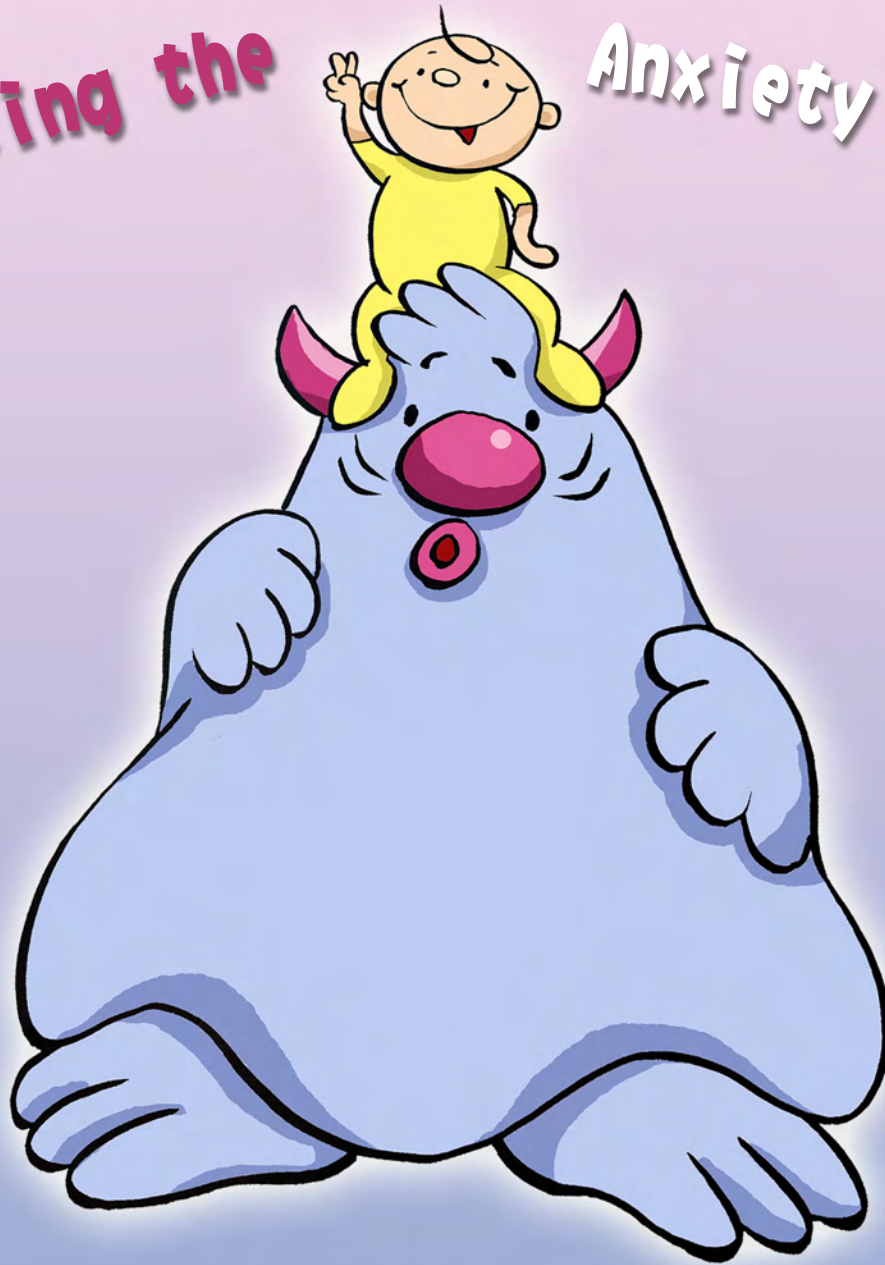
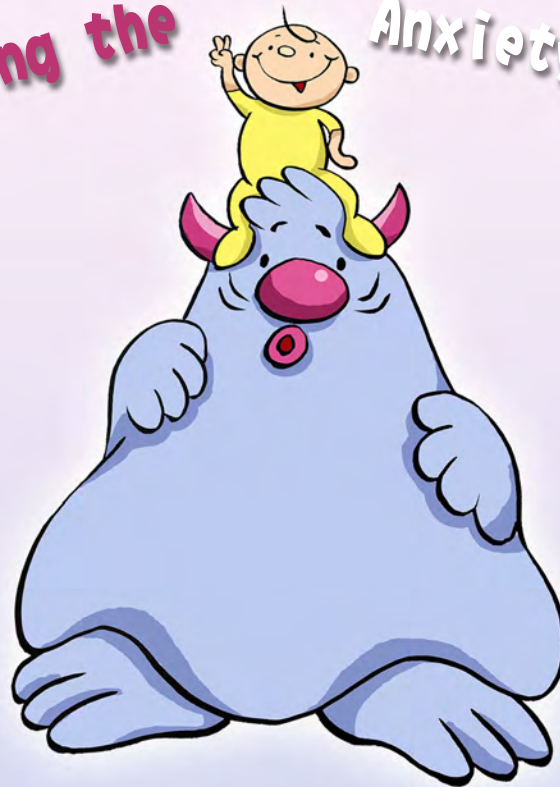


# Fighting the Anxiety Monster



Child Assessment Service, Department of Health

# Fighting the Anxiety Monster



Child Assessment Service, Department of Health

# For Parents



Anxiety is a basic emotion experienced by every one of us. We have all had moments when we feel anxious or worried about something. However, anxiety may become a problem when the feelings are excessive and irrational. Having too much anxiety may cause children to feel uneasy or even affect their learning, as well as social and everyday functioning. For children, anxiety may seem like a scary monster!

