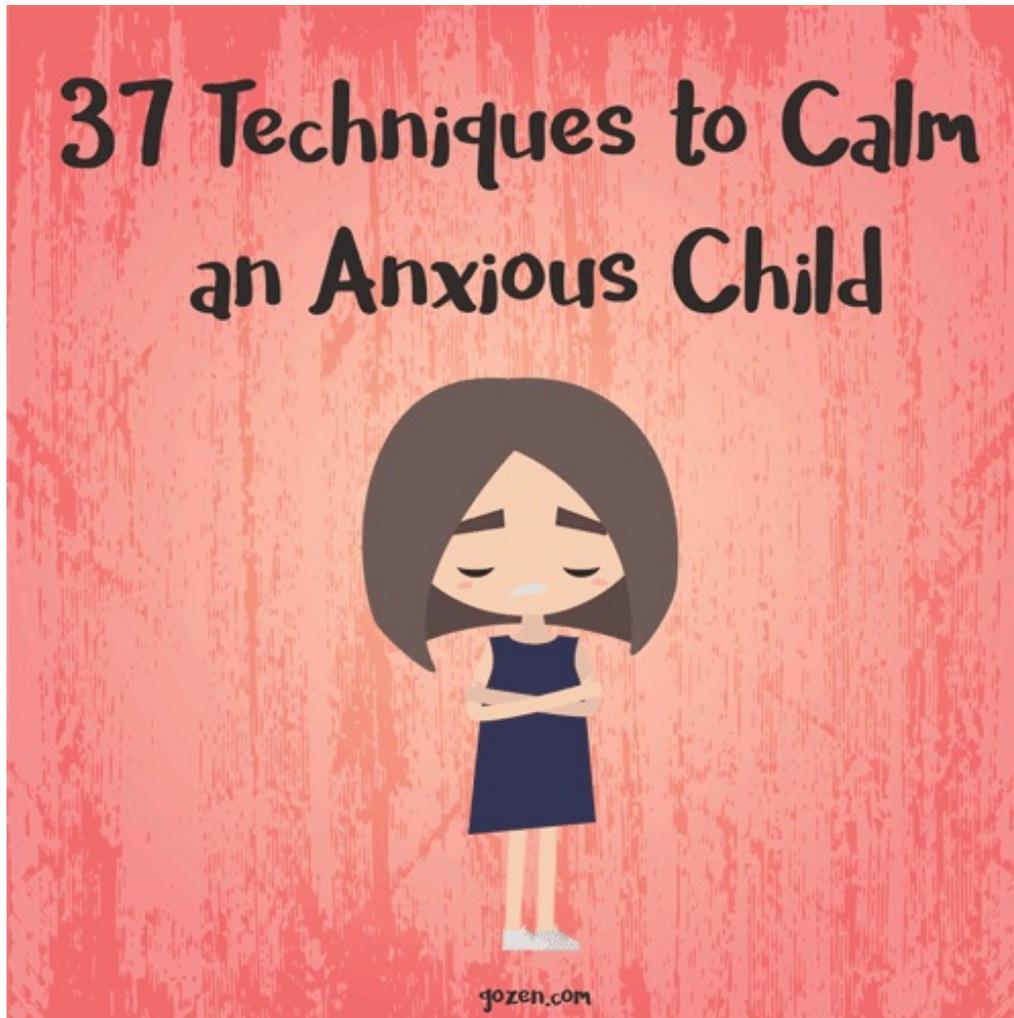


37 Techniques to Calm an Anxious Child

blogs.psychcentral.com/stress-better/2016/07/37-techniques-to-calm-an-anxious-child

Renee Jain, MAPP

March 29,
2019



Imagine, you are driving in the car. You look in the rearview mirror and see your child trying to shrink into her seat.

“What’s wrong?” you ask.

“I don’t want to go to the birthday party.”

“But you’ve been excited all week. There will be cake and games and a bounce house. You love all of those things,” you try to reason.

“But I can’t go. There will be lots of people there I don’t know. No one will play with me. My tummy hurts.”

Sound familiar? As a parent of an anxious child, you might regularly find yourself in situations where no matter what you try, what effort you make, what compassion you offer, or what love you exude, nothing seems to help quash the worry that is affecting your little one’s everyday interactions.

In my work with anxious children, I have found it tremendously beneficial for both parents and kids to have a toolkit full of coping skills from which to choose. As you know, every child is different and some of the tools described below will resonate more than others. When you pick one to work with, please try it at least two to three times before making a judgment on whether it suits your child and family.

