



# 1. MY CHILD'S ANXIETY: HOW CAN I HELP THEM STEP OUTSIDE OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE?

## Introduction

This workshop should take place between the first and second *student* workshops. The objective of this meeting is to give parents insight into what the students are doing.

## Specific workshop objectives

At the end of the workshop, the parents will be able to:

- Get know the facilitator and the other group members;
- Understand the program objectives and the concept of comfort zone;
- Target avoidance behaviours in their child;
- Understand the link between thoughts, emotions, sensations, and behaviours;
- Help their child reflect on certain thought patterns by asking them questions.

## How the workshop works

Welcome the parents and present the workshop objectives and how it will work. Make sure each parent has their *Handy parent guide*.

### A. Presentation of the program (10 min.)

1. Thank parents for attending and remind them of the importance of participating in their child's well-being.

2. Present the workshop objectives and talk about what the *Handy parent guide* will be used for.
3. Reiterate that everything said in the parent group will remain confidential. This is essential to create a sense of trust and security.

Their mutual exchanges are an integral part of the program. Point out that when they are willing to share their experiences, they help others work through their own issues. By the same token, listening with empathy to the other parents is sometimes what they need most. Everyone is encouraged to share their experiences, while leaving room for others to express themselves.

4. Next, review the material provided during the preparatory meeting. What did they learn? Do they have any questions?

## B. Icebreaker: A picture that represents me (15 min.)

1. Ask them to look at the pictures in their *Handy parent guide*. Ask everyone to choose a picture that represents them. The pictures can represent one or more aspects of their personality or state of mind.
2. Ask them each to introduce themselves to the group based on that picture.

## C. Comfort zone (20 min.)

If you would like, use the following video (15:24 min.) to prepare or to explain the concept of the comfort zone, and then ask the questions below to get the parents talking:

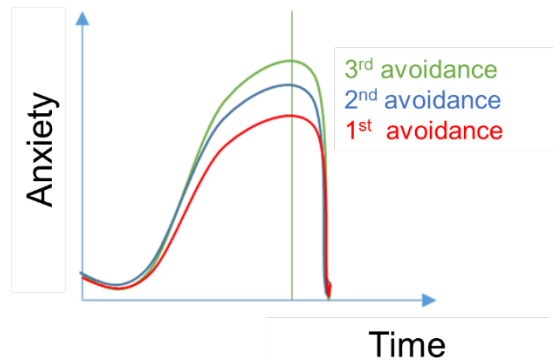
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTxRd8UfKa0>

1. Ask them to go to the first workshop in their *Handy parent guide*.
2. Using the diagram in the workshop, introduce the concept of the comfort zone.

The comfort zone is those parts of their life where they feel good or on familiar territory. It's the relationships, events, and environments where they know the routine and don't need to ask too many questions. Basically, they're comfortable, or at least they think they are (inspired by White, 2009).

Anxiety can happen when they step outside of their comfort zone, or even when they think about situations that are outside of their comfort zone. This means having to enter the fear zone. They don't know how to react, they're afraid of the unknown, and they don't feel good. They're tempted to avoid these situations and retreat back into the cozy familiarity of their comfort zone. This is called avoidance. Avoidance feels good in the short term because it instantly lowers their anxiety levels.



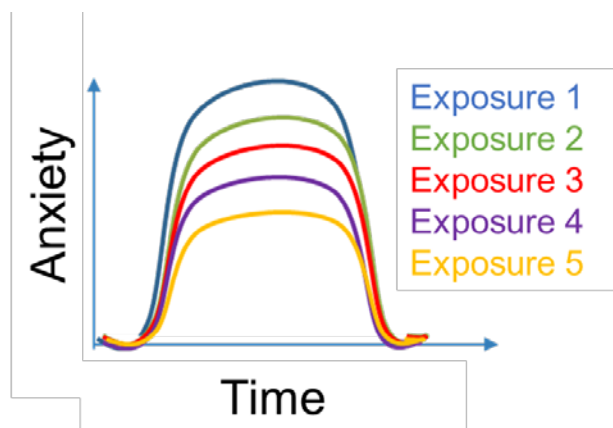


The problem with avoidance is that the more they avoid a situation, the more frightening it becomes. Their comfort zone shrinks, and they start to feel trapped inside it, or they begin to feel more uncomfortable each time they step outside it. At that point, they need to face their fears, which will help them to cope better or even get over their fears completely. This is called exposure. Exposure can be very uncomfortable in the short term because facing the scary situation will cause their anxiety levels to rise. Remember that anxiety isn't dangerous; it's temporary and it eventually goes away. The more they expose themselves to a situation, the less anxious they'll feel about it.

