UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING
YOUR CHILD'S Anxiety
Anxiety typically begins with a trigger, which may be obvious or subtle (a test, the dark, nighttime, etc.). But the reaction it causes is exaggerated.

Anxiety triggers feelings like fear and panic. The anxiety itself is not real, but the feelings certainly are.

Anxiety causes racing thoughts like: “I can’t cope!” “What if...?” “I’m in danger!” “Something terrible is going to happen!”

Anxiety causes physical sensations like increased heart rate, feeling hot and sweaty, increased pulse and breathing, tight chest, nausea.

Anxiety triggers fight or flight: run away/avoid, fidget, escape, fight/argue, act snappy or irritable.
The goal is not to avoid the trigger, but rather to gently be exposed to it, through a process of systematic desensitization, which gradually and gently exposes the child to more and more contact with the trigger while being supported.

The important message to give to anxious children is that while anxiety they are feeling is not based in reality, the feelings they are feeling (fear, panic, worry, nervousness, overwhelm, terror, dread) are very real indeed.

In order to calm the racing thoughts associated with anxiety, various forms of deep breathing and relaxation techniques are advised (we will cover those later). But just trying to notice that their thoughts are racing is the first thing to clue the child in that anxiety is getting a grip on them.

Anxiety can cause actual physical symptoms like a racing heart, increased breathing/pulse, sweating, nausea, etc. These are very real sensations. When anxiety turns into a panic attack, the child can feel like they are going to die. It is important to reassure them that these feelings are based in anxiety, not reality.

We need to teach the child coping strategies to limit their fight or flight reactions (avoiding/escaping situations, engaging in risky behaviors, limiting activities, becoming overly attached to someone/something).
COPING WITH ANXIETY

KEEP A LID ON IT:
One thing I used with my daughter when her anxiety peaked around age 8 was a worry jar. Each night at bedtime, I would ask her if she had any worries. If she did, she would tell them to me and figuratively pull them out of her head, and stuff them into a clear plastic bug-catching jar with a screw on lid. Then we would say a prayer asking God to empty the jar while she slept. Each morning, to her delight, the worry jar was empty.

JUST THROW IT OUT:
When my daughter was particularly bothered or angry about a worry, rather than place her worry in the jar, she would prefer to throw it into the fan that she sleeps with for white noise. As she threw the worry into the fan, she would envision the worry getting chopped up into little tiny bits so that it did not affect her any longer.

BOX BREATHING:
When we focus on our breath, our bodies naturally calm down. In this exercise close your eyes, inhale to a count of 4, hold your breath for a count of 4, exhale for a count of 4 and wait to a count of 4 before breathing in again. As you practice with eyes closed, imagine drawing the line of the box up the left side with the inhale, across the top while you hold your breath, down the right side while you exhale, and across the bottom while you wait to inhale again.
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PINCH YOUR HAND:
This technique was also taught to me by Michael Delman and is based in reflexology. Find the Hand Valley Point - the skin between the thumb and pointer finger. Applying pressure here is helpful to relieve anxiety in the moment or to relax your child proactively. For example, squeezing this pressure point right before a test can help them to be ready for the test with less anxiety.

TRACE YOUR HAND:
This technique was taught to me by Michael Delman, a principal at a private high school. When your child is nervous, they can trace their hand. As they go up their thumb, breathe in, down the thumb, breathe out. Up the pointer finger, breathe in. Down the pointer finger, breathe out and so on for each finger. This can be done anywhere they need to calm down, especially in school with their hand under the desk where no one will notice.

PLATFORM TECHNIQUE:
This meditation exercise helps to manage racing thoughts. Imagine yourself sitting on a train platform by yourself. As a thought occurs, a train pulls into the station. Resist the urge to get on the train (to follow the thought). If you stay on the platform (the present moment), that thought will leave (pull out of the station). Then a new thought (train) will arrive. Resist the urge to get on that train as well. By not getting on the thought trains, we “train” ourselves to stay in the present moment and not get hijacked by our thoughts.
The information contained in this handout is only the TIP of the iceberg. There is so much more to learn about in order to truly and fully help your child to deal with and manage their anxiety.

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WARMLY,
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