Here are 37 techniques to calm an anxious child:



Write it out

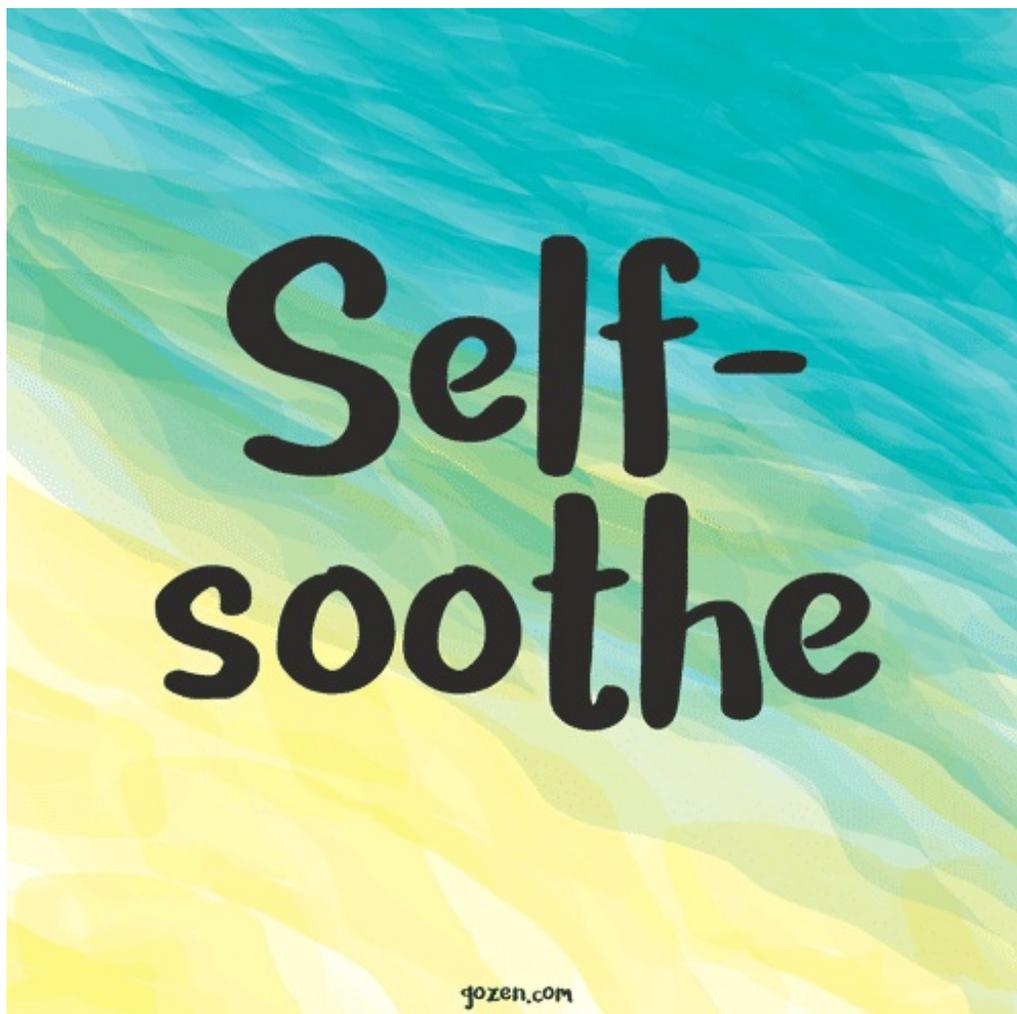
1. *Write it out and then throw it out*—In a study published in Psychological Science, people were asked to write what they liked or disliked about their bodies. One group of people kept the paper and checked it for errors, whereas the other group of people physically discarded the paper their thoughts were written on. The physical act of discarding the paper helped them discard the thoughts mentally, too. Next time your child is anxious, have her write her thoughts on a paper and then physically throw the paper out. Chances are, her perspective will begin to change as soon as the paper hits the trash can.
2. *Journal about worries*—Researchers at Harvard found that writing about a stressful event for 15 minutes, for four consecutive days, can lessen the anxiety a person feels about that event. Although the person may initially feel *more* anxiety about the stressor, eventually the effects of writing about anxious events relieved anxious symptoms for up to six months after the exercise. Make journaling about anxious thoughts a habit with your child.
3. *Create “worry time”*—In the movie *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O’Hara often says, “I can’t think about that now. I’ll think about it tomorrow.” A similar concept works for anxious children. Set aside a designated “worry time” for 10-15 minutes on a daily basis. Choose the same time each day and the same spot and allow your child to write down his worries without worrying about what actually constitutes a worry. When the time is up, have him drop the worries in a box, say goodbye to them, and move on to a new activity. When your child begins to feel anxious, remind him that it isn’t “worry time” yet, but reassure him that there will be time to review his anxiety later.
4. *Write a letter to yourself*—Dr. Kristen Neff, a professor at the University of Texas, Austin, and a pioneer in the field of self-compassion, created an exercise where people were asked to write a letter as though *they* were not experiencing stress or anxiety but rather their best friends were experiencing it. From this perspective, they were able to examine themselves and their situation objectively and apply a level of compassion to themselves that they often reserve for other people. Next time your child feels anxious, have them write a letter that begins “Dear Me” and then ask them to continue writing in the voice of their best friend (real or imaginary).