While children do feel anxious, they may not understand what the feeling implies. They may also have difficulty explaining their feeling to others. The aim of this book is to help children understand the cause and symptoms of different types of anxiety through stories, so that they may understand what anxiety is and learn how to cope with and overcome the scary monster.

We suggest that parents read this book with your children. Throughout the process, parents may gain more understanding on how children perceive their anxiety. Parents can also take this chance to offer support and encouragement to children. If children have difficulty understanding any parts of the stories, parents can provide elaborations and clarifications.



# Introduction to The Characters



Dave



Hayden



Sue



Bowie

Dave, Hayden, Sue, and Bowie are classmates. They have different kinds of anxiety problems.



Little Q

Little Q is a curious child. He likes to ask questions whenever he doesn't understand something.



Dr. A

Dr. A is wise and knowledgeable. He can always provide answers for Little Q's questions.

The school has organized a camping trip for the students. Dave, Hayden, Sue, and Bowie have all been signed up by their parents.

While most of the students are excitedly preparing for the trip which is coming up in two weeks, Dave, Hayden, Sue, and Bowie are worrying about different things.....





Ugh oh..... The camp site is in a remote and desolate place. There must be a lot of bugs, snakes, or even rats! What if I run into frogs or lizards? I am very scared of frogs and lizards!



Dave

So many students have signed up for the camping trip, but I am really scared of being with a lot of people! What if unfamiliar classmates came up to talk to me? They are going to make fun of me for not being able to express myself clearly. What if I am asked to join group games? Then everyone will know that I am clumsy!



Hayden



We need to camp out in the wild?  
What if it is really dirty there?  
What if my hands get dirty and I can't  
find a place to wash them? Does it mean  
I won't get to take a shower at night?

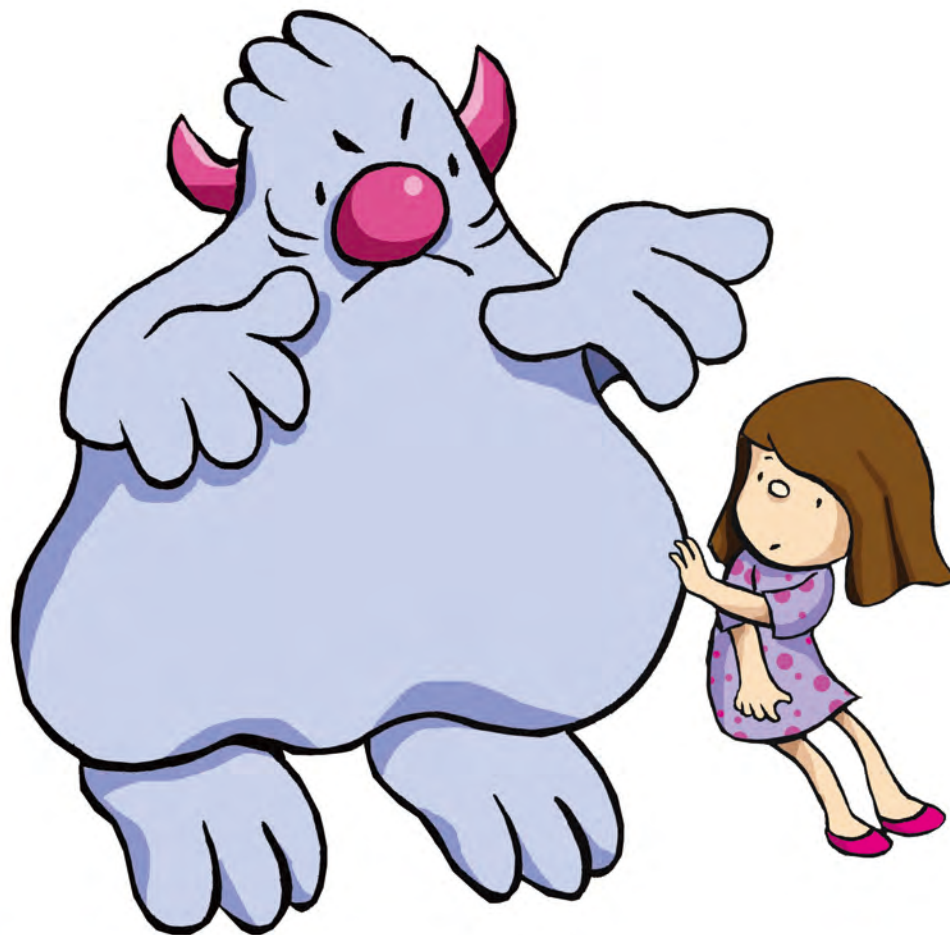
**Sue**



Camping in the wild?  
Where can I hide if it rains?  
What if the camp site gets struck  
by lightning? What if I get lost?  
What if I fall off the hill?  
What if there are robbers?.....

**Bowie**

Kids, do you have worries that are similar to what Dave, Hayden, Sue, and Bowie have?







Dave is really scared of frogs and lizards.

There are quite a few children who are afraid of insects or animals, such as cats, dogs, rats, spiders, cockroaches, bees.....

Other than insects and animals, there are also other things that make people scared, such as height, darkness, blood, getting injections, etc.....



Yes! I am scared of lions and tigers too!



