Are you worried about going to school?

An Information Leaflet for young people

Children's Service: Educational Psychology Service

Contents

Feelings And Symptoms

Frequently Asked Questions

Important Key Points on School Refusal

How Can I Help Myself

Summary of ways to Help Yourself

Adapted from Kelloch & Maloney,
South Lanarkshire Psychological Service

Feelings And Symptoms

You might be experiencing some of the following when you think about going to school:

- Feeling sick (or being physically sick)
- Shortness of breath
- Stomach pains
- Dizziness
- Trembling, shaking and crying
- A fear of 'going crazy'
- Loss of appetite
- Muscle tension
- Restless - feeling 'keyed up'
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Irritability
- Difficulty with sleep
- Disrupted sleep pattern
- Headaches
- A feeling of detachment - not in the 'here and now'

It is important to check first with your doctor that you do not have a physical illness to cause the symptoms.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What Causes Refusal to Attend School?

Causes of refusal, sometimes called 'a phobia', can be hard to work out. It may be difficulties within school such as the work given being too hard; getting a row; or even falling out with another pupil. There may be home factors involved - not wanting to leave a parent (who may be ill, or has other reasons to stay at home). Significant loss through death or separation can be factors involved.

2. Why Do I Feel I Can't Go To School

The fear you are facing is part of the body's NORMAL reaction to stress. We all face stressful situations in our lives. As a response, our body reacts by telling us to either 'fight' it, or 'run away' from the danger often called the 'fight or flight response'. You are simply facing an unusually high number of stress responses which are being triggered by the body at the prospect of going to school.

3. Am I Mad?

No! You are facing a normal reaction and you are not mad or mentally ill but you may need to use all the support you can get (family members/teachers/ psychologists etc) to help you to recover.

Important Key Points On School Refusal

- The stress is 'REAL' for you and can be even stronger than any earlier fears eg snakes and spiders.
- The STRESS about school can affect you in a number of ways.
  - **Bodily Feelings** - eg feeling sick, having pains etc.
  - **Your Behaviour** - avoidance of school or getting ready to go to school.
  - **How You Think** - thoughts about not being able to cope with school.
- The body's normal STRESS RESPONSE is being triggered too often. It can be because of things happening at school or at home
- Feeling this way is NOT a sign of 'going crazy' or mental illness
- The strong feelings can wear off quickly (within 30 - 40 minutes). However, the negative thoughts about going to school can come up whenever you think about school. It is important that you return to school as soon as you can.
- The purpose of this booklet is to provide a programme to overcome the anxieties and to support you in quickly returning to school.

How Can I Help Myself?

There are three key ways you can help yourself:

1. Get back to school

- It is important to face the situation causing the fear
- Staying at home increases the anxiety
- Break down the task, going to a support room in school (rather than class) if required

2. Teach yourself 'Coping Strategies'

- Use a 'Relaxation Technique'
- Learn to face the symptoms
- Learn to accept the physical feelings
- Learn to 'work through' the anxiety
- Learn to allow time to pass

3. Teach yourself 'Coping Statements'

- Challenge the 'negative thinking'
- Challenge the irrational fears

Learn to use 'coping' statements which help you to stay in school

Section 1 - Get Back To School

Helping you face the fear is very IMPORTANT. Staying at home may seem a reasonable way of handling the situation but it only aggravates the fears. This makes it increasingly difficult for you to return to school.

If necessary, your parents and support teacher will arrange for a 'safe-area' in the school - a place where you feel comfortable, eg a support base/assistant head's room.

Getting Back to School

It is important that you start to confront the problems which are causing the fears as **Getting Back To School Is Important.**

Face the Symptoms - Don't Run Away From Them

Running away or avoiding facing the situation relating to the fears is a way of telling yourself you can't handle a particular situation. In most cases this will only lead to more panic.

Learn to 'Ride With The Fear'

A good attitude to develop is to realise that the panic cannot Actually Harm You and for you to say to yourself:

'OK, here it is again. I can allow my body to go through this and I can handle this. I've done it before'.

After 10-15 minutes the panic will fade away. You can cope with it, don't allow it to take control over you - it will fade.

Section 2 - Teach yourself 'Coping Strategies'

Here are three key strategies to learn:

Coping Strategy 1: Relaxation Training

Developing a relaxation strategy will help you to stay relaxed even in school situations. Your psychologist or teachers can help you with this.

1. Abdominal or Tummy Breathing

Breathing slowly from your abdomen can help reduce the body symptoms of panic in two ways:

- By slowing down the breathing, you can reverse the reactions associated with the 'fight or flight' reaction.
- Slow abdominal breathing, especially when done through the nose, will reduce symptoms of hyperventilation such as dizziness, disorientation and tingly sensations.