Have a debate (with yourself)

5. *Talk to your worry*—Personification of a worry allows children to feel as though they have control over it. By giving anxiety a face and a name, the logical brain takes over and begins to place limitations on the stressor. For young children, you can create a worry doll or character for them that represents worry. Next time a worried thought arises, have your child try to teach the doll why they shouldn't worry. As an example, check out [Widdle the Worrier](#).
 6. *Recognize that thoughts are notoriously inaccurate*—Psychologist [Aaron Beck](#) developed a theory in behavioral therapy known as “cognitive distortions.” Simply put, these are messages our minds tell us that are simply untrue. When we help our children recognize these distortions, we can begin to help them break them down and replace them with truths. Read through and use this list as a reference with your child. Depending on their age, change the language for greater accessibility.
- **Jumping to conclusions:** judging a situation based on assumptions as opposed to definitive facts

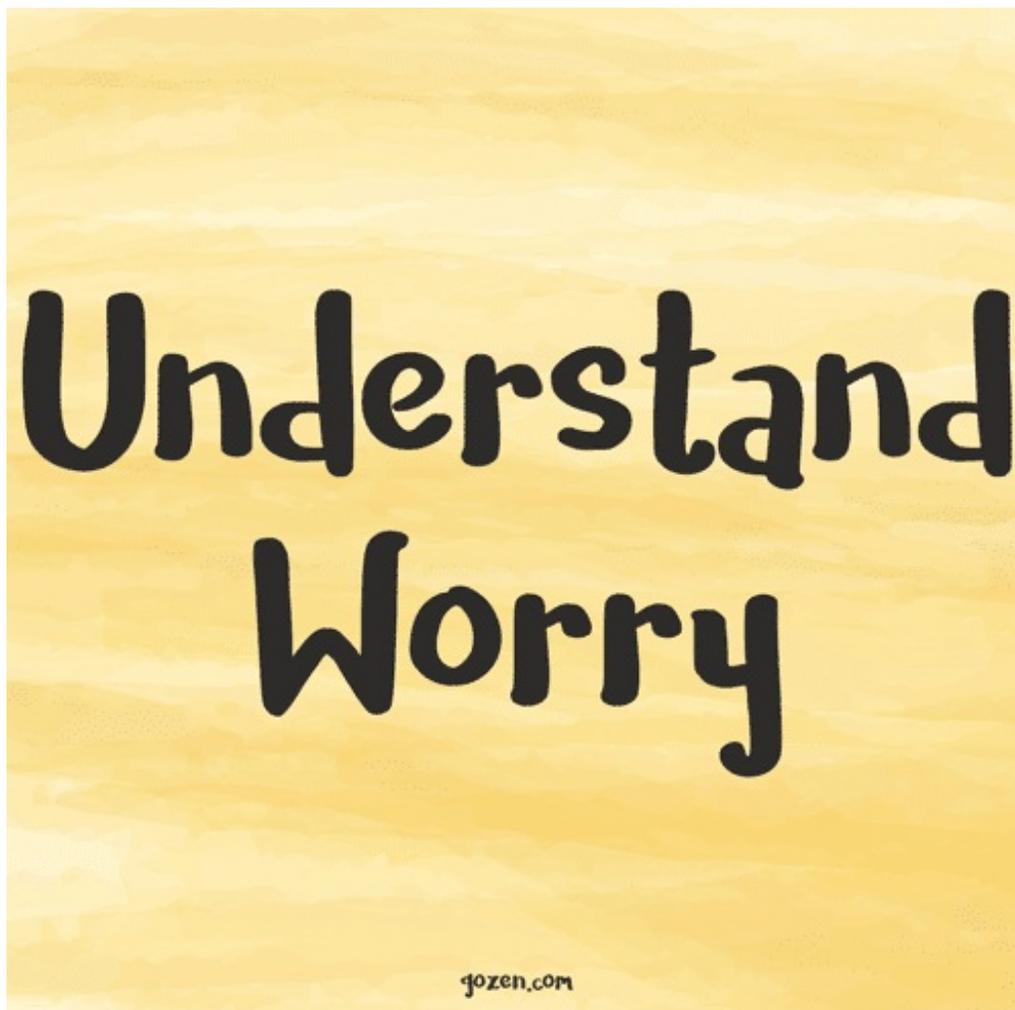
- **Mental filtering:** paying attention to the negative details in a situation while ignoring the positive
- **Magnifying:** magnifying negative aspects in a situation
- **Minimizing:** minimizing positive aspects in a situation
- **Personalizing:** assuming the blame for problems even when you are not primarily responsible
- **Externalizing:** pushing the blame for problems onto others even when you are primarily responsible
- **Overgeneralizing:** concluding that one bad incident will lead to a repeated pattern of defeat
- **Emotional reasoning:** assuming your negative emotions translate into reality, or confusing feelings with facts



Self-soothe

7. *Give yourself a hug*—Physical touch releases oxytocin, a feel-good hormone, and reduces the stress hormone cortisol in the bloodstream. The next time your child feels anxious, have her stop and give herself a warm hug. She can hug herself discreetly by folding her arms and squeezing her body in a comforting way.