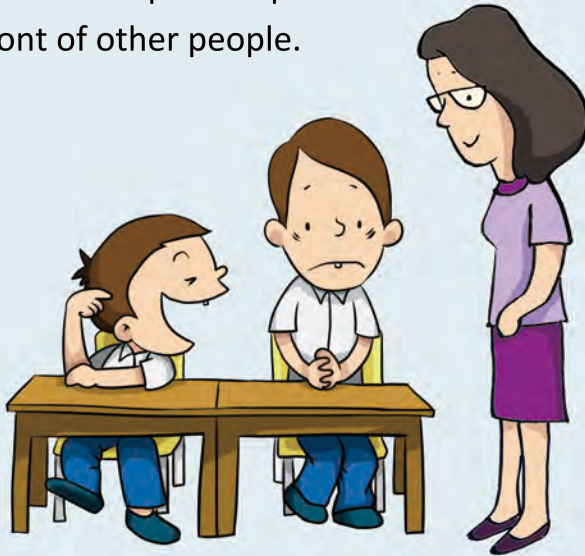
There are things that some people are afraid of. For example, many people are afraid of fierce animals, like lions and tigers, because they may attack us and put us in danger. It is certainly reasonable and understandable to be afraid of them! However, if there are things that make you so scared that it starts to affect your everyday life, then the fear may be out of proportion or unreasonable. You should let your parents know and ask for their help.



Some children, like Hayden, are scared of social situations and dislike being in touch with strangers. They are comfortable and relaxed when spending time with their parents and family members, but get anxious when they need to attend social gatherings.



Some children get even more scared if they perceive that others are paying attention to them or evaluating their performance, or if they have to speak or perform in front of other people.



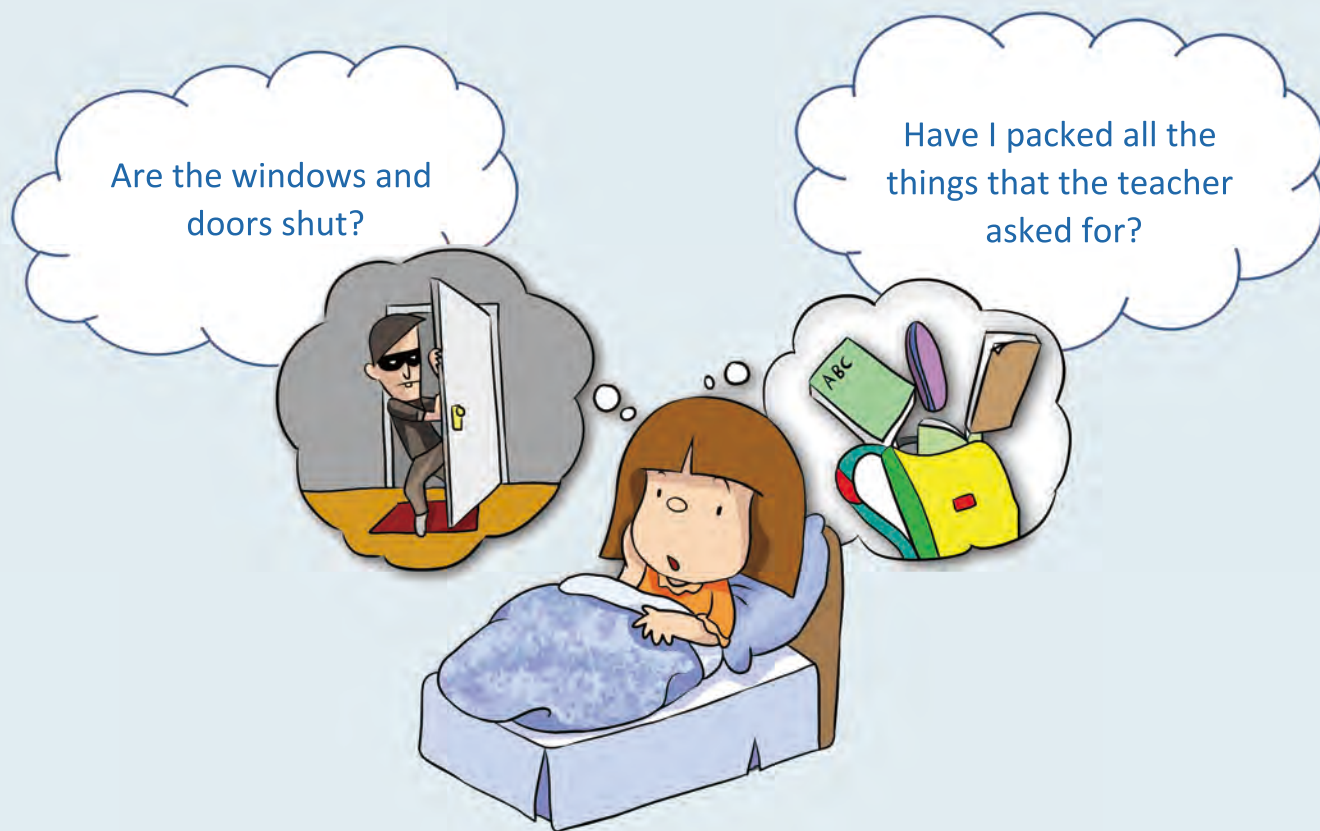
Some of my classmates are very quiet and shy, does it mean there is something wrong with them?

We all have different characters and temperaments, so being slightly shy isn't necessarily a problem. However, if children are so shy that it affects their social and daily activities, then we need to give them some help.





Some children, like Sue, are afraid of dirty things. Thoughts like “my hands are dirty!” and “these things are dirty” always pop into their heads, and make them constantly wash or wipe their hands, or refuse to touch certain things.



Other than dirty things, some children may be bothered by other worrying thoughts, such as worrying that they have missed or forgotten to do some things, causing them to repeatedly check for reassurance.