Three or four minutes of slow abdominal breathing will eliminate these symptoms.

2. 'Progressive Muscle Relaxation' (PMR)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a well established method for relaxing and staying calm (a Relaxation Tape is available). Like any skill, this will need to be practiced. Practicing twice a day, in the morning and at night before going to bed, you will soon learn the skill of relaxation.

3. 'Visualise' a comforting person or scene

Try to imagine a comforting place or scene. See yourself in the scene. When you visualise a person, see him/her there sitting beside you.

Coping Strategy 2: 'Get Angry!'

It is impossible to experience anger and anxiety at the same time. If you can express anger physically onto an object - not just talk about it - at the moment you feel the sensation start, you can stop the panic attack.

- Pound on a pillow or a bed with both fists
- Scream into a pillow, or openly in your room if alone

'GETTING MAD' at the EARLY symptoms of an attack works well. This does not mean struggling against panic, it's rather a matter of using the energy created by the panic into another emotion.

Coping Strategy 3: 'Develop Coping Strategies'

To be used with 'relaxation', 'visualisation' and 'getting angry'.

1. Using the 'Retreat' Method (but NOT escaping!)

If you are near to, or already in, a situation in which you feel highly anxious, you can leave the situation until the anxiety subsides.

It is very important to distinguish retreat from escape. Retreat means leaving the situation temporarily, with the intention of returning when you feel better. 'Escape, where you don't return, only reinforces the phobia'.

Facing the fear proves that you are the one who is in control

2. Practice 'Thought Stopping' Techniques

Many people have found that 'thought stopping' in combination with deep breathing are highly effective in stopping panic attacks at an early stage.

- Teach yourself to take deep breaths and shout 'stop', 'stop it!' or 'get out!' (If other people are around, you will need to say this silently to yourself!) Repeat several times, if necessary.
- Teach yourself to replace anxious thoughts with calming, reassuring thoughts: 'This will pass', 'I am calm and strong', (or any of the coping statements in section 6 below).

3. Talk to Another Person

Talking to someone else will help you keep your mind off the symptoms and anxious thoughts. Whether you are standing in line at the dinner hall or standing in the lift talking to someone; even admitting to a friend that you are anxious about going to school can help and it will help reduce the anxiety.

4. Move Around or Engage in Physical Activity

Moving around or doing something physical will use up the extra energy/adrenaline created by the 'fight or flight' reaction. Doing some housework - cleaning up your bedroom! Walk to the bathroom and back; go outdoors for a brisk ten minute walk.

5. Stay In 'The Present'

Focus on concrete objects around yourself. Watch closely the actions of people nearby. For example, whilst walking to class, watch the person in front, try to guess which class they will walk into! If driving to school focus on the car in front, look at details in the surroundings you're passing - how many different house styles are there?

6. Engage In Simple Repetitive Activities

There are many simple acts that can distract your attention from the anxiety symptoms:

- Unwrap and chew a piece of gum
- Count backwards from 100 by 3's
- Count the number of people walking to school
- Count the money in your pocket/purse
- Whilst being driven to school, count the number of red cars (or other factors, eg count all the Ford cars)
- Feel the sharp edge of a key or coin in your pocket
- Snap a rubber band against your wrist
- Sing a song in your head from start to finish

7. Do Something That Requires 'Focused Attention'

These activities act as good distracters especially at the start of an attack. They are harder to do when you feel panicky, but once you are involved in them, they are a good long lasting effect in distracting your attention.

- Make sure you have a 'routine' from waking to going to school
- Read a book/magazine
- Solve a puzzle (crossword etc)
- Write a running diary of your changing level of anxiety
- Play a game on your computer
- Play a musical instrument
- Plan your day's activities

8. Do Something Nice

Just as anger and anxiety are incompatible, so are feelings of anger and pleasure. Any of the following will work to control your anxieties:

- Have a favourite snack or meal (carbohydrates: cheese, nuts, crackers - not junk food)
- Take a hot shower or bath
- Ask mum or dad for a cuddle!

9. Repeat Positive Coping Statements

One of the central points of this booklet has been to emphasise the role of negative SELF-TALK in increasing panic. Telling yourself you will not come to harm and that you will cope with the panic is crucial in learning to beat your anxieties.

10. Use A Breathing Technique In Combination With Coping Statements

You might find a combination of a 'relaxation technique', 'coping strategies' and 'coping statements' will work best for you. You will need to experiment to find the best combination to suit you.

All of the Coping Strategies work well - you will need to experiment to find which one works best for you. Practise using them frequently.

