anxious. My job will be to help you boss back your anxiety by asking you to read over your homework yourself. This is going to be our new plan, okay? When you ask me to help you, I am going to remind you that your anxiety is bullying you, and that you can do it fine by yourself. Eventually, anxiety is simply going to give up and stop bossing you around.

### Step 2: Following Through on the Plan

Once you have explained the new plan to your child or teen, you need to follow through on it. There are a number of things you can say to your child when he or she comes to you for reassurance. Here are some examples:

- “You already know the answer to that question. I am not going to answer that.”
- “What if you didn’t do your homework perfectly -- what would happen?”
- “Maybe you did make a mistake on your exam; what could you do to cope with that?”
- “It sounds like your anxiety is acting up. What could you do to boss it back? Could you maybe do some relaxed breathing? Are there any helpful thoughts that you can tell yourself?”
- “What do you think? How could you handle that?”
- “I guess you’ll just have to wait and find out.”

**Active ignoring** involves deliberately ignoring the question and not paying attention to your child's demands. However, once he or she stops asking for reassurance, give him or her lots of praise and attention. Return to not giving your child attention or reassurance if he or she starts asking you questions again. This strategy quickly teaches your child that reassurance will not be rewarded or answered by you, and that it is more beneficial not to repeatedly ask the same questions.

### Step 3: Give lots of praise!

Because this is hard work, make sure to repeatedly praise your child for any efforts made to not seek reassurance from you, or attempts to manage anxiety independently. Some positive comments you can make are:

- "You are doing such a great job!"
- "Look how well you bossed back your anxiety!"
- "I'm so proud of you!"

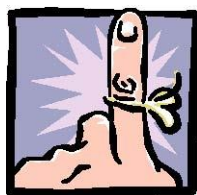
### What to expect...

When you first stop giving reassurance, your child or teen will probably be very anxious. In fact, he or she might become very angry or frustrated, and even throw a temper tantrum. This is normal. It is important that if you have decided **NOT** to give reassurance, that you **stick with it!** Children and teens often get very angry when they do not get the reassurance that they have come to expect. If you keep at it, and stick to the plan, your child will stop seeking reassurance from you, and start managing anxiety in more healthy ways.

### THE GOLDEN RULE: CONSISTENCY!

Sometimes parents will say they tried to stop giving reassurance, but it didn't work, and that their child or teen simply kept asking for reassurance. This usually happens when you have given in once or twice, and gave reassurance. Many parents will "break down" and give reassurance if their child has a really bad temper tantrum, cries, or delays a task that needs to get done (for example, wanting reassurance before going to school in the morning). This is understandable because it can be very difficult for parents to stop themselves from soothing their upset child or teen. Nevertheless, it is necessary.

**REMEMBER...** For this strategy to work, you need to resist giving reassurance **every single time!**



#### HELPFUL HINT: THE PROBLEM WITH INCONSISTENCY

If you give in to your child's demand for reassurance even once, your child has learned a powerful lesson: **"If I persist and ask enough times, eventually I will get the reassurance that I want"**. So, rather than getting rid of the problem behaviour, you have increased and strengthened it!

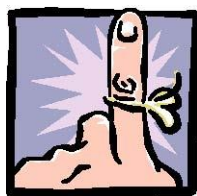
This is why if you give reassurance, even once, your child will keep asking until he or she gets it. However, if you consistently stick to the plan, your child or teen will start using other strategies to cope with anxiety, and stop asking you for reassurance.

### Teens and Reassurance

Anxious teens seek reassurance just as younger children do, and parents need to use the same strategies to deal with this, using language and examples that are appropriate for the teenager's age. Because they are older, parents can give their teen a more detailed explanation of why excessive reassurance-seeking is not a helpful coping strategy. Some of the points you can talk about are:

- Reassurance seeking only works in the short-term: the more you ask for reassurance, the more you will want it in the future.

- We ask for excessive reassurance when we feel that there is a danger; but, in fact, anxiety is driving the need for reassurance.
- When you stop receiving reassurance, it is normal to feel anxious. However, this might be a good opportunity to start using other, more helpful coping skills.



### HELPFUL HINTS:

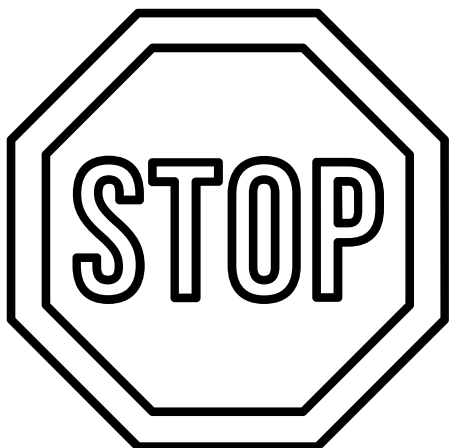
#### FOCUS ON POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR, NOT ANXIOUS BEHAVIOUR

Because your child will probably be quite anxious at first when not getting reassurance, your first instinct might be to soothe him or her in other ways (for example, giving lots of affection and attention, treats or rewards).

- By doing this, you are actually rewarding the anxious behaviour.
- If you stick to the plan, resist giving reassurance, and encourage your child to handle anxiety on his or her own, you are ignoring the anxious behaviour.
- Encouraging your child to reassure him or herself, and to problem solve independently will help your child to become independent and confident.
- After your child has calmed down, or if he or she is using a coping tool to deal with anxiety, then you can praise this positive behaviour!



This STOP Plan is for: \_\_\_\_\_



**S**cared?

**T**houghts?

**O**ther helpful thoughts?

**P**raise and Plan!

**Scared**

What's going on in your body?

**Thoughts**

What are you thinking?

**Other**

What is something else you can think?

**Plan**

What is something nice you can say to yourself?