3. Make the connection between the concept of comfort zone and their child's situation.

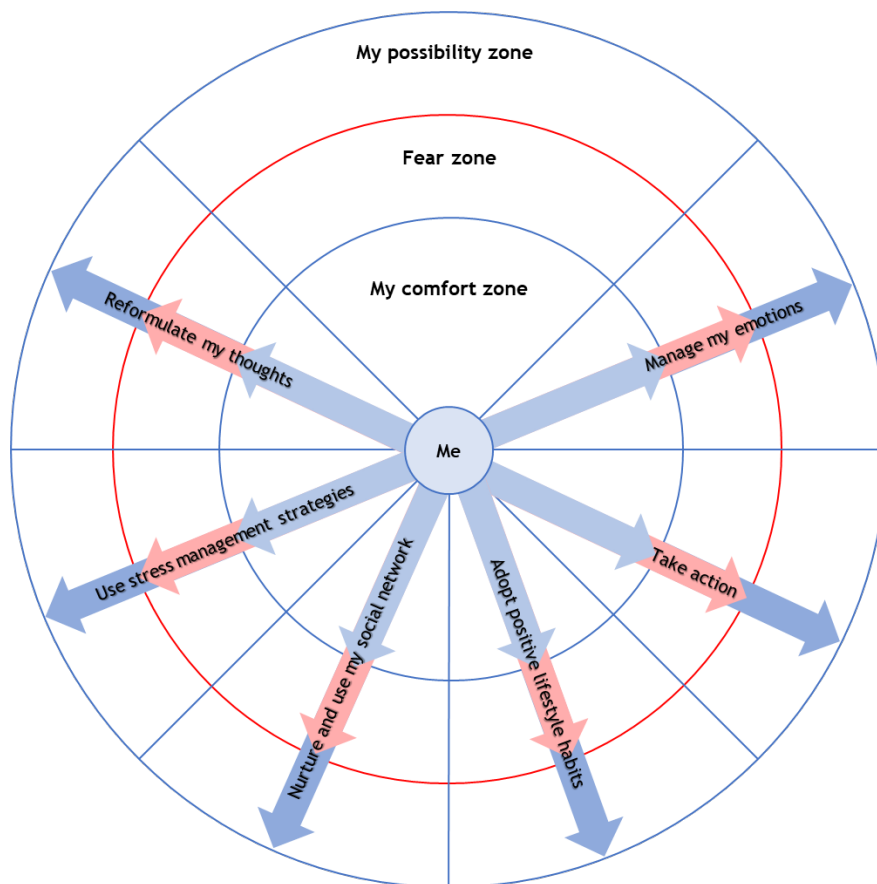
However, your child isn't always able to recognize that it isn't dangerous, because it's the opposite of what they're feeling: "It's dangerous!" It's therefore important to listen to them, understand what they're going through, and encourage them to step outside of their comfort zone, one small step at a time. Trivializing or downplaying what they're feeling won't help. By stepping outside of their comfort zone, your child will become more comfortable, more confident, and freer. Stepping outside of their comfort zone is also a great learning opportunity (Forsyth and Eifert, 2007; Gosselin *et al.*, 2019; Harvey and Ilic, 2014).

The objective of the program is to help your child expand their comfort zone so that they're more comfortable and less anxious in situations that they've identified as anxiety-provoking.



4. Using the diagram, explain to the parents that, in order to expand their comfort zone, their child will learn to:

- Reformulate their thoughts into helpful ones;
- Manage their emotions to better cope with them;
- Adopt new behaviours (take action!);
- Adopt positive lifestyle habits;
- Use stress management strategies;
- Nurture and properly use their social network.



5. Finally, remind parents that their child set a goal for themselves during the preparatory meeting. This objective answers the question: "What would I like to be able to do at the end of this program that I can't do now because of my anxiety?" This will become their new comfort zone. They were also asked to identify seven small steps that will bring them closer to their objective. These are their baby steps: When situation 1 becomes easy, it's time to move on to situation 2, etc.



6. Remind the parents that it's important to celebrate all their child's baby steps, even if it's just a different way of looking at things, as this will help set them up for success. This is how they will gain confidence and be able to continue on the path to achieving their objective. Give an example.

