

AN OUT-OF-ZONE EXPEDITION

Coping with anxiety

Target competency	Manage one's emotions and stress effectively
Cross-curricular competency (QEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construct their identity
General objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become familiar with the notions of comfort and avoidance zones • Use strategies to reduce and cope with anxiety



REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS WORKSHOP

In the last workshop, we talked stress and anxiety. Do you remember the challenge I gave you? Tell me how it went.

* The challenge was to use meditation to calm yourself during a moment of stress or anxiety.

IN THE LIVES OF LEO AND CHARLIE

This morning at Camp OFF-TRAIL, final preparations are happening for the expedition to Mount Jacques-Cartier. Ms. Nathalie the cook explains: "I'll make you a super nutritious breakfast. You'll need energy all day long."

As she serves Leo and Charlie, she notices that they seem off this morning. They look tired. Worried, she takes a moment to question them: "What's wrong with you two?"

"We didn't sleep all night... Leo and I feel like we're about to climb Mount Everest! We haven't stopped thinking about it since yesterday... we're afraid we won't make it," worries Charlie.

Feeling panicky, Leo confirms: "She's right! We're totally unprepared! What if we run out of supplies, have a big storm, get hurt, or even worse, get lost? I'm not sure I want to go anymore!"

Charlie agrees: "Me neither."

Ms. Nathalie brings them back gently: "I understand your concerns, but we've planned the expedition carefully so there's nothing to worry about. Go eat and then we'll talk."

Charlie and Leo sit down to eat, but they don't feel any more confident.

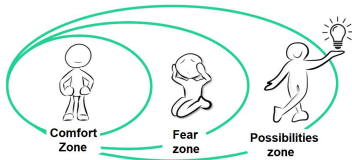
Charlie exclaims: "We have to find some way to get out of this hike!"

"Yes. But how?" asks Leo.

Charlie lists a few ideas: "We say we have to visit our grandparents in the hospital. Or we tell them we broke an ankle. Oh no, I've got a better idea. We pretend to have terrible heartburn!"

DID YOU KNOW?

The **comfort zone** is the zone where students **feel comfortable** or on familiar ground. To succeed in expanding their comfort zone, students have to break through **their fear zone**. In order to avoid fear, students may tend to return to their comfort zone; this is known as **avoidance**. The more a student avoids fear, the more their comfort zone shrinks **and the more their fear zone expands**. On the other hand, the more a student succeeds in confronting their fears, the more their comfort zone will expand and their fear zone will shrink. They'll discover a world of possibilities!



(Inspired by White, 2009)

Although at first glance avoidance seems to calm anxiety, it ends up exacerbating it.

So it's important to help students cope with anxiety-provoking situations. We call this process **exposure** (therapy). Anxiety is very uncomfortable, but not dangerous!

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Tell the students that Leo and Charlie seem to be feeling anxious about the hike up Mount Jacques-Cartier. Mention that this expedition will take them out of their comfort zone. Ask the students:
 - What do you think a comfort zone is?
2. Take a few answers, then complement them with the following:

The comfort zone is where you feel good or on familiar ground. These include, for example, the relationships, activities and places you know, where you know what to do and where you don't ask yourself too many questions. In short, it's when you feel comfortable (inspired by White, 2009). Sometimes, certain situations require you to step out of your comfort zone and into your fear zone. To illustrate the different zones, ask the students to try this visualization. Use the verbatim presented on the *Visualizing the cliff* supplementary sheet, below, to guide the visualization activity, or play the following audio: https://sante-mentale-jeunesse.usherbrooke.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/HPp1_6.3_visualizing-ix.mp3
3. After the visualization, explain to the students that the blanket where the group was having lunch is like the comfort zone; a place where you feel good, safe and balanced. Certain situations can make you lose your balance and step out of your comfort zone, like when you thought about jumping off the cliff. That represents your fear zone. Novel situations can seem more difficult, and it's normal not to know how to react at the time, to be afraid of the unknown, and to feel uncomfortable. Often, this is when you feel the urge to run away, to avoid the situation and return to the warmth of your comfort zone. However, when we move beyond our fear zone and allow ourselves to try out a new situation, we enter the possibilities zone (learning zone). The first time is often the hardest, but when you do it a second and a third time, it gets easier and easier. *Facilitation strategy: Some students may not feel anxious about visualizing the cliff. In this case, you can add to the discussion with a few examples of anxiety-provoking situations, such as anticipating that there might be a rumor about you at school, or a negative comment about you on social networks.*
4. Next, to learn more about stress and anxiety, offer the students a short TRUE or FALSE quiz. Facilitate the quiz using the *Questionnaire* supplementary sheet and the slide show.
5. Now, ask the students:
 - Can you tell me about a time when you had to step out of your comfort zone? Did you feel like running away?
 - What can you do to help yourself cope with anxiety-provoking situations?
6. Take the students' answers and complement them using the *Ways to reduce and cope with anxiety* handout. Give a copy to each student, so they can refer to it as needed.

