A kid’s guide to fighting worry

This handout reviews several approaches a child can use to combat worry. When used along with the “Coping Skills for Kids” handout, it can be very useful in helping kids manage anxiety.

## Approach vs. Avoidance coping

Humans have different ways to deal with negative feelings, but generally, we can split those ways into two categories: approach coping and avoidance coping.

Both have different advantages and are useful in different scenarios. But overall, approach coping is healthier in the long term than avoidance coping. Avoidance can work really well in small doses and in immediate, short-lived scenarios, but when used too often, it is associated with poorer physical and mental health and is less effective at managing anxiety. Approach, on the other hand, involves looking worry in the eye and saying, “I can handle this.” Approach is linked to much better physical and mental health outcomes over time.

Let’s first look at some examples of each:

### Approach coping

* Active coping
  + This involves taking action to do something about whatever is causing you stress
* Emotional support
  + Finding support from others. Can be humans or animals/pets. Sometimes, even fictional characters (e.g. imaginary friends, book characters, etc.) can provide emotional support. God or other deities can also be emotional supports.
* Use of informational support
  + Learning more about the problems or the stressors. Learning more about anxiety. Learning more about how coping skills work.
* Positive reframing
  + Change your worries into something good (more on this in another section below)
* Planning
  + Having a plan of action for the next time you worry about something. For example, “I’m worried I’ll have a nightmare and wake up afraid.” You may come up with a plan such as, “When I have a nightmare, I will \_\_\_\_\_.” Having a plan of action can reduce anxiety a lot on its own.
* Acceptance
  + This involves accepting that anxiety and worry are normal human emotions, and they are healthy. If we learn that anxiety is good for us, we are more likely to be able to face it and listen to it, rather than avoid it.

### Avoidance coping

* Self-distraction
  + Distraction works great for short-lived, necessary stressors, such as getting shots at a doctor’s visit or for when you are using approach coping to face something stressful but you want to lessen the stress during the exposure. Distraction is only a good idea, though, when it is used **in conjunction** with approach coping. For example, your child with separation anxiety at night may decide they are ready to try sleeping on their own. You use a lot of approach skills to prepare for this, but you might also throw in some temporary distractions during the day to help make the approach coping more manageable.
  + When self-distraction is the only coping skill used, or if it’s used too often or too long, it becomes unhealthy.
* Denial
  + Telling yourself the problem isn’t really a problem can often make things worse. If you ignore anxiety, it will only yell at you louder until it gets your attention. Anxiety *wants* your attention, so give it what it wants (your attention), and then it will get quieter and easier to manage. Just because it wants your attention doesn’t mean it’s always telling the truth though. Worry is also a big fat liar! It will tell you all kinds of lies to get you to pay attention. This is why getting information can help. If you learn how to be a scientist and investigate what your worries are telling you, you can see if there really is anything to be worried about. You can also then develop a plan for fixing the thing you’re worried about.
* Substance use
  + Some adults and older kids might use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to avoid their stress. This is always unhealthy. Nothing good ever comes from using substances to avoid stress. The same is true for medicines a doctor might give you for anxiety. Those can definitely be helpful, but **they should never become a substitute for approach coping.** If you are using medicines to avoid stress or anxiety, you are only going to make your anxiety worse, because, like I said before, anxiety really wants your attention. So, if you avoid it, it only works that much harder to get louder. Medicines and alcohol and drugs are like “mufflers” for your anxiety; it’s like putting headphones on to cancel outside noise. Sure, the anxiety is quieter, but if you take off your headphones, you might find that the anxiety has only gotten louder and louder. So, it’s okay to use medicines if the anxiety is so loud you can’t even think straight (it’s not okay to use alcohol and illegal drugs this way though). But **the medicines are a tool to help you use approach coping better, and that’s how they should be used.**
* Behavioral disengagement
  + This is a fancy term to mean you’ve basically given up trying to deal with your worry and/or stress. It’s sort of like saying, “There’s nothing I can do about it, so I may as well just sit back and take it.” This isn’t healthy for you, and can turn into a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, which are both associated with depression. Always remember, there is *always* **something** you can do about worry or anxiety. BUT, also remember that the goal is not to make anxiety go away completely. That wouldn’t be good for you either. Remember, anxiety is good for you. You need it, and that’s a good thing. But just because we don’t want to make it go away completely doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do something about it when it tries to scare us.
* Venting
  + Venting involves sharing how you feel or just getting it out of your system. A lot of people think that venting helps, but research shows that venting alone actually makes things worse over time (or, at least, it doesn’t make things better). Think about it this way. Imagine you have a room that is a closed system. No air gets in or out of the room, but there is a vent that circulates the air in the room to keep it moving. At first, this vent feels okay. It’s blowing some air, and the air keeps you cool and comfortable. However, over time, that air starts to get stuffy and uncomfortable. Our bodies release moisture, and there is also going to be some dust and other things in the environment. In this closed room, the vent is just sucking in all of that moisture and dust and then blowing it back into the room. Then, it sucks up even more, and blows it back out. Pretty soon, you’ve got a room that is just multiplying constantly in moisture, dust, and other contaminants. This is what venting is.
  + You can even try this a little bit in your car as an experiment. If you don’t have a driver’s license, ask your parents for help. Inside your car, you should see some buttons that look like the pictures on the next page.