7. For example, if the child's objective is: "I want to be able to assert myself in a group," the 7 baby steps to get there might be:

1. Say hi to a classmate when I walk into class
2. Ask a classmate a question during group work
3. Ask the teacher a question at the end of class
4. Start a conversation with a friend
5. Share my opinion during a family discussion
6. Share my opinion during group work
7. Raise my hand in class to give my opinion on a topic

#### **D. Discuss your experience (20 min.)**

1. Now ask the parents to introduce their child, talk about one of their strengths, describe how their child's anxiety manifests, and how this makes them feel as a parent. Lead a discussion on the topic by asking the following questions:

- Do they know what objective their child set for themselves during the preparatory meeting?
- Do they notice avoidance behaviours in their child?
- What is the most difficult thing for their child? And for them?

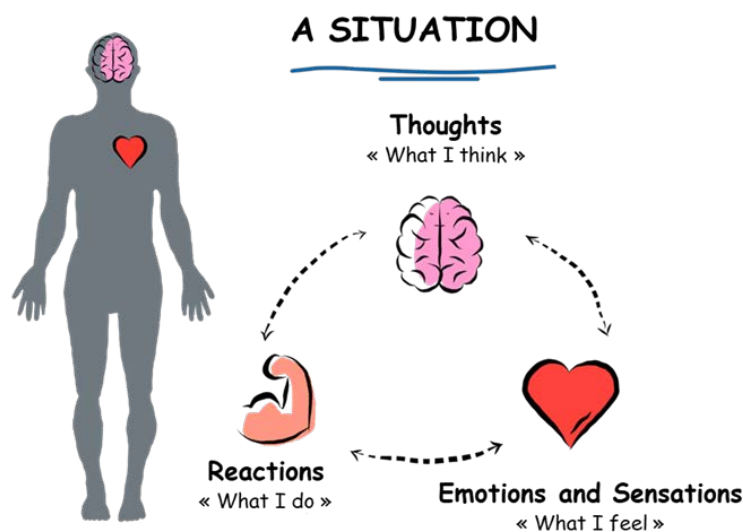
2. To wrap up, ask them what they expect from the program and from you, as the facilitator.



## E. What's going on inside me? (20 min.)

If you would like, use the following video (4:35 min.) to prepare or to explain the concept of perceptions, and then ask the questions below to get the parents talking.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMKGjN67HzU>

1. Ask the parents to turn to the diagram of the cognitive-behavioural approach in their *Handy parent guide* and introduce the diagram. The diagram shows that thoughts, emotions, sensations, reactions, and behaviours are intimately linked. The way a person interprets a situation will influence their emotions and sensations, not to mention their reactions to the situation (Beck, 2011).



2. Give the following example: You're home at night by yourself. You hear a noise, which you interpret as someone trying to break in. What sensations and emotions are you experiencing? What do you do? Repeat the scenario but change the interpretation: The cat probably knocked something over. What sensations and emotions are you experiencing? What do you do?
3. Explain that, depending on how we interpret a fact (our thoughts), we will experience different emotions and react differently. Explain that this mechanism is constantly "on" and that to control stress or anxiety, we sometimes need to learn how to see things differently.
4. Explain to the parents that it's important to remain empathetic, to listen to their child, and not to make fun of their thoughts, feelings, or behaviours. The child's distress is real. They're stuck in their perception of things, and their emotions and sensations are validating their interpretation of the situation. Often, their thoughts aren't entirely wrong, but they are overblown and not very helpful.
5. Show the parents a list of questions that can help their child reformulate their thoughts into more helpful, useful, and realistic ones. These questions can be found in their *Handy parent guide*. They can also use their own questions.

6. Tell them that their child has identified three questions to help them challenge their way of thinking Urge the parents to help their child use these questions whenever they feel their child is engaging in unhelpful thinking.

- Am I sure about what I'm thinking?
- Does what other people think really matter?
- Am I jumping to conclusions in deciding that this is a disaster?
- Do I tend to exaggerate?
- Is it realistic to expect everything I do to be perfect?
- What's the worst thing that can happen? What can I do to prepare myself? If the worst happened, would it really be that terrible?
- How would this situation affect my life?
- Would I remember it a year from now?
- Is there another way of looking at the situation? Is there anything positive about it? What can I learn from this situation?
- Do I have control over any part of this situation? How could I gain control?
- Have I experienced a similar situation in the past that turned out well? What strategies did I use?
- Do I tend to use extreme words like always, impossible, never, or forever?

## F. Conclusion and invitation (5 min.)

1. Wrap up the workshop by asking the parents what they learned. Encourage them to start talking to their child about their comfort zone and their thoughts, in order to help them understand them better. For now, it's important to listen and observe. End by reminding them of the importance of baby steps.