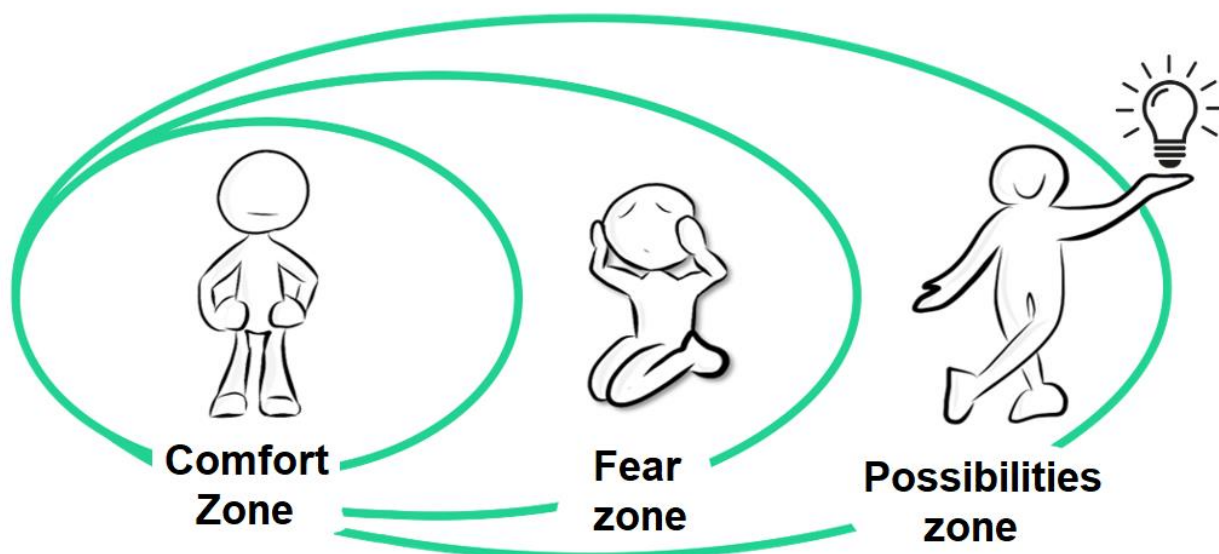
CHALLENGE

Suggest the following challenge:

- Before the next OFF-TRAIL workshop, when you realize you want to flee or avoid an uncomfortable situation, try to use at least one way to reduce or cope with your anxiety.

ENABLING REINVESTMENT

When a student tries to avoid a task, an outing or an anxiety-provoking situation, work with them to find ways to help them face the situation, instead of running away from it. Help them get out of their comfort zone, one step at a time, by setting small goals. You can use the following comfort zone image to remind them of the importance of facing their fears.



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SUPPLEMENTARY SHEET

Visualizing the cliff

Somewhere in this classroom is a place where you can get comfortable and be in your own bubble. Whether it's your chair or elsewhere, take the time to settle in and close your eyes. To visualize is to allow yourself to imagine yourself elsewhere, being, living, doing or feeling something in particular. Before starting this visualization, take a few deep breaths to help you relax. Let the words you hear guide you to a place where you can better understand the comfort zone.

It's summertime. Summer vacation has been good for you. The weather is wonderful today. The sun is shining brightly. There's nothing to disturb you, not even any mosquitoes nearby. You're with your group of friends on the shore of a beautiful lake. The water is clear. The lake makes you want to go swimming. You can imagine how nice the water is, and it's just the right temperature.