8. *Rub your ears*—For thousands of years, Chinese acupuncturists have used needles to stimulate various points in a person's ears to treat stress and anxiety. Similar benefits are available to your child simply by having him apply pressure to many of these same points. Have him begin by lightly tracing the outline of his outer ear several times. Then using gentle pressure, have him place his thumbs on the back of his ears and his forefingers on the front. Have him count to five and then move his finger and thumb downward to a point just below where they started. Have your child repeat the process until he has squeezed both earlobes for five seconds each.
9. *Hold your own hand*—Remember the safety you felt when you held your parent's hand as you crossed the street? As it turns out, hand-holding has both psychological and physiological benefits. In one study, researchers found that hand-holding during surgery helped patients control their physical and mental symptoms of anxiety. Have your child clasp her hands together, fingers intertwined, until the feelings of anxiety begin to fade.



Understand worry

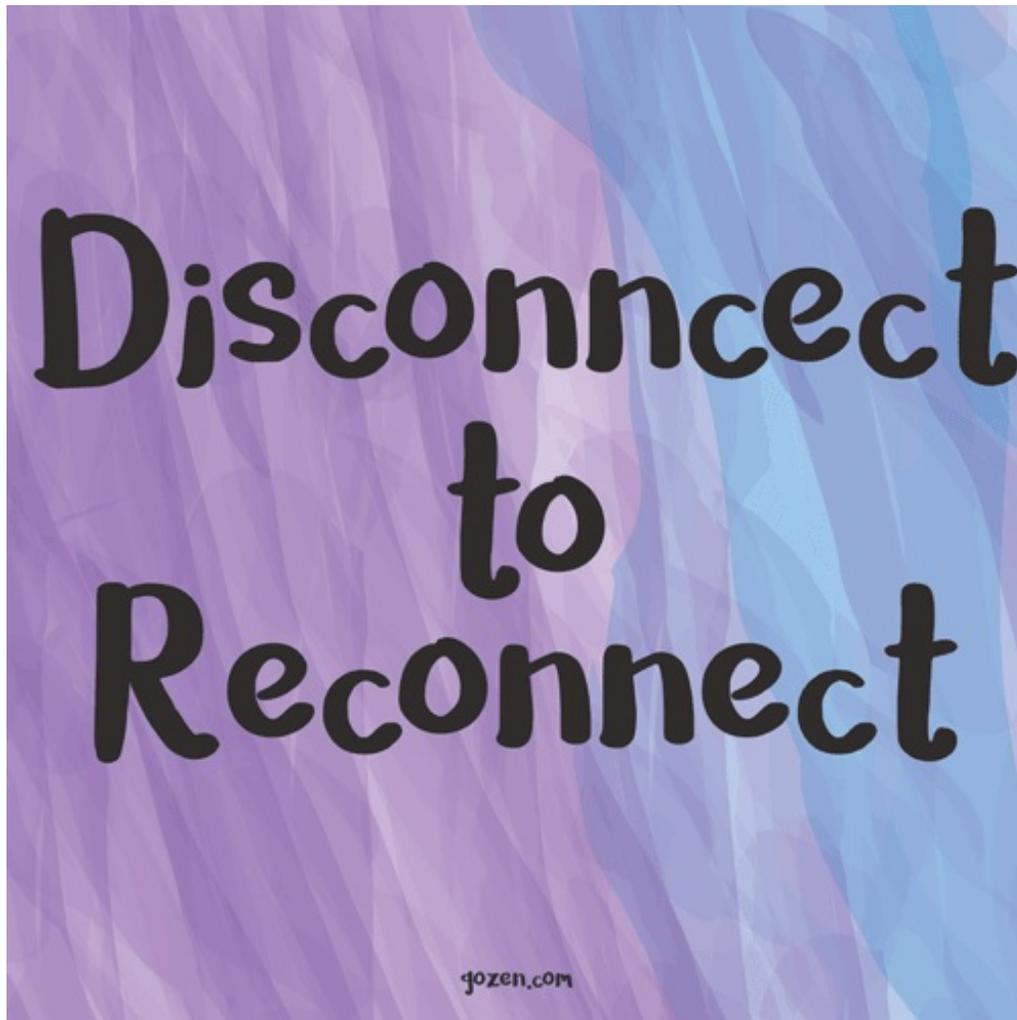
10. *Understand the origin of worry*—Anxiety and worry have biological purposes in the human body. Once upon a time, anxiety was what kept our hunter and gatherer relatives safely alert while they searched for food. Even today, worry and anxiety keep us from making mistakes that will compromise our safety. Help your child understand that worry and anxiety are common feelings and that he gets into trouble only when his brain sounds the alarm and he does not allow logical thoughts to calm him down.
11. *Learn about the physical symptoms of worry*—We often think of anxiety as a mental state. What we don't think about is how worry creates physical symptoms as well. Cortisol and adrenaline, two of the body's main stress hormones, are produced at a rapid rate when we experience anxiety. These are the "fight or flight" hormones that prepare our bodies to either fight or run from something dangerous. Our heart rates increase, and our breathing gets fast and shallow; we sweat, and we may even experience nausea and diarrhea. However, once your child is familiar with the physical symptoms of anxiety, he can recognize them as anxiety and use any of the strategies in this article rather than worry that he is sick.