There are also some children who are perfectionists and do not allow mistakes to happen. Some children are obsessed with tidiness and order. They want things to be lined-up or arranged neatly, and may feel uneasy if things are not straight, even, or orderly.

But dad, mom, and teachers always ask me to wash my hands before eating, check the things in my schoolbag, and put things back where they belong..... is that a problem too?



What your parents and teachers say are correct, but it may be a problem if you find yourself washing hands or checking things too frequently, or if you can't stop thinking these things.

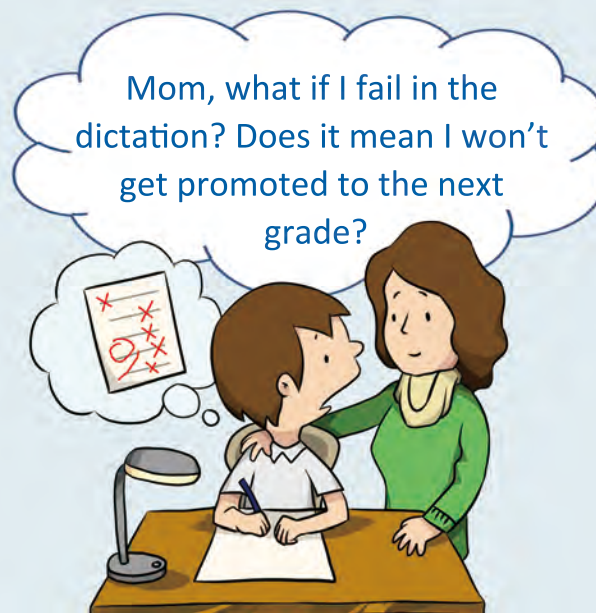


Some children, like Bowie, can become worried easily. They worry about all kinds of things in daily life. They cannot control the negative thoughts even if those things have a small chance of actually happening.





When “What ifs...” thoughts appear too frequently in our heads, we will easily overestimate the possibility or intensity of those disastrous outcomes.



It happened  
to me too!  
I once worried  
about a  
competition on  
the next day!

Many people get anxious or worried before important events, such as competitions, examinations, interviews, performances, etc., but this is a normal reaction. However, if you are worried about many things, even the small things or something that may not happen, then you may be worrying too much.





In addition to the above situations, some children have other fears or worries, for example:



Some children are afraid or unable to speak at school or some social situations, but can talk to their parents easily at home.

Some children are really afraid to be away from their parents.





Some children become fearful after having experienced accidents or disasters and frequently have flashbacks of the event.



Some children may suddenly feel unwell and have physiological symptoms, such as racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, tremors, or feel as if they couldn't breathe. These symptoms make them overly worried about their body, making them think they may pass out or suffocate.



In fact, there are times when we all feel worried or anxious, such as before going on stage to perform or seeing frightening things. It is normal to be afraid.

However, if we are constantly afraid of, or worried about something, and if the feeling is so intense that it affects our school, social, or everyday life, bothering us like a monster, then we need to do something about it!





Where does this  
anxiety monster come from?





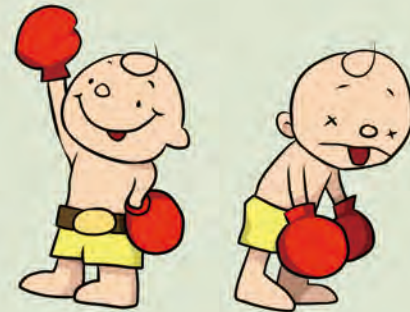
We all experience fear and anxiety at some point in life, it's just that we may be afraid of different things, or the intensity of our fear may be different. This difference may be explained by the way we think, the experiences we have had in the past, and our physiology. As a result, some of us are more prone to worrying or fears, while others seem to be afraid of nothing.



I don't understand. I am not afraid of any of the things that Dave, Hayden, Sue, and Bowie are scared of..... does that make me abnormal?



## Past Experiences



## Thinking Style



## Physiology



# Thinking Style:

Each child is born with a different set of temperament and thinks differently. Even when faced with the same event or put in the same situation, different children's thoughts or reactions may be different. Their way of thinking contributes greatly to their anxiety.



For example: Bowie is a cautious child and tends to prepare for things ahead of time, "just in case". She would consider things, many things, that are far off in the future that other children may have never thought about, and sometimes gets stuck in her thoughts.

For example: Hayden is very conscious of what other people think of him. He often worries about embarrassing himself in front of others, or that others may think he is odd or silly. Having too many of these worries cause him to lose confidence in himself. When being at the centre of attention, he would become so anxious that he couldn't even lift his head to look at others.



## Past Experiences:

Children have different backgrounds of upbringing; some children may have experienced scary or anxiety-provoking situations, causing them to become anxious more easily.



For example: Some naughty classmates had played tricks on Hayden and teased him. This causes Hayden to be afraid of interacting or playing with other children.

Some children may have unknowingly picked up the anxiety response, such as thoughts or behaviors, through interactions with their friends or family members.

For example: Sue's mother is hygiene-conscious. She frequently washes her hands and cleans the home. She also often reminds Sue to keep clean.