Section 3 - Tackling the negative self talk

Develop 'Coping Statements'

Use any or all of the following positive statements to help you develop an attitude of accepting the stress associated with the phobia. 'Floating through the panic', and 'allowing time to pass' during the attack will allow you to feel that you are regaining control. You may find it useful to repeat over and over again a single statement at the start of a panic attack. If one statement becomes tiresome, change to another. You may want to practice deep abdominal breathing at the same time.

Here are some samples of coping statements to learn:

'This feeling isn't comfortable or pleasant, but I can accept it.'

'I can be anxious and still deal with this situation.'

'I can handle these feelings and sensations.'

'This isn't an emergency, it is OK, to think slowly about what I need to do.'

'I'm going to go with this and wait for my anxiety to fade away.'

'This is an opportunity for me to learn to cope with my fears.'

'I can take my time to relax and let this thing pass.'

'This is just anxiety - I'm not going to let it get to me.'

'These are just thoughts - not reality.'

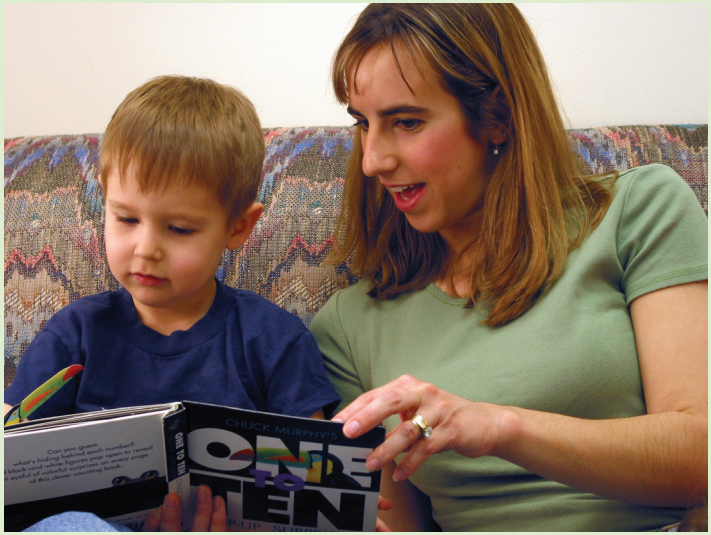
'Nothing serious will happen to me.'

'This isn't dangerous.'

'So what, it's only adrenaline, it will pass.'

Teach Yourself To 'Actively Cope'

'Actively coping' is when you learn to stay in the situation, which causes the panic, knowing that if you 'ride it out' (staying in there) the body state will return to a normal level. You need to be back in the stressful situation (school) to relearn positive ways of acting and thinking. You will think that the initial physical sensation will lead to a major consequence - being physically sick or lesser degrees such as 'fainting' etc. It is crucial to challenge this belief. Learning to 'go with it' will help you learn to cope, then eventually tame the fear.



Some Basic Points About Negative 'Self Talk'

- 'Self talk', is usually AUTOMATIC - you need to listen to your thoughts and fears and discuss them with your parents/teacher or psychologist. They will help you realise how irrational these are (DEBUNK the fearful thoughts).
- 'Self talk' is often in TELEGRAPHIC FORM - that is, usually a single word or small phrase contains a whole series of thoughts, emotions or associations. Examining self talk can often unravel several distinct thoughts from a single word or phrase.
- A panic starts with a simple physiological factor such as increased heart rate, but is made much worse by negative self talk.
- Negative 'self talk' is a series of **bad habits**. People aren't born to have panic attacks - they learn it. You need to teach yourself to relearn positive self talk and coping strategies. These take time but can be extremely effective.
- You need to relearn positive self talk which lets you hear yourself using positive coping statements

Summary Of Ways To Help Yourself

- Develop 'coping strategies' which help you to decrease the physical feelings (feeling sweaty, feeling sick)
- Develop positive 'coping statements' to challenge 'negative self talk'
- Be prepared to take risks - to get BACK to school and to go on to classes
- Learn to manage discomfort
- Learn to cope with the early stages of a panic attack
- Learn to overcome 'resistance' (unwillingness to get started)
- Reward yourself for even small successes
- Expect and plan how to deal with setbacks
- Ensure practice of skills is regularly undertaken
- Remain calm and positive - expect success
- Remember a hug can go further than words

All the above methods can be used to re-teach yourself strategies which will overcome the perceived difficulties in returning to school.

It is time for you to take control over your thoughts and feelings and to return to feelings of control and calmness in school.

Children's Service: Educational Psychology Service

Children's Service: Educational Psychology Service
Wolfcraig
Dumbarton Road
Stirling FK8 2LQ

Stirling Council
Phone: 01786 404040
E-mail: info@stirling.gov.uk
http://www.stirling.gov.uk