

Sometimes When I'm Worried



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illustrated by Kyra Teis

free spirit
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For Jessica



Sometimes when I'm worried,
I feel scared.



I cry a lot.
I can't calm down.



And it feels like my
worries won't go away.



HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH WORRY

A Guide for Caring Adults



Sometimes When I'm Worried helps children and adults learn to recognize worries, validate and confront such thoughts and feelings, and build the skills for coping with them in healthy ways. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health conditions of childhood, so helping little ones learn to manage their worries is essential.

Why do some children worry more than others? A lot has to do with our stress response—what's known as "fight, flight, or freeze." We're born with this emergency neural network, and it helps keep us safe in threatening and dangerous moments. However, some children have a highly sensitive stress response and don't always react proportionally to experiences. They may have a fight (tantrum), flight (avoid), or freeze (cry) response even in common or safe situations. This heightened stress response system is connected to genetics, temperament, and environment.

FROM FEAR TO WORRY

Infants and young children live in the moment, and fear—a form of anxiety—is an emotion felt in the moment as a here-and-now experience. For example, a child may fear a big dog they see right now at the park. The stress response system is activated by this fear, and the child feels anxious. Fear tends to reduce once the threat is eliminated. If the child can see that the dog is quiet or friendly, they may no longer feel distress. Or, if you turn around and leave the park, the child will no longer experience anxiety. But of these two possibilities, only the first helps the child move through their fear in a healthy way. By experiencing the fear, rather than avoiding it, children learn to widen their comfort zones.

Worry is also a form of anxiety, but it requires a child to understand the past and the future. "I remember seeing that dog in the park before, and I'm worried it will be there again when we go today." Whereas the dog caused *fear* in the moment, remembering or anticipating the dog creates *worry*. Worry has a longer and more debilitating timeline than fear. Learning to detect worry in children of various ages will help adults recognize early symptoms so interventions can be put into action. These approaches help children soften their fight, flight, or freeze responses; manage worry; and decrease anxiety.

HOW TO SPOT ANXIETY IN CHILDREN OF VARIOUS AGES

Infants: On average, infants don't begin to experience anxiety until around 9 months. At this point they develop a bond with their caregiver and may cry when they're separated or with an unfamiliar person. As babies grow with consistent caregiving, many children learn to tolerate separation from caregivers without much difficulty. Later, the developmental skill of individuation (being able to be apart from others for long periods) helps children feel safe as they experience the world. Signs a baby is anxious may include arching back, squirming or shaking arms and legs, and tight-fisted grasp; avoidance of eye contact; changes in sleeping and eating; difficulty being soothed; frantic crying; irritability; and reluctance to play.

Toddlers: Children this age tend to have imagination-induced anxiety or worries that spring from fantasy. They may fear bugs, animals, clowns, or the dark. They might worry about monsters, ghosts, and bad guys from books or shows. Toddlers are also sensitive to their environment, and loud, abrupt sounds like thunder, motorcycles, garbage trucks, or sirens can cause distress. They may even worry about sounds in their own home, such as the vacuum, blender, or furnace. It can be hard for toddlers to distinguish fantasies or make-believe thinking ("Let's look in the closet together. See, there's no ghost.") from things that are real and just need a simple explanation from an adult ("That sound is the wind making the trees scratch against the house."). Signs a toddler is anxious may include changes or regression in toileting; clinginess and whining; excessive crying; headaches or stomachaches; intense fears; irritability; nightmares; slowness to warm up to new experiences or people; tantrums; tics, coughs, or restless body movements; and trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.