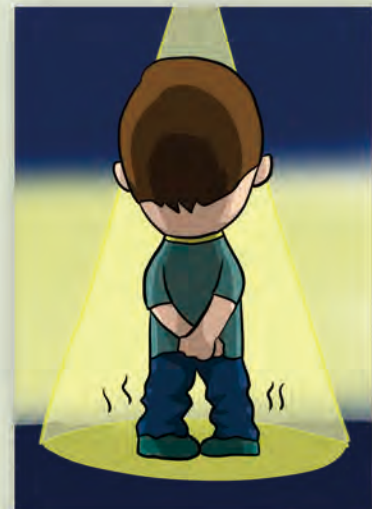
# Physiology:

Some children have strong or adverse bodily sensations when experiencing fear, such as racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, tremors, sweating, muscle cramps, stomachache, toilet urges, etc. On the contrary, some children may not experience these physiological symptoms as intensely when they are scared.



For example: Dave experiences these physiological symptoms whenever he sees frogs or lizards.

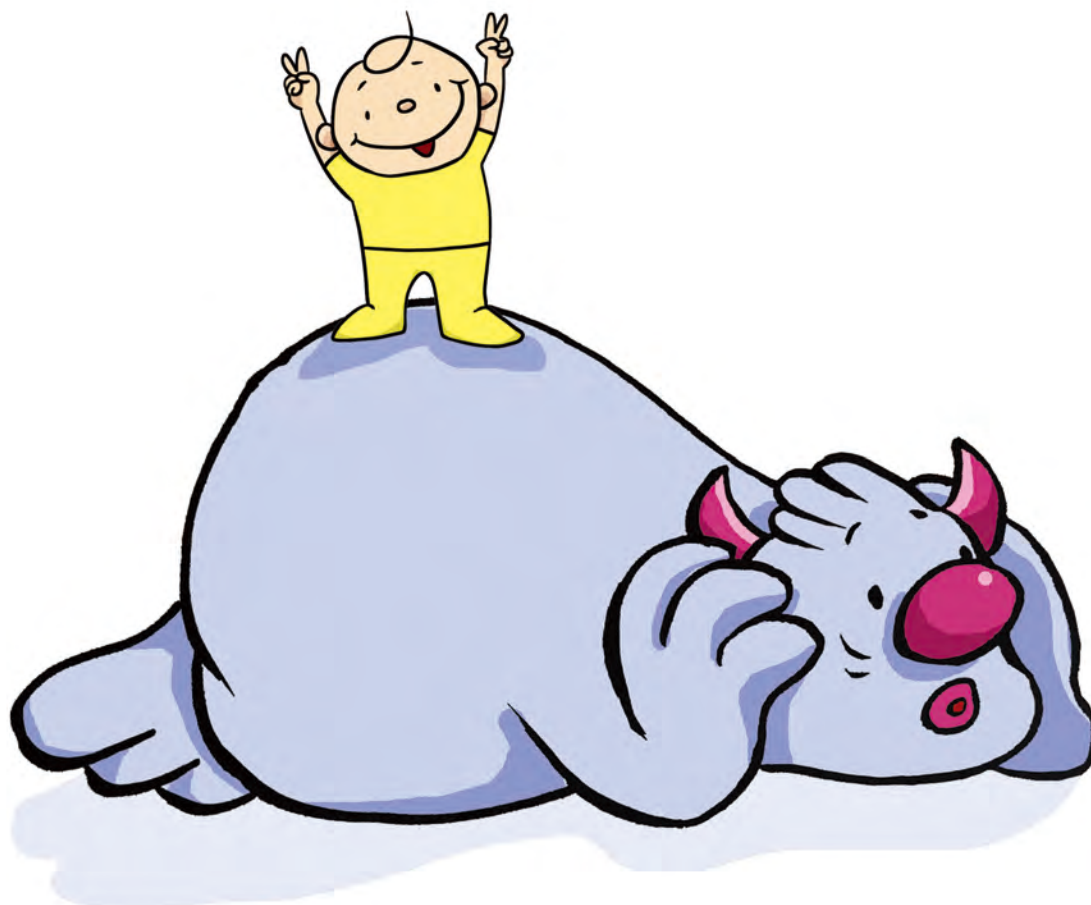
For example: Hayden have these physiological responses when he has to speak in front of a crowd.







**Anxiety? I'm not scared!**





Anxiety is a really scary monster. How should Dave, Hayden, Sue, and Bowie fight it?

Although the anxiety monster seems to be scary, there are quite a few ways to fight it. Earlier, we talked about the factors that lead to anxiety, including our thinking style, past experiences and physiology. We need to target at these factors in our fight with the anxiety monster. Here are three magical weapons that can help us win the fight:



## The Rational Thinking Sword



## The Exposure Axe



## The Relaxation Wand



# The Rational Thinking Sword



**The rational thinking sword** can help us break the confusing, negative, irrational, and exaggerated thought bubbles, and turn them into positive, rational, and useful thoughts!

There are 4 tips to using **the rational thinking sword**:

- (1) Is there any evidence to support my thought?
- (2) What is the probability that my thought would come true?
- (3) Are there any other possibilities besides this thought?
- (4) Is this thought helpful to me or the event?



For example: Hayden often worries that he would make a fool of himself in front of people. He is afraid that other people would think he is silly or strange.

### Negative thoughts

"So many students have signed up for the camping trip, but I am really scared of being with a lot of people! What if unfamiliar classmates came up to talk to me? They are going to make fun of me for not being able to express myself clearly. What if I am asked to join group games? Then everyone will know that I am clumsy!"

### The rational thinking sword

- (1) Is there any evidence to support my thought?
- (2) What is the probability that my thought would come true?
- (3) Are there any other possibilities besides this thought?
- (4) Is this thought helpful to me or the event?

### Positive thoughts

"Some classmates do like to tease or make fun of others, but there are also nice classmates in the class! Ying Ying and Lok Lok are really friendly."