Use your body

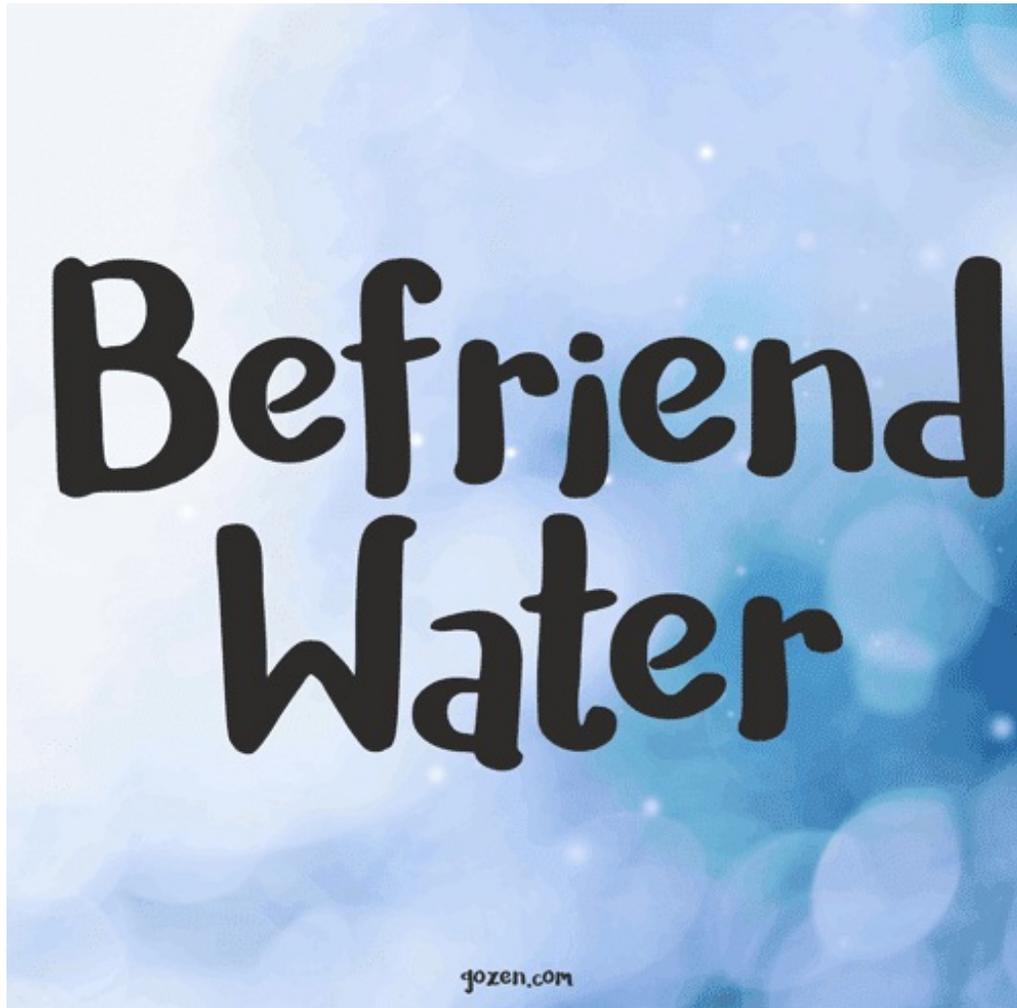
12. *Stretch*—A study published in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* showed that children who practice yoga not only experience the uplifting benefits of exercise but also maintain those benefits long after they are done with their practice. Even if you or your child is unfamiliar with yoga poses, the process of slow, methodical stretching can provide many of the same benefits.
13. *Push against a wall*—For some children, trying to breathe deeply or relax through meditation only causes more anxiety. “Am I doing this right? Everyone thinks I’m crazy. I forgot to breathe that time.” The act of physically tensing the muscles will create a counterbalancing release when they are relaxed, resulting in the relaxation more passive methods may not provide. Have your child push against the wall with all of her might, taking great care to use the muscles in her arms, legs, back, and stomach to try to move the wall. Have her hold for a count of 10 and then breathe deeply for a count of 10, repeating three times.
14. *Practice chopping wood*—In yoga, the Wood Chopper Pose releases tension and stress in the muscles by simulating the hard labor of chopping wood. Have your child stand tall with his legs wide and arms straight above as though he is holding an ax. Have him inhale and, with the full force of his body, swing the imaginary ax as though he is chopping wood and simultaneously exhale a “ha.” Repeat.
15. *Try progressive muscle relaxation*—This relaxation exercise includes two simple steps: (1) Systematically tense specific muscle groups, such as your head, neck, and shoulders etc., and then (2) Release the tension and notice how you feel when you release each muscle group. Have your child practice by tensing the muscles in her face as tightly as she can and then releasing the tension. Here is a great [script for kids](#) (pdf).
16. *Use the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)*—EFT combines tapping acupressure points in the body with verbalizing positive affirmations. Using his fingertips, have your child gently but firmly tap the top of his head, his eyebrows, under his eyes, under his nose, his chin, his collarbone, and his wrists while saying positive things about his situation. The idea is that the body’s natural electromagnetic energy is activated and associated with positive affirmations, thereby reducing anxiety.
17. *Strike a power pose*—Anxiety makes your child want to physically shrink. However, research has shown that holding a powerful pose for just two minutes can boost feelings of self-confidence and power. Have your child pose like her favorite superhero, with her hands on her hips, ready for battle, or strike a pose like a boss leaning over a table to drive a point home, hands planted on the table top.
18. *Sweat it out*—Exercise releases endorphins, the feel-good chemicals in our bodies. Exercise that is more intense than your child’s normal physical activity level can actually reduce his body’s physical response to anxiety.