(*Venting – continued)*

*Icon

Description automatically generatedA picture containing car, silver, close

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* To conduct the experiment, get inside your car and make sure the windows are rolled up. Also, make sure the car is not in closed garage or other enclosed space. Get the car outdoors (it’s very dangerous to start a car and leave it running in an enclosed space). Once outdoors, start the car and let it get to a comfortable temperature inside. Once you’re comfortable, turn OFF the A/C (right picture) and turn ON the recirculation (left picture). Next, turn the fan/vent speed up to high, for maximum effect. Now, wait and see what happens. What should happen is that it starts to get pretty stuffy inside. The windows might fog up and it might get pretty uncomfortable pretty quickly. This mimics exactly what I was talking about with venting. Basically, you are stewing in your own untreated sweat, dust, and grime.
* Now, let’s take this metaphor to what happens when we vent anxiety. Venting anxiety or worry or any other negative emotion in a closed mental space just ends up making us stew in our own negative juices. For venting to work properly, the “air” you spit out must be “treated.” This is how the A/C button works. It treats the air to make it cooler or warmer. It also filters out the moisture and other contaminants (to some extent), making it much more pleasant. This is why EMOTIONAL SUPPORT is healthy when venting is not. Sharing our concerns with someone who cares about us and who makes us feel supported is the same thing as the A/C treating stuffy air. Having another person support us is healthy. Venting without the support is not!
* Self-blame
  + The last type of avoidance coping is self-blame. If we spend a lot of time focusing or looking for the things we’ve done “wrong” to cause our stressors or worries, we only end up making things worse. It’s better to be kind to yourself and use approach coping to address the problem.

## Image/Thought Rehearsal

Another effective means for managing worry is to practice your worries in a controlled environment. Rehearsal, then, involves trying to recreate your worries in a safe space, along with a plan of what you will do to minimize the effect of worries during rehearsal. There are lots of different ways to do this. I’ll review a few below:

### Worry Box or Worry Time

Some families employ a Worry Box or Worry Time. In both cases, families choose a certain time of day where everyone is allowed to talk about or write down their worries. During that time, you can say or write any worry you want, without judgment. However, you must also work to “treat” the worry in some way, so that you’re not just “venting” (see above for why venting is bad for you). Different ways to “treat” the worry can include:

1. Changing the worry into something positive.
2. Throwing the worry into a fire and imagining the smoke carrying your worry away
3. Everyone (secretly) puts their worry into a box/container. Then, as a family, people randomly draw different worries. The person that draws the worry then has to work to “treat” the worry in some way. If a person draws their own worry, then can put it back.
   1. This exercise is effective because often we are better at “treating” other people’s worries than we are our own. The rehearsal is effective in that each person gets practice in using the skills, which they can then use for their own worries too.
4. Research how likely the thing you’re worried about actually is. Many things we worry about are extremely unlikely events, and often getting those facts can help us. This is also a great idea for the worry box (#3), and people can make presentations about the facts about other people’s worries. This can be fun, at times, especially if a worry is fairly catastrophically unlikely. Feel free to use humor (also a healthy coping skill). For example, perhaps a worry is “If I don’t get straight A’s, I won’t get into college, may not get a job I want, and could probably end up homeless or living in my parent’s basement forever.” A humorous research presentation on the topic could include photo-editing a high school yearbook photo of Einstein (who was brilliant but did not get Straight A’s) holding up a paper with a B on it, with the superlative “Most Likely to End up Homeless.” If you do use humor, be careful not to make the worrier feel like you are making fun of them.
5. Accept together the reality that the worry is a real, legitimate worry, while encouraging, though, that even if it is a real worry, it doesn’t have to run your life. “Man, everybody worries about that. I do too, but I know I have a plan to address it!” Tell about your plan, or come up with a new plan together.
6. Plan to fight the worry. Most everyone in the modern world has seen the movie *Home Alone,* where Kevin McAlister enacts a complex plan to keep some inept burglars out if his home. If you can suspend disbelief in the practicalities of an 8-year-old’s incredible skills to engineer the various contraptions he made, all working to perfection, then the concept is still useful in that we see a child who looked fear in the eye and just came up with a plan to fight back. If you’ve seen the movie, you know Kevin drew up his plan in a sort of blueprint. Have your child do this too. It can be fun, nonsensical, and fantastical, but the exercise of drawing up the blueprint to fight the worry can still be really useful. Be sure to include at least SOME realistic measures along the way, but also feel free to let your child enjoy the fantastical pieces of the project.

### Nightmare Rehearsal

Nightmare rehearsal is a special type of image rehearsal specific to nighttime fears and nightmares. It is exactly what it sounds like. It involves taking the nightmare during the day, rehearsing it, and changing into something positive. It is a technique that has actually been researched heavily. Research has shown that simple rehearsal itself (without changing the nightmare) can be helpful for some, but that in children it can sometimes enhance fear. So, an important step is in the changing of the nightmare into something positive. Kids usually need help with this, so, as a parent, you can support this by knowing your child and what they like or what they find funny or relaxing. If children are having nightmares about a shadow monster, they may practice visualizing the monster and changing it into something hilarious.

If you or your child are a Harry Potter fan, you can even pair this practice with the “Riddikulus” or “Expecto Patronum” spell from the novels/movies, which follows similar ideas. In the stories, the Riddikulus spell is cast to ward off creatures called Boggarts, which are shape-shifting mind-readers, able to take the form of whatever frightening thing the person they are attacking think of. Casting Riddikulus involves imagining something else – usually something humorous – and casting the spell, which then turns the Boggart into this harmless, humorous thing instead. This process also works well for nightmares or other “imagined” fears

“Expecto Patronum” is similar, but used against Dementors, who’s special skill is in activating a victim’s worst fears and replaying them over and over in a person’s mind until they are so overwhelmed by fear they pass out, which then allows the Dementors to suck out the person’s soul. A patronus charm only works if the person casting it can manage to think of the happiest memory they can imagine – a truly happy memory – focusing on that, and casting the spell. It is described in the novels as an exceedingly difficult spell to master, because it is – focusing your mind on positive memories even in the face of unrelenting terror is awfully hard – but it is accomplished through practice. The students in Harry Potter get together and practice the spell over and over for a full year (and longer) at school, so they can use it when they need it. The same idea works with rehearsal. By practicing over and over again during the day, children can master the “charms” to ward off “evil.”