"There are so many fun things to do at the camp. Those naughty classmates will be busy at playing them. They are not likely to pay attention to me."

"They may not be laughing at me even if they are laughing. There may well be other reasons causing them to laugh!"

"It is not going to help if I keep thinking that others will laugh at me. This will only make me more anxious and more likely to embarrass myself. It will be more helpful if I spend this time to practice my social communication and relaxation skills."



For example: Bowie is a cautious person and always wants to prepare for “just in case” situations. She often associates things with accidents and disasters.

### Negative thoughts

“Camping in the wild? Where can I hide if it rains? What if the camp site gets struck by lightning?”

“What if I get lost? What if I fall off the hill? What if there are robbers?”

### The rational thinking sword

- (1) Is there any evidence to support my thought?
- (2) What is the probability that my thought would come true?
- (3) Are there any other possibilities besides this thought?
- (4) Is this thought helpful to me or the event?

### Positive thoughts

“The camping trip takes place during Autumn when there are more sunny days than rainy or stormy ones.”

“The probability of being struck by lightning is extremely low even if it does rain, considering how big this mountain is.”

“We can hide inside the tent if it rains.”

“The teachers will look after us and bring us home if the weather becomes very bad.”

“I have never heard of anyone getting lost in the previous school trips.”

“It is rare to run into robbers in the city where there are lots of people. The probability of running into robbers will be even lower in a mountain where there are so few people!”

“I will not fall off the hill if I pay attention and walk carefully.”

“The teachers have maps and compasses. We won’t get lost so easily. Besides, we have phones so we can call for help anytime if needed!”



Oh, I get it. **The rational thinking sword** implies that we should think positively about everything, right?

Well..... not necessarily. For example, for a child who is afraid of taking exams, a positive thought could be "I don't have to be afraid. I will pass for sure!" However, without making the effort to study for the exam, the child may really fail the exam! On the other hand, a rational thought would be "I don't have to be afraid. The chance of passing is very high if I have studied for the exam!"



In other words, **the rational thinking sword** encourages us to have rational and realistic thoughts and to look at things objectively and comprehensively, rather than dwelling on our worries.

# The Exposure Axe



You may not believe this, kids, but the truth is, if you bravely expose yourself to the things that you are afraid of instead of running away from them, the intensity of fear that you feel will actually decrease over time. With this **exposure axe**, we can overcome our fear step by step.

I've heard others say that if someone is afraid of water, pushing him into the sea would help him learn to swim, is that what you mean?



It would be way too difficult to challenge ourselves with the things we are most afraid of right away. This will only scare us away, or cause us to give up in the midst of trying. We should expose ourselves to our fears gradually and systematically, starting with the easier stuff, and gradually move on to the harder ones, just like how we level-up when playing video games.



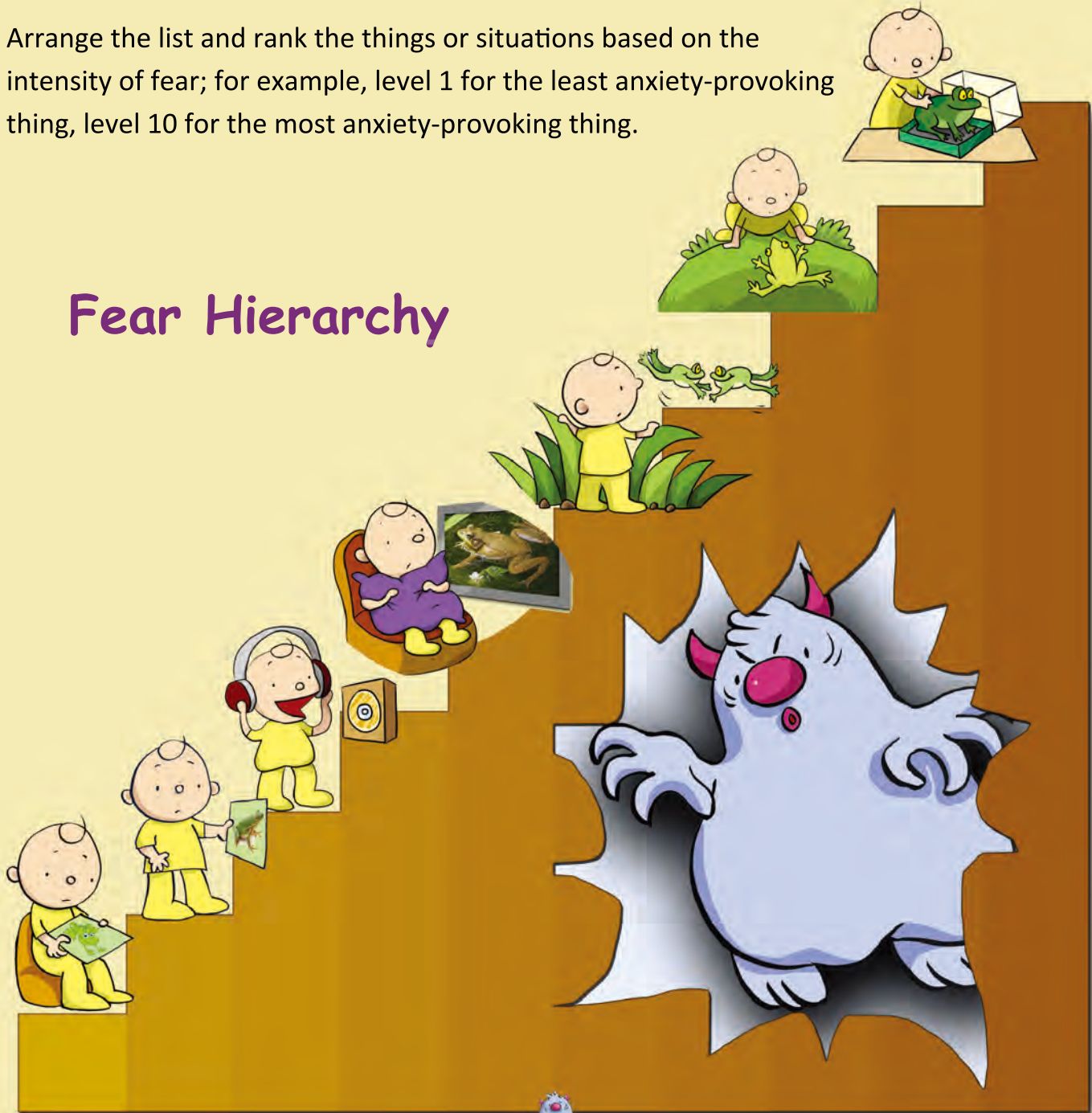
For example: Dave is really afraid of frogs and lizards. Using **the exposure axe** can help him overcome his fears.

