

Community Brain Injury Program for Children & Youth in British Columbia

Tips for Managing Anxiety with Concussion

Anxiety, or worrying a great deal, can be a common problem for teens or children who have had a mild traumatic brain injury such as a concussion. Of course, worrying occasionally is normal, but excessive worrying can use up a lot of energy and be bad for your overall health.

The anxiety can be caused by either direct changes or damage to the brain from the concussion, or as a side-effect of other common concussion symptoms such as memory and concentration problems. The symptoms of anxiety can seem to make the symptoms of concussion worse, and vice versa. This creates a cycle that can be difficult to break.

What Does Anxiety Look Like?

- Increased heart rate, pounding heart
- Sick feeling in stomach (like 'butterflies')
- Difficulty breathing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Sore head, neck or back
- Feeling hot, cold, or both, at the same time
- Red hot face
- Feeling shaky, dizzy or light-headed
- Blurry vision
- Difficulty concentrating or controlling thoughts

Tips for Managing Anxiety

This section is adapted from *Taming Worry Dragons*, by Garland, E.J. & Clark, S.L. (2000), published by Mood and Anxiety Disorders Clinic at BC Children's Hospital. This highly recommended resource booklet is available on loan through the Community Brain Injury Program for Children and Youth library, as well as through the BC Children's Hospital library.

- Time Management
 - › Create a schedule to make sure that everything gets done on time, and that nothing is forgotten; post this schedule in a visible spot
 - › Tick off each item as it is done
- Overcoming Procrastination
 - › Break a large task into small steps, then put these small steps into your schedule
 - › Use a reward system to also increase motivation to get things completed
- Mental Imagery
 - › Visualize yourself "putting your worries away" in a safe place
 - › Visualize pressing the "off" button when you begin to worry
 - › Schedule a short period of time (up to 15 min. or so) to think specifically about your worries, using a timer. Then stop, put your worries away, and get on with the task at hand.



- Relaxation techniques
 - › Practice relaxation techniques such as mental imagery, deep breathing and muscle relaxation: all these can decrease feelings of anxiety and worry.
 - › Use a timer to spend a specific amount of time in practice. Just like learning to ride a bike, you can learn to relax successfully with short periods of practice.
- Sleep patterns
 - › Follow a standard evening routine with the teen or child, night after night
 - › Use a relaxation technique with the child or teen as well to help them sleep better
- Friendships
 - › Close friendships and other social supports can decrease feelings of anxiety
 - › Organize regular opportunities to do quiet activities with one or more friends
- Mental Practice/Rehearsal
 - › Mentally practice an activity that seems to be making you anxious; do it over and over again in your head
 - › Imagine yourself being calm, confident, and successful.
 - › Repeat as often as you wish, particularly with other relaxation tips such as deep breathing
- Healthy Diet
 - › Follow a healthy nutritional diet (see Tips on Healthy Diet)
 - › Eat breakfast, drink lots of water, avoid pop drinks or energy drinks
- Laughter
 - › Laughter helps your body feel more relaxed, and your mind stops worrying
 - › Look for funny situations, joke books, funny movies, and the like to get you laughing
- Physical Exercise
 - › Regular physical exercise reduces anxiety, improves your overall energy, and improves your mood
 - › Do exercise in moderation, however, to avoid making concussion symptoms such as nausea, vision problems, and headaches.
- Predictable Routines
 - › Following a regular daily routine can reduce anxiety and give you a sense of personal control, and of predictability.
 - › Children with anxiety benefit from structured routines, where they always know what will happen next, what to do after lunch, etc.
 - › Post the routines for the day on a board or by the calendar so your child can check it regularly

Relaxation Techniques & Strategies



Here are a few helpful techniques which you and your child or teen can practice. Using these techniques regularly can help reduce anxiety to a much more manageable level, so the child's concussion symptoms can also improve.

Strategies to help with relaxation include deep breathing exercises, mental imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation. Yoga activities and regular meditation practice can also be very helpful strategies.

Deep Breathing

Breathing consciously can be very relaxing. Deep breathing, or belly-breathing, slows down the breathing rate and also lowers blood pressure. It has been shown to help reduce anxiety and depression, and can also increase concentration and focus. It produces a calming effect which can last for quite a long time – which, in turn, can also help you sleep better.

Basic deep breathing exercise (adapted from *Overcoming School Anxiety*, by Mayer, D.P., available from the Community Brain Injury Program for Children and Youth library, or your local library):

1. Find a quiet space and time.
2. Set a timer for 2-3 minutes when you first start.
3. Sit comfortably in a chair, feet flat on the floor (or box), hands resting in your lap, shoulders back.
4. Close your eyes and breathe only through your nose.
5. Slowly inhale and exhale with a 'soft belly': when you inhale, your belly expands significantly, and when you exhale your breath, it relaxes.
6. Focus ONLY on allowing your breath to go in gently, then out of your lungs.
7. Try to slow your thoughts and clear your mind of all busy thoughts. You may find it easier if you concentrate on the word "breathe" and/or see the word in your mind.
8. Repeat the same breathing exercise after a minute or two, with your eyes open, focusing on a point in the room.
9. When you are finished, sit for a minute and think about how you feel.
10. Take a big deep breath, stretch, and get up.

Note: This is only one example of deep breathing. It can also be done in other positions, such as lying in bed, lying on the couch, sitting in a car, and so on. Some people use this technique as a part of their sleep routine.

Mental Imagery

Imagery involves you focusing on a specific image in your mind. This activity can help you relax as you concentrate on the image. It has been found to lower stress, anxiety, heart rate and blood pressure.

Close your eyes and focus on a very calm scene such as a favourite place, a beach or cabin or lake. Children or teens may enjoy picturing themselves sitting on a gently moving swing, lying on a beach in the sun, or flying their favourite kite.

Practice focusing on your favourite image for up to 10 minutes at a time, and work up to 15-20 minutes. Using a timer will make this easier. If your busy brain keeps intruding, gently come back to your favourite place over and over again. With practice, you will find it easier and easier to remain focused.

Here is one example of a guided imagery audio clip available through the website of the MD Anderson Cancer Center:

www.mdanderson.org/education-and-research/departments-programs-andlabs/programs-centers-institutes/place-of-wellness/multimedia/index.html

As with any relaxation strategy or technique, you will need to practice at least several times a week in order to develop the ability to use imagery for relaxation. Make a schedule and try it out for about a month. Evaluate how you feel after using this technique.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

In progressive muscle relaxation, you tighten and relax groups of muscles all over your body, area by area. This methodical exercise helps lower tension and anxiety and can result in improved sleep and overall health.

For example, start at your feet, tighten your toes and feet, hold for a count of three, then relax on a big sigh. Move up to your calves and knees, and do the same. And so on, up your body, your hands, arms, shoulders and back, face, scalp.

This is an excellent activity to use as you lie in bed, ready to go to sleep. You can help your child or teen learn this technique by slowly telling them how to tighten and then relax their muscles, one group at a time, or follow a written guide.

The following is a link to clear instructions on how to practice progressive muscle relaxation, available through the website AnxietyBC. This pdf form can be printed out for your own use.

www.anxietybc.com/resources/pdfs/MuscleRelaxation.pdf

