

Understanding Anxiety for Young People in Out-of-Home Care

A Feeling Better Initiative

For most people, stressful things can trigger worries. We can worry about losing people we care about, our relationships with friends or family, being bullied, feeling safe or even natural disasters. The anticipation of these can often impact other parts of our life, cause panic or intense fears of things associated with past frightening experiences. At worst, anxious thoughts and memories can repeatedly intrude throughout the day, and during sleep, making it harder to feel calm and achieve or do things.

Given the number of scary/traumatic experiences young people in out-of-home care may have had and/or currently exposed to, it is important to recognise and understand anxiety, what could be causing it (triggers which are hard to know without support) and to know what help is out there to manage these challenges.

What is anxiety?

Unsettled feelings, worry or mild anxiety is a normal part of life when people are faced with challenging or frightening experiences. These feelings help us avoid danger. Most young people also feel a little stressed or “psyched up” when facing school exams, an important game, or an activity like hang gliding that may be slightly risky. The mildly anxious feelings can also help us perform at our best. Although everyone experiences a level of worry/anxiety, when it starts to impact upon the ability to do day to day things, that is when it becomes concerning. Some symptoms are listed below.

Feelings such as constantly feeling restless, feeling on edge, feeling overwhelmed, and not feeling confident.

Thoughts racing, frequent worrying thoughts, difficulty concentrating, not thinking clearly, and being distracted or forgetful.

Behaviours like difficulties dealing with criticism and being isolated from others. Avoiding social situations/places/things that may trigger things that have happened in the past and cause worry such as new or difficult situations.

Physical like headaches, feeling restless, unable to relax, shaking, sweating, dry mouth, stomach butterflies or pain, feeling sick, vomiting, diarrhoea, difficulty breathing, shallow and fast breathing (top of the lungs), rapid heartbeat and or staying asleep and waking early. Feeling constantly tired and or tense.

Anxiety can also cause panic, a feeling that may be familiar for young people who have experienced distress where they can't escape. This distress can cause sudden overwhelming fear, and body symptoms like a thumping heart, trouble breathing, shaking, feeling dizzy, feeling sick, which can last for minutes but feels like hours. After this panic we can spend time worrying about having another episode and go to great lengths to avoid situations from which escape is difficult, and so we may not want to leave home.

Anxiety can develop around social situations through a strong fear that they will do something or reveal too much about their experience that leaves them vulnerable to criticism. They may try to avoid judgement by avoiding social gatherings, including school. Alternately, when young people do feel that someone can be trusted, they may become extremely fearful of becoming separated from that person.



Here's how one young person in care described anxiety:

'Anxiety feels like carrying a round multiple bags of heavy rocks, trying not to drop them and not knowing the final destination, the place you can put the rock down safely.'

Why are young people in care more at risk of experiencing anxiety?

Anxiety can create worry about many everyday things that don't seem to worry others. It can create a strong expectation that danger could come from anywhere at any time. For young people in out-of-home care this sense danger may have been in the past, or even still happening now.

Young people in out-of-home care have often been exposed to significantly frightening things more than others their age. For young people who have experienced or witnessed serious threat to self, others and their sense of safety, can mean many of the anxiety related symptoms can be extreme, relentless and overwhelming.

Young people in out-of-home care often experience multiple changes which can also affect them, increasing a sense of anxiety and lack of control.

'It can be helpful to focus on the present, the things that are right in front of you. Use your five senses, sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell.'

Anxiety may increase the risk of developing depression and using ways of coping that may not be helpful such as using alcohol or drugs to reduce the unsettled feelings/thoughts.

Where to go for help

Many people with anxiety experience symptoms of more than one type of anxiety (e.g., Post-traumatic Stress, generalised anxiety, phobias, social anxiety etc), and may experience depression as well. It's important to seek support early if experiencing anxiety. Without support, symptoms can start to take over your life. Thankfully, there are lots of places and people who can help and support you if you are experiencing anxiety.

A lot of young people in care say that reaching out and speaking to someone they trust, like a carer, teacher or sports coach, really helps!

Is there someone in your life you trust and feel like you can talk to? If so, we really recommend talking to this person about what you're going through.

Otherwise, there are great workers you can reach out to:

KidsHelpLine

- 1800 55 1800
- <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>
- A 24-hour free and private phone and online counselling service for people aged 5 to 25.

Headspace

- <https://headspace.org.au/>
- headspace provides information and advice to young people about issues like general health, mental health and alcohol and drugs.

oneplace

- <https://www.oneplace.org.au/>
- oneplace is a free easily accessible online Community Services Directory for Queensland.

Mental Health care plan

Your GP may be able to help you access a mental health plan which will entitle you to up to 10 appointments with a support person like a psychologist or social worker.

Mental Health

Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) specialises in helping children and young people who have complex mental health needs. Talk to your GP or guidance officer and they can help refer you to CYMHS, or to other suitable services.

Here's what one young person had to say about her experience ...

'I'm linked in with a mental health service. I love my worker. She has helped to find and link me in with more supports.'

In a life-threatening situation always phone 000.

Here's some more advice from young people in care ...

'Seek help and build a support network.'