First, make a list of the things or situations related to your fear:



Arrange the list and rank the things or situations based on the intensity of fear; for example, level 1 for the least anxiety-provoking thing, level 10 for the most anxiety-provoking thing.

## Fear Hierarchy



Start practicing on the thing or situation that you are least afraid of (level 1 on the fear hierarchy), and gradually move up to overcome what you are more afraid of.



I get it. **The exposure axe** implies that we will expose ourselves to our fears gradually and to face them bravely instead of running away from them, am I right?

That's it! Dave's case is only a simple illustration of how to use the **exposure axe**. For execution details and effective practice, it is best to have guidance from an expert.



# The Relaxation Wand

As mentioned, one of the tricks that the anxiety monster plays is to make our bodies feel uncomfortable, such as giving us a racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, muscle tension, etc. To fight the anxiety monster, we have another magical weapon called **the relaxation wand**. It can help us slow down our breathing and relax our tensed muscles, which will soothe and relieve the physiological symptoms caused by anxiety.



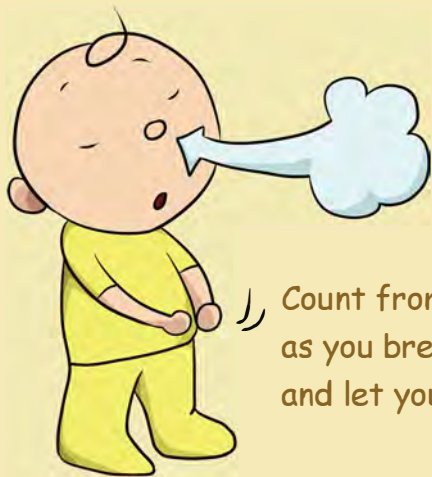
We can use **the relaxation wand** to cast the following spells:

- (1) Breathing relaxation spell
- (2) Muscle relaxation spell
- (3) Imagery relaxation spell

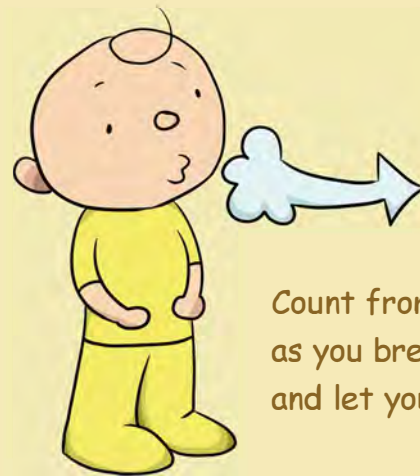


# (1) Breathing Relaxation Spell

Why do our bodies have uncomfortable bodily sensations when we are anxious? It is because our bodies work faster and harder when we are faced with fearful things or in danger, so that we can be prepared to run away (or fight them). So, we can calm ourselves down if we can find ways to slow down our bodily motion.



Count from one to three as you breathe in slowly and let your tummy rise.



Count from one to three as you breathe out slowly and let your tummy sink.