19. *Fall into Child's Pose*—Have your child assume the Child's Pose, a pose in yoga that is done by kneeling on the floor and bringing the body to rest on the knees in the fetal position. The arms are either brought to the sides of the legs or stretched out over the head, palms on the floor.



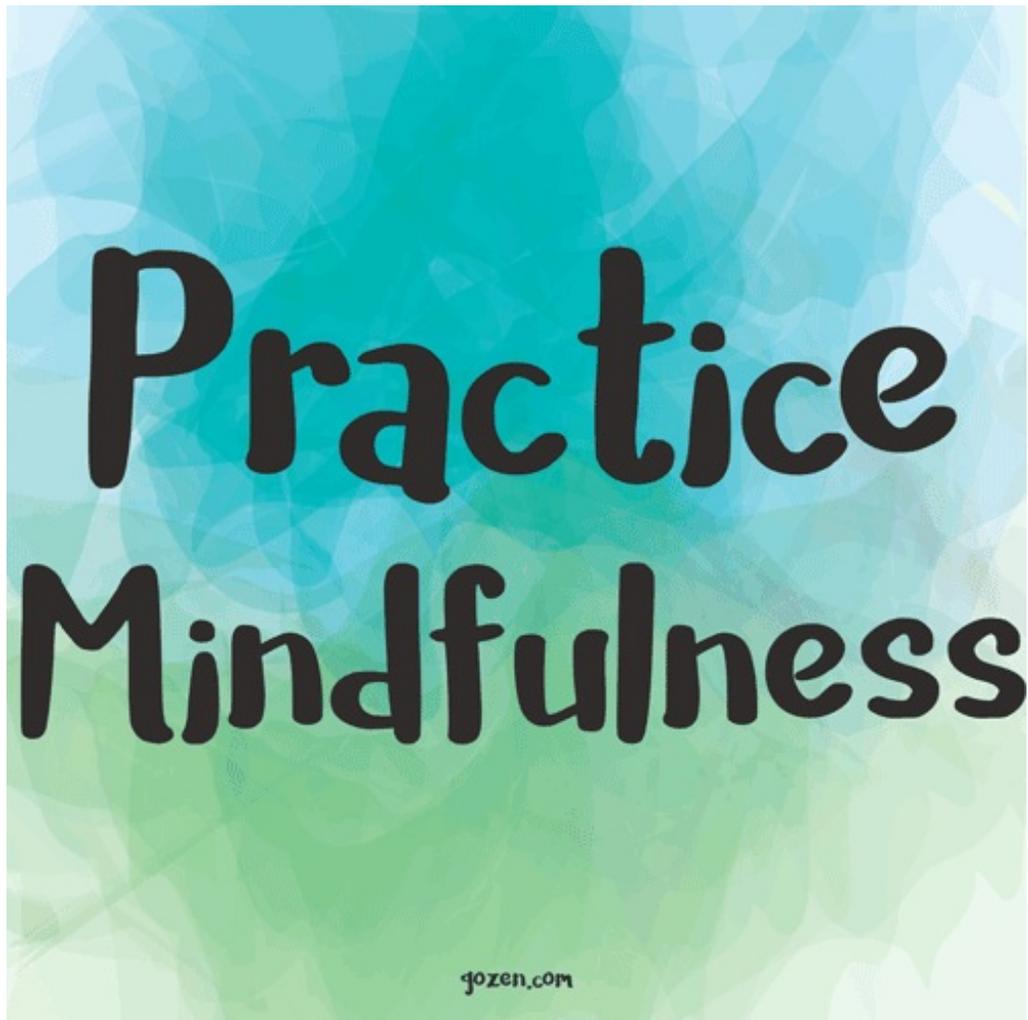
Disconnect to reconnect

20. *Do a tech detox*—Studies show that modern technology is adversely correlated to sleep and stress—especially in young adults. Challenge your child to spend a week without video game systems or smartphones, and encourage her to be more creative with her time.
21. *Walk in nature*—A Stanford study showed that exposure to green spaces has a positive cognitive effect on school children. Going for a walk in nature allows your child to reconnect with tangible, physical objects; calms his mind; and helps his logical brain to take over for his anxious brain.



Befriend water

22. *Drink more water*—Although dehydration rarely causes anxiety on its own, because our brains are 85% water, it can certainly make its symptoms worse. Make sure your child is getting adequate amounts of water in a day. The basic rule of thumb is to drink one-half to one ounce of water per pound of body weight. So if your child weighs 50 pounds, he should drink 25 to 50 ounces of water every day.
23. *Take a cold or hot bath*—Hydrotherapy has been used for centuries in natural medicine to promote health and prevent disease. Just 10 minutes in a warm or cool bath can have profound effects on the levels of anxiety your child is experiencing.



Practice mindfulness

24. *Observe your “train of thoughts”*—Have your child imagine her anxious thoughts are like trains coming into a busy station. Sometimes they will slow down and pass by, and at other times they will stop at the station for a while. If the anxious thought stops at the station, have your child