

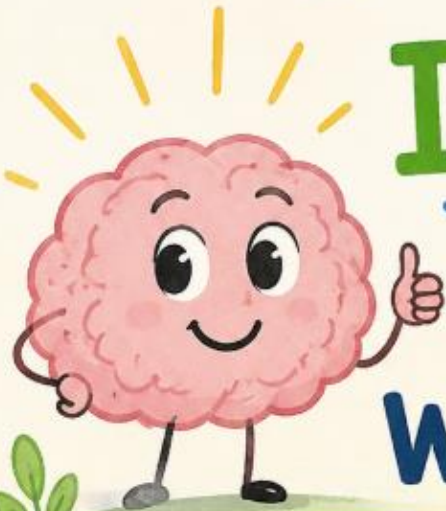


I have
WORRYING
THOUGHTS

What if I
 make a mistake?
 ?

What if
 something
 bad happens?
 ?

— but —



I CAN
COPE
WITH THEM

What if
 people don't
 like me?
 ?

I can try things that help me:



TAKE DEEP
 BREATHS



TAKE MY TIME
 AND GO SLOW



FOCUS ON
 THE POSITIVE



DO SOMETHING
 I ENJOY



TALK TO
 SOMEONE

Oscar's Worrying Brain

When a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder asks repeated “what if” questions, they're often looking for **certainty**, not information. The challenge is that providing more and more reassurance can accidentally make the anxiety stronger, because the brain learns: *“I need to ask this question to feel safe.”*

A helpful approach is to balance **validation, a brief answer, and support for coping with uncertainty.**

A simple pattern is:

1. **Acknowledge the feeling**
2. **Answer briefly (once)**
3. **Shift to coping or problem-solving**
4. **Avoid getting pulled into endless reassurance**

For example:

Child: “What if there's a fire while we're asleep?”

Adult: “That sounds like a worrying thought. We have smoke alarms that work, and we know what to do if they go off. Even when we can't know everything for certain, we can handle problems if they happen.”

If he asks again a few minutes later:

“I think your **worry brain** is asking for reassurance again. We've already talked about our plan. What could help your worry right now?”

Some families find it useful to separate **“curious questions”** from **“worry questions.”**

You might say:

- “Is this a question your **curious brain** is asking, or your **worry brain**?”
- “What do you think your worry is trying to protect you from?”
- “Do you want information, or do you want help feeling calmer?”

Other strategies that often work well with autistic children:

- **Visual supports:** Create a “What If Plan” with simple steps and pictures.
- **Predictability:** Use schedules, countdowns, and explain changes in advance when possible.
- **Designated worry time:** Set aside 10 minutes each day for worry questions instead of answering them all day long.
- **Coping menu:** Help him choose from a list of calming activities—deep breathing, squeezing a stress ball, drawing, movement, listening to music, or talking through a plan.
- **Practice uncertainty in small ways:** “We don't know exactly what snack we'll have later, and that's okay—we can handle surprises.”

Try to avoid responses like:

- “Don't worry.”
- “That will never happen.”
- Repeatedly answering the same question in different ways.

Those responses feel comforting in the moment but can increase the need for reassurance over time.

If his anxiety is causing significant distress, affecting sleep, school, or daily activities, it can be helpful to speak with a paediatrician or a therapist experienced in both anxiety and autism. Approaches based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be adapted effectively for autistic children.

Above all, remember that the goal isn't to eliminate every worry—it's to help him learn:

“I can have worried thoughts, and I can cope with them.”

SOME CBT TECHNIQUES

If you're looking for CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) techniques that you can easily personalise and use when a child is feeling anxious, here are some practical, evidence-based strategies that are commonly taught by therapists. They can be adapted for adults, teenagers, and children (with support if needed).

1. Catch the Thought

When anxiety appears, identify the thought behind it.

Ask:

- "What am I worried will happen?"
- "What evidence do I have?"
- "Is there another way of looking at this?"

Example:

- Anxious thought: "Something bad is definitely going to happen."
- Balanced thought: "I'm feeling anxious, but that doesn't mean the danger is real."

2. Rate the Anxiety

Use a 0–10 scale.

- 0 = completely calm
- 10 = worst anxiety imaginable

Re-rate after using a coping strategy to see whether it helped.

3. Box Breathing

Breathe slowly:

- In for 4 seconds
- Hold for 4
- Out for 4
- Hold for 4

Repeat for a few minutes.

4. Grounding (5-4-3-2-1)

Notice:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

This helps shift attention away from anxious thoughts and back to the present.

5. Worry Time

Instead of worrying throughout the day:

- Write worries down.
- Set aside 15–20 minutes later in the day as "worry time."
- If worries arise outside that time, remind yourself you'll think about them later.

6. Behavioural Experiments

Test anxious predictions.

Example:

- Prediction: "If I ask a question, everyone will laugh."
- Experiment: Ask one question.
- Review: What actually happened?

This helps challenge unhelpful beliefs with real evidence.

7. Calm Coping Statements

Prepare a few phrases to repeat:

- "This feeling will pass."
- "I've handled anxiety before."
- "I don't need to believe every anxious thought."
- "I can cope one step at a time."

8. Problem vs. Worry

Ask:

- Is this a real problem I can solve today?
 - If yes, make a plan.
 - If no, practise letting the thought pass without engaging with it.

9. Activity Scheduling

Anxiety often leads people to avoid activities, which can make it worse.

Plan small, meaningful activities each day, such as:

- Going for a walk
- Seeing a friend
- Doing a hobby
- Completing one manageable task

10. Exposure (Gradual Facing)

Avoidance keeps anxiety going.

Make a hierarchy from easiest to hardest situations and gradually practise facing them, staying in the situation long enough for anxiety to reduce naturally.

For example:

1. Think about the situation.
2. Visit briefly.
3. Stay longer.
4. Repeat until it feels easier.

A Simple CBT Routine for Oscar

When Oscar notices he's anxious:

1. **Notice:** "I'm feeling anxious."
2. **Rate:** Anxiety out of 10.
3. **Breathe:** 1–2 minutes of slow breathing.
4. **Challenge:** Ask, "What's the evidence for this thought?"
5. **Ground:** Use the 5-4-3-2-1 exercise if needed.
6. **Choose:** Take one small action instead of avoiding the situation.
7. **Review:** Rate anxiety again and note what happened.

These techniques are most effective when practised regularly, not only during moments of high anxiety. If Oscar's anxiety is frequent, severe, or significantly affecting daily life, working with a CBT-trained mental health professional can help tailor these strategies to his specific needs.

You might also like to look at 'My Big Metacognitive Workbook' for printable activities or email me for copies- geoff.hannan@btinternet.com. I also do a free guided workshop for parents and kids together on Teams. Just contact for availability.