Anxiety

What is it?

Anxiety means feeling worried, nervous or fearful. We all experience anxiety at times and some anxiety can be helpful. For example, feeling some anxiety before a test, interview or public-speaking can help motivate you to prepare for it.

When someone is threatened or in actual danger, their body has as an alarm system to keep them from harm. It triggers your "flight-fight-freeze" response that helps prepare the body to defend itself. It might have you run from the situation ("flight"), yell or fight back ("fight"), play dead or stay very still ("freeze").

In the absence of immediate danger, our body's 'fight-flight-freeze' response can still get triggered. For example, for some people having to get up and speak in front of a group of people can trigger the body's alarm system in the same way as if there were a real danger.

It's normal for children to have fears as they go through development. For example, many young children are afraid of the dark, afraid of monsters, or have a hard time being away from their parents.

Children and youth often have many more fears than adults, this is normal as they try to make sense of their world. Most childhood fears are normal and go away eventually. It is important to think about age and what is common when considering whether anxiety is becoming a problem.

How do I know?

What does anxiety look like in children and youth?

Below are some examples of what children and youth may experience when they feel anxious:

- Worried thoughts, often about something bad happening
  - *What if Mom doesn't pick me up from school?*
  - *What if I throw up?*
  - *Will everyone laugh at me?*
- Feelings in the body
  - Racing or pounding heart
  - Shallow or fast breathing, hard to breathe
  - Stomach "butterflies" or stomach aches
  - Headaches
  - Dizziness
  - Tense muscles
- Behaviours
  - Avoiding situations, people or objects, or refusing to go places or do things
  - Seeking a lot of reassurance from parents or others
  - Temper tantrums or meltdowns
  - Crying

When does anxiety become a problem? How do I know if it's an anxiety disorder?
Anxiety becomes a problem when it gets in the way of the child or youth's ability to participate in day to day life. For example, children who are so worried about being away from their parents that they are starting to miss school. Another sign that anxiety is becoming a problem is when a child is experiencing a high level of upset or distress over a period of time.

Specifically, it is important to think about:

- the **amount** of anxiety the child is feeling
- the **level** of anxiety
- **how long** it's been going on
- how much the anxiety is **getting in the way** of how they function
- how **distressing** it is for the child and for the family

When the anxiety happens too often and gets in the way of doing things at home, at school or with friends, it's important to seek help.

Anxiety disorders are one of the most common mental health challenges among children and youth. Anxiety comes in different forms, and often children are anxious about more than one thing. Children with other challenges like learning difficulties or challenges paying attention, among other things, are somewhat more likely to experience anxiety than children without those difficulties.

What can be done?
The good news is there are ways to overcome and better manage anxiety so that it doesn't get in the way of life. There are two main treatments that research shows often helps children or youth with an anxiety disorder.

1. Cognitive behavioural therapy **(CBT)** is a structured type of therapy that focuses on teaching children and families how to:

- Identify and challenge anxious thoughts
- Practice facing scary situations by taking one step at a time
- Promote bravery in their children and change patterns of family accommodation

2. **Medications** are sometimes a useful component of treating children and youth with anxiety.

Tips to help children with anxiety
- Work towards having regular routines (morning, school, homework, bedtime).
- Try and be clear with your expectations. Implement consequences that are realistic for the child's age.
- Notice your child's feelings and support your child to identify them.
- Model the positive ways you identify your own feelings and solve problems.
- Try and focus on your own calm when your child is anxious.

- Give specific praise and rewards, even for small steps in facing fears
- Plan ahead for times that may be difficult (getting to school, returning to school after breaks) by starting early with small steps towards the goal
- Model and encourage healthy living habits, including:
    - Regular physical activity
    - A healthy and balanced diet
    - Getting a good night's sleep
    - Stress management and relaxation
    - Healthy relationships
    - Community involvement
    - Social support