practice breathing slowly and deeply until the train pulls out of the station. As it fades, have your child “watch” as the train pulls away. This exercise teaches children that they don’t have to react to every thought that occurs to them. Some thoughts they can simply acknowledge and allow to leave without acting on them.
25. *Practice a five-by-five meditation*—Have your child use each of his five senses to name five things he experiences with that sense. Again, this exercise roots your child in things that are actually happening rather than in things that *may* happen or *could* happen that are causing him to worry.
26. *Focus on your breath*—The natural biological response to anxiety is to breathe shallowly and quickly. Focusing on breathing slowly and deeply will mitigate many of the body’s stress responses.

27. *Tune in with a body scan*—Have your child close her eyes and check in with all of the parts of her body. Have her talk to each part and ask how it feels and if there is anything wrong. Then have her invite it to relax while she checks in with the other parts. This [animation](#) can be a fun way to practice a body scan meditation with your child.
28. *Practice cognitive defusion*—The process of cognitive defusion separates the reaction your child is having from the event. It gives your child a chance to think about the stressor separately from his reaction to that stressor. Have your child talk about his feelings of anxiety as though his mind is a separate person. He might say something like “My mind does not want to go to the party, so it is making my stomach hurt.” By disconnecting the two, he can then talk to his mind as though it is a person and re-create his internal dialogue.

Have an anxious child? Join us for a LIVE, webinar-style online masterclass Thursday, July 14th @ 1pm EDT: 9 Things Every Parent with an Anxious Child Should Try – [grab a spot here](#).