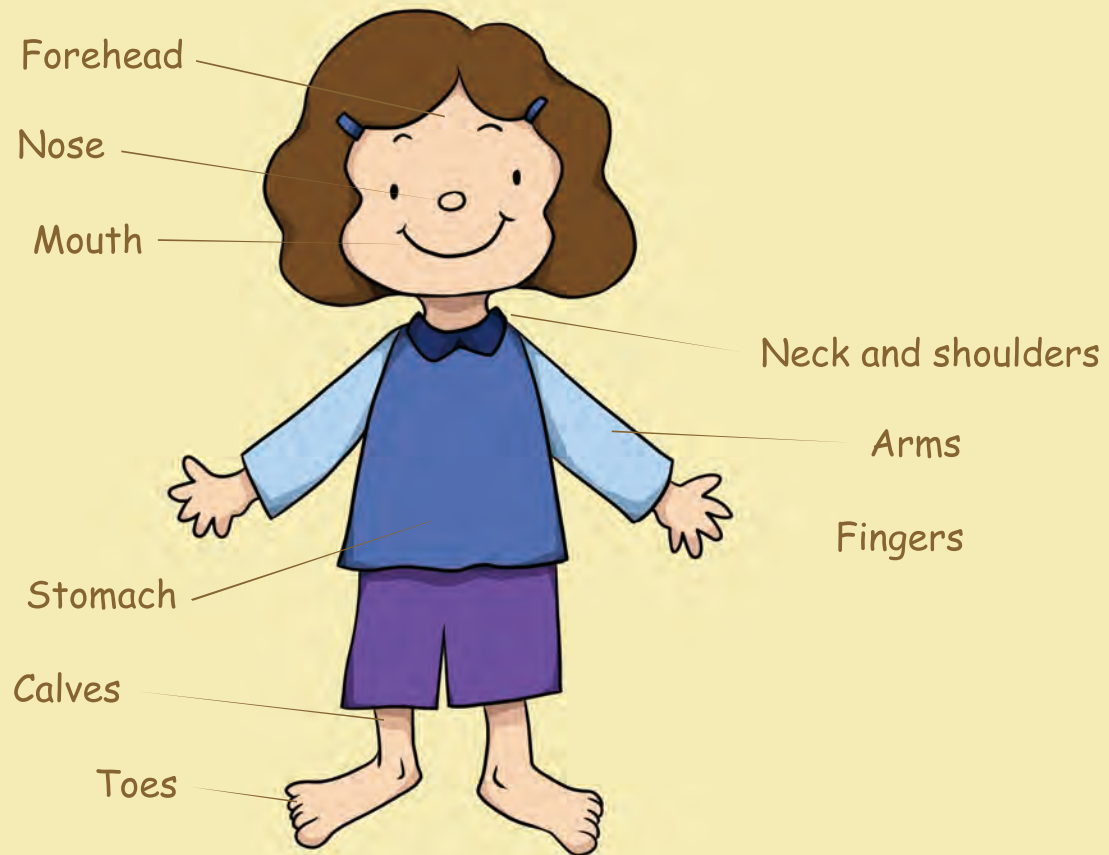
I'm not used to breathing in and out slowly. It seems very difficult!

You can try to practice blowing bubbles because when you blow bubbles, you can't blow too quickly or too hard; it won't work! When you blow the bubbles, pay attention to your sunken tummy, this will help you learn to control the pace of your breathing.



## (2) Muscle Relaxation Spell

Another way to soothe physiological symptoms is to relax your tensed muscles. From head to toe, gradually contract and relax different groups of muscles in your body.



Practice relaxing your muscles group by group, contract for about 5 seconds and relax for about 10 seconds.



Contract for about 5 seconds



Relax for about 10 seconds



I don't know how to contract or relax my muscles. What should I do?

You may pretend to move like a robot to imitate muscle contraction state, while pretend to be a plush doll to imitate the muscle relaxation state.



### (3) Imagery Relaxation Spell

The imagery relaxation spell is another magic of the relaxation wand. Swing the magic wand and you will enter into a calming and comfortable imagery, such as the sun and beach, meadow, or anywhere that could help you relax and feel peaceful. What do you see in the imagery? What do you hear? Try to enjoy and fully immerse yourself in the scenery that is far from the worries and negative thoughts brought about by the anxiety monster. Relax!







The **rational thinking sword**, the **exposure axe**, and the **relaxation wand** sound like powerful weapons! Do we have to use these weapons all at once to fight the anxiety monster?

It surely is the best if you could learn to use all three of these magical weapons. As for which weapon to use, it depends on the nature of the anxiety and the environment or situation. For example, Bowie often has worrying or negative thoughts, so the **rational thinking sword** would be most helpful to her!



With Dr. A's help, Dave, Hayden, Sue, and Bowie all learnt ways to fight the anxiety monster. Although they are still a bit worried about the camping trip, they know that the anxiety monster isn't as strong or scary as it seems. There are magical weapons to fight it off as long as they are brave enough to face it!



Frogs and lizards are ugly, I don't like them, but I don't have to be afraid of them or run away when I see them.

Dave

There will be many classmates going on the camping trip. While some classmates like to make fun of others, there are also many friendly ones, and I can play with those friendly classmates. People will not be paying attention to me either since there are so many classmates participating in the group activities!



Hayden



Sue

Although it is important to be hygienic, a little bit of dirt won't hurt. Nothing horrible will happen and I won't get sick because of it.



Bowie

The chances of being struck by lightning, getting lost, falling off the hill, or running into robbers are so extremely low that there is no evidence to support my worries! I need to have a clear mind when thinking. Let me enjoy this happy camping trip to its fullest!



# For Children

What do you think after reading this book? You may not even remember when you became affected by the anxiety monster, being afraid of speaking to others, interacting with strangers, worrying that bad things are about to happen, being away from your parents, sleeping alone, running away when you see a puppy.....

In fact, these worries and fears can be overcome. With the help of the three magical weapons against the anxiety monster, changing the way we think, learning and practicing to cope with our feared things through systematic exposure, applying the relaxation skills to help us feel more at ease, we can all become brave!

However, some children are faced with very powerful anxiety monsters! This is when you need to seek the help of experts to guide you through the fight! Therefore, some children need to have regular visits or attend training programs at the specialist clinic to learn more powerful and effective skills. Some children may also need to take medicine to get rid of the negative impact exerted by the anxiety monster. In spite of this, you can learn to fight off the monster with your own strength when you are equipped with the right weapons and have the right tactics.

Remember, we all have our strengths and shortfalls. Even if you are afraid to interact with strangers, give a performance on stage, or afraid of the dark or height..... you also have lots of strengths and there are many things to be appreciated about you. Never be ashamed of yourself for having anxiety problems; rather, reassure yourself and be a rational, confident child!





# Fighting the Anxiety Monster



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First published : September 2013

ISBN no. : ISBN 978-962-8868-55-1

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