**Anxiety Handout**

Anxiety is a normal part of the human experience, and we all feel anxious sometimes. It is our mind and body’s way of making sure that we are safe. Anxiety is a thought or feeling that can feel very frightening but is not actually dangerous. In fact, there are times when anxiety can be useful and help us. We may feel some anxiety when we are trying something new, playing a new sport, making a new friend, or speaking in front of other people. This might feel like “butterflies in our stomachs,” or we may feel warm or excited, or sweaty. When we are trying something new and have some anxiety, we may also be more focused and aware of what we are doing.

However, there are times when our anxiety grows from being helpful to being overwhelming, making it difficult to make decisions. When we have “Big” anxiety, we may have racing thoughts or a lot of big feelings, which may lead to big actions as we try to avoid what we are feeling anxious about (and these big actions often do not help us feel better). When anxiety gets really big, we may also feel it in our bodies like headaches, stomaches, feeling dizzy, feeling restless, experiencing difficulty concentrating, trouble sleeping, unexplained pains, or even feeling very tired. Overwhelming or “Big” anxiety can make it challenging to do the things that we otherwise would normally do, like go to school, ride the bus, and make new friends. When we start to avoid the things that we would normally do, it can leave space for our anxiety to grow, and we may have new anxieties about what we are missing or what work we may need to catch up on.

When we feel anxiety “bells” (e.g., symptoms of anxiety such as sweaty palms, dizziness, hot, tense muscles, fast heart rate, or rapid breathing, etc.), that’s our brain and body’s way of telling us that it is time to determine if we are in real danger or if we are not in real danger. We might think of these signs as “helpful bells” and “harmful bells.” If anxiety bells are ringing and you determine that you are not in any real danger, then you are hearing harmful bells. Harmful bells include thoughts that are unhelpful, like imagining the worst possible outcome, such as thinking, “I will never get through this.” When we feel our anxiety bells going off, and we determine that we are in real danger, we may be hearing helpful bells which help us focus, protect ourselves and find help by giving us urgency.

**How do I decide if I am in real danger? It *feels* really dangerous!**

Take three slow deep breaths (for each breath, count to 4 and inhale through your nose and when you release your breath, count to 4 and exhale slowly through your mouth) and ask yourself:

* How likely is the outcome I am worried about happening really?
* How often has that outcome happened before?
* What are more likely outcomes?

If you determine that you are in real danger, you need to contact someone for help, such as a parent or 911 if it is an emergency and you are in real danger.

Everyone feels anxious feelings sometimes. It is part of being human! Another part of being human is choosing how we respond. Remember, we can not control the earth or others, only ourselves, our words, and our actions. Most of the time, the things we worry about do not happen, and our anxiety causes us unnecessary distress. When we spend more time worrying than we do having fun, it can be tiring and leave us feeling irritated or sad.

What should I do if my anxiety starts to grow or I can determine I am hearing “harmful bells?”

Remember, when our anxiety is growing, it becomes harder to think. Take a breath and spend a moment thinking about what might make you feel better right now. If it feels like nothing will help you to feel better right now, try one of the activities below to see if that helps you feel more calm and grounded. Talking about it with a parent or someone supportive that you trust can also be helpful and remind us that we are not alone.

**Things to Try:**

* Listen to music
* Read a book
* Go for a walk
* Jump on the trampoline
* Play outside
* Ride a bike
* Watch TV
* Play a musical instrument
* Take a warm bath
* Sit quietly in a calm place
* Sing
* Dance
* Draw or paint
* Write in a journal
* Talk with a friend
* Squeeze a squishy
* Use a fidget toy

**Practicing a mindfulness exercise can also be helpful for calming and grounding ourselves when anxious. There are a lot of mindfulness activities you can try!**

Traditional mindfulness activities:

* Deep breathing- slow, deep breaths using the diaphragm
* Pleasant imagery
* Progressive muscle relaxation- intentionally tensing and relaxing muscles in the body systematically

Other mindfulness activities:

* Listening to calming music
* Sucking on a piece of candy
* Sucking on ice chips
* Blowing soap bubbles
* Tossing a ball
* Making art
  + Coloring
  + Drawing something that is right in front of you for 5 minutes (like a cup or a controller)
* Watching a snow globe or calm-down glitter jar
* Thinking about your favorite kind of day
* Thinking about something you are thankful for
* Taking a walk and naming something you see, smell, taste, touch, and hear

Write down 5 things you like to do to relax:

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References

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