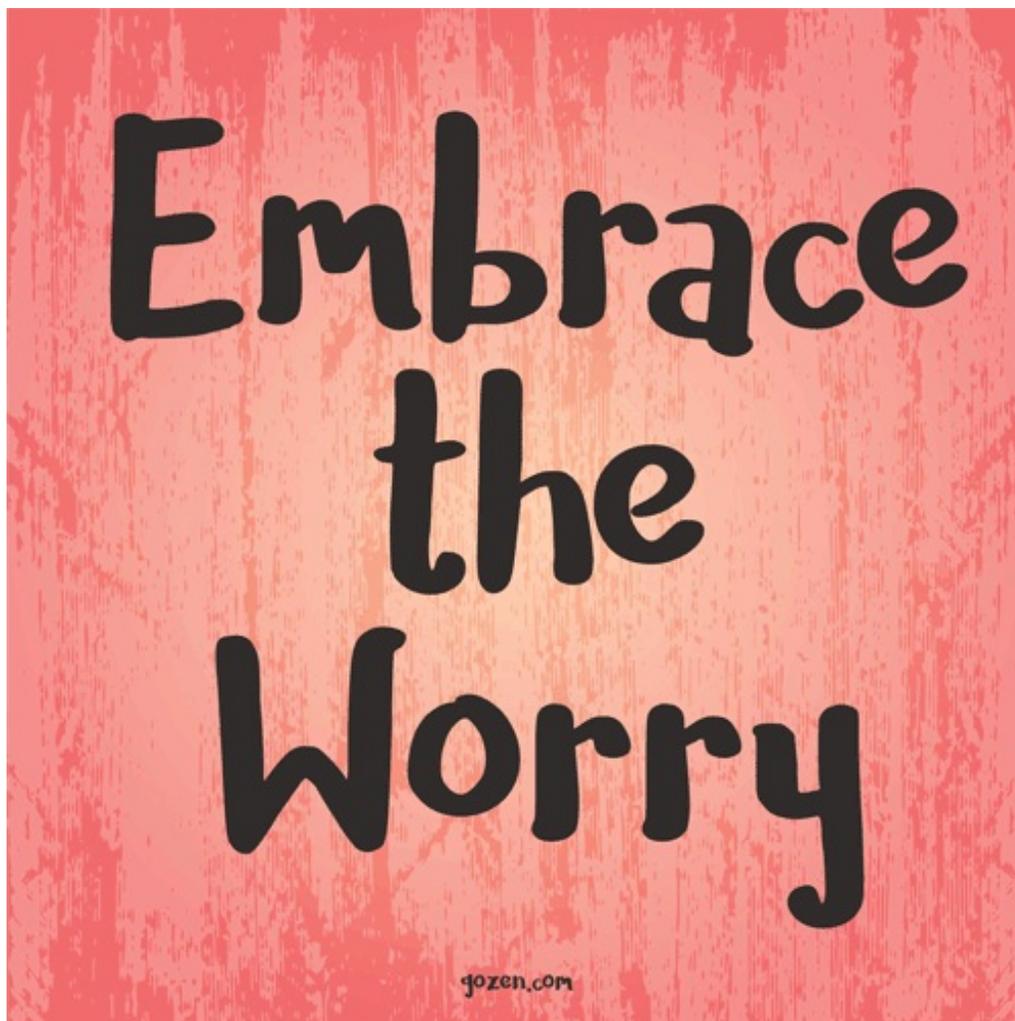
Listen

29. *Listen to music*—It is challenging for your child to feel anxious when she is dancing to her favorite song. Crank up the tunes and sing along! Here is a [loving-kindness meditation](#) set to dance music you can listen to with your child.
30. *Listen to stories*—Avid readers know how difficult it is to pry themselves away from a good book. Listening to audio books can help your child get lost in an imaginary world where anxiety and worry do not exist or are put into their proper perspective.
31. *Listen to guided meditations*—Guided meditations are designed to be soothing to your child and help him relax by presenting images for his mind's eye to focus on rather than focusing on the stressor.
32. *Listen to the uplifting words of another*—Often, anxiety is rooted in a negative internal monologue. Have your child listen to your uplifting words or those of someone else to restructure that monologue into positive affirmations of herself.



Help someone else

33. *Volunteer*—Researchers have long shown that “helper’s high” happens when people volunteer to help others without any expectation of compensation. Whether your child is helping a younger sibling do math homework or helping your neighbor weed her flower bed, volunteering is an easy way to alleviate his feelings of stress or anxiety.
34. *Be a friend and give someone else advice*—Sometimes the advice we give others is really meant for ourselves. Encourage your child to tell you how you should react to a situation similar to what your child might be experiencing anxiety over. If she is worried about giving a presentation in class, have her tell you how to get over your anxiety about a work presentation. The same techniques your child is teaching you will come into play when she is faced with a similar situation.
35. *Turn your focus outward*—Anxiety would have your child believe that he is the only one who has ever experienced worry or stress in a certain situation. In reality, many of his peers are likely experiencing the same feelings of worry. Encourage your child to find someone who may look nervous and talk to her or him about how she or he is feeling. By discussing his anxiety with his peers, your child will discover that he is *not* the only one to feel worry.



Embrace the worry

36. *Know that this too shall pass*—One of the greatest lies the anxious brain tells your child is that she will feel anxious forever. Physiologically, it is impossible to maintain a high level of arousal for longer than several minutes. Invite your child to sit by you, and read a story or simply watch the world go by until the feelings of anxiety start to fade away. It sounds simple, but acknowledging that the “fight or flight” response won’t last forever gives it less power when your child begins to feel its effects.
37. *Worrying is part of our humanity*—Anxiety, stress, and worry are all part of what makes us human. These biological and psychological responses are designed to keep us safe in situations we are not familiar with. Reassure your child that there is nothing wrong with feeling anxiety, that it simply alerts his body so that he can be on the lookout for danger.

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