

## Developing and Using Cognitive Coping Cards

An important tool in your child or teen's anxiety toolbox is the ability to change anxious thoughts to more relaxed and balanced thinking. However, it can be very difficult for children and teens to remember to use coping tools when they are anxious. They are so focused on their feelings of being in danger that they forget they have a way of telling whether or not danger actually exists (and it usually doesn't).

With practice, however, your child can learn to use coping thoughts on his or her own. This is really helpful as you might not always be there to remind your child to use the tools (for example, when at school, or sleeping over at a friend's house).

### A good tool to help your child or teen is Cognitive Coping Cards!

#### What are Cognitive Coping Cards?

Cognitive coping cards can be small index cards with short sentences of some of the coping skills your child can use when experiencing anxiety. The cards are portable reminders to boss back anxiety!

#### What sorts of things are helpful to put onto a coping card?

- A reminder that physical symptoms (e.g., sweaty palms, stomach-aches) are just anxiety
- The name your child has given to anxiety (e.g. "Mr. Worry", "the pest", "the bug")
- A reminder that anxiety is not dangerous and doesn't last forever
- Positive coaching statements (e.g. "I can get through this!")
- A reminder to use some coping skills (e.g. I can do relaxed breathing)
- some calming facts your child or teen has used before (e.g. the odds of getting kidnapped are really low)

## HOW TO DO IT!

### Step 1: Make sure your child is involved

In order for coping cards to be useful, your child needs to feel that the coping statements will actually be personally helpful! Children and teens are more likely to use them if they have been involved in developing them. It is NOT a good idea for you to simply write them up and hand them over.

#### What to say to get your child involved:

*"You have been really good at bossing back your anxiety these days! Now we can learn another way for you to be the boss. Why don't we try to figure out some things you can tell yourself when your anxiety is acting up? We can write down some things on cards that can help you feel calm. These cards will be another tool in your anxiety-fighting toolbox!"*

**For teens:** Although you should encourage your child to develop coping statements, older children and teens can be more independent when writing out their coping cards. They can decide what skills are most helpful for them. You can explain that when we feel anxious it is sometimes difficult to remember all the skills we've learned to battle that anxiety. Writing out those skills on coping cards might help them remember what has been helpful for them in the past, and what skills they would like to use next time.

### **Step 2: Make it a game!**

Making up the cognitive coping cards should not be a chore! Have fun trying to come up with good statements that your child will find helpful in managing his or her anxiety. Here are some ways you can make this tool a fun task:

- **Get the family involved!** Like all the tools in the anxiety toolbox, the whole family should work together on the goal of tackling anxiety. Parents, brothers, and sisters can all get involved in making these coping cards!
- **Make it an art project!** Decorate the cards with coloured ink, sparkles, stickers, gold stars, and different colours of poster board cardboard. This turns developing and using coping cards into a fun project.

### **Step 3: Remember to praise your child**

As always, it is very important that you give lots of praise whenever your child is successful at managing anxiety, or whenever he or she tried to manage anxiety (but was not quite able to do it). This can include saying, "You are doing a great job! I'm so proud of you", but it might also involve small, simple rewards (story time; playing a fun board game together; having a fun family day; or getting a new video game if your child has been working hard to boss back anxiety for a while).

### **Some examples of coping cards:**

#### Coping card #1: Billy

Billy has panic attacks, and is afraid he is going to have a heart attack. He has started to boss back his anxiety by doing muscle relaxation, and facing his fears about his panic attack symptoms.

#### **My Coping Card to Beat Anxiety!**

1. Anxiety is not dangerous. It can't hurt me! It's just a bully!
2. I can boss back my anxiety. I have done it before!
3. If my heart is racing, I get sweaty, and my tummy hurts. That means that my anxiety is acting up. I'm not in danger.
4. I could do some relaxation now.
5. Am I falling into a Thinking Trap?\*

\* For more information on Thinking Traps, see [Realistic Thinking for Teens](#).

#### Coping card #2: Susan

Susan gets very anxious when she is at school. She is worried that the other kids don't like her, and that, if they knew she had anxiety, that they would laugh at her and make fun of her. She has been learning to recognize her anxious thoughts and to try to challenge them and think of more realistic thoughts.

**My Coping Card to Beat Anxiety!**

1. My face is getting hot and my head is getting dizzy! My anxiety is acting up again!
2. Maybe I need to use the STOP plan now! \*
3. If I'm feeling anxious, I could do some calm breathing to calm down.
4. I have lots of friends at school, and they like me even when I get anxious. They told me so.

\* For more information on the STOP plan, see [Healthy Thinking for Young Children](#).