You and your friends have arrived on an island of very large, raised rocks in the centre of the lake. All around you are a series of springboard-high cliffs overlooking the lake. Your parents dropped you off by boat earlier this morning, so you could spend part of the day there. You're comfortably seated on a big blanket, eating an excellent lunch, chatting, and reading a little. It's a hot day and you really want to go for a swim. Suddenly, one of your friends stands up, looks around and shares with you her desire to jump into the water. She knows this lake well. She knows it's deep and there are no obstacles. She's already jumped off this rock several times during the summer and knows there's no danger. Without waiting, she jumps into the water, right before your surprised eyes.

You saw her jump. You even had time to count four long seconds. She invites you to jump in and join her. You approach the edge and look at the distance between your feet and the water. It looks so high. You want to swim so badly, but at the same time you feel your stomach tighten, your heart beat faster and your hands get clammy. You feel fear welling up inside you. You could go back to sitting comfortably where you were a moment ago. After all, you felt very comfortable there. At the same time, you're watching your friend, who's now been joined by other members of your group, having a leisurely swim, and you think it looks so nice. You hesitate. You don't know what you should do. You lift one foot, to try a little. You're afraid of the height and how it'll feel if you jump. Maybe you should go back to lying on the big blanket? Perhaps you could risk stepping out of your comfort zone to discover this new possibility? How about jumping just once? Maybe you could see whether you don't like it or, on the contrary, see that the second time really is easier? What will you do?

Before completing this visualization, take a few deep breaths. Then take a moment to open your eyes, look around gently and return to where you were if you moved.

SUPPLEMENTARY SHEET

True or False quiz game

Ask the students to raise an open hand to indicate True or a closed fist to indicate False.

TRUE OR FALSE?



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- **It's not normal to feel anxiety.**

False. Everyone feels anxious at one time or another, and that's normal. It becomes a problem if it prevents you from functioning properly, if it leads you to avoid certain situations, or if it causes you distress. It is possible to learn to overcome anxiety. The more tools you develop to help you cope with anxiety, the greater your chances of avoiding its long-term consequences.

- **Escaping or avoiding an uncomfortable situation is an excellent way to reduce anxiety.**

False. It's true that in the short term, avoidance is good for you, as the anxiety you feel instantly diminishes.

For example, in the visualization, if you decide to go back to your friends on the blanket, you'll quickly feel the fear and discomfort dissipate. You'll experience a kind of relief.

The problem is that the more you avoid a situation, the more frightening it becomes for you. So, in the long run, avoidance will increase your anxiety.

For example, the next time you're invited to jump off a cliff, you may be even more paralyzed by fear and anxiety than the first time.

- **It's by facing up to our fears that they can be reduced or even eliminated.**

True. This is what we call "stepping out of your comfort zone". It can be very uncomfortable at the time.

For example, in the visualization, if you decide to face the fear you're feeling and jump in spite of it, it's possible that your discomfort will increase during the jump.

But remember, the more you confront the situations that scare you, the less anxiety you'll feel about those situations, and the better you'll feel about the future.

For example, as the day progresses, if you jump off the cliff several times, you'll feel more and more comfortable, confident and proud of yourself. We bet that the next time a friend invites you to jump off a cliff, you'll be a little less scared.

Remember: Anxiety isn't dangerous, it's temporary and it always goes away eventually. So it's best to overcome it!

HANDOUT TO PRINT

Ways to reduce and cope with anxiety

- Adopt helpful lifestyle habits (adequate sleep, physical activity, balanced diet, moments of pleasure and relaxation, etc.);
- Recognize your physical sensations and your first signs of anxiety;
- Change your non-helpful thoughts into helpful ones; learn to see things differently;
- Use strategies to deal with your emotions;
- Face up to anxiety-provoking situations instead of avoiding them, and accept going out of your comfort zone;
- Use concrete ways to calm yourself when faced with a stressful or anxiety-provoking situation:
 - Do a physical activity;
 - Talk to someone about your stress;
 - Laugh with your friends;
 - Try drawing, painting, sculpting or creating;
 - Maintain quality social relationships;
 - Perform a mindfulness or relaxation exercise.

Centre RBC d'expertise universitaire en santé mentale and partners (2021)

