

This case study was created as part of the Empowering Young People – Leading Change Ourselves project, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and delivered by Potential Plus UK. It was developed by young people, for young people, as part of a wider action project focused on sharing real experiences and practical strategies for managing anxiety.

Background to Case Study

This young person is a 16 year old young person who is neurodivergent, with 'high learning potential'. She experienced very high levels of anxiety when she was younger but now has really effective strategies in place to manage anxiety.

How was anxiety making you feel and what area of your life was anxiety most impact?

When I was around 5, I had quite major sensory issues. I'm hypersensitive so that caused a lot of anxiety, especially in situations with lots of people or noise. I didn't feel physically secure because I was overstimulated. Anxiety was also really bad for me when I was 9 and I went back to school (after 4 years of homeschooling). I had these physical compulsions, like tics, which got worse under stress. That was the high point of anxiety for me. It's still ongoing, I still can get quite anxious, and I get anxiety a lot more when I am tired. But I had lots of support from my parents, and I learnt how to deal with it a lot better.

Sometimes, when I'm really stressed, I just wake up with anxiety. And I think it impacts my free time because I feel terrible sometimes and I just can't get anything done.

But I think my anxiety helps my cello playing – anxiety and nerves can feel similar – so I've had a lot of experience with feeling that way, like on stage, and I know techniques to minimise my nerves!

When did you start using anxiety management techniques and who helped?

When I was 3, I think, because of my mum. This case study is a good insight in my opinion for adults as well, because lots of people have kids and it can provide some understanding of what's going on to both parents and children.

The main influence on my anxiety is my mum, because she's really good at helping me with it. A lot of people have people around them who adapt to their anxiety. They try to avoid it, but I think that only feeds the 'monster' part of anxiety. It's like a never-ending cycle.

My mum and I have always had really logical conversations about not submitting to anxiety – when I was little sometimes I might be scared of going to a friend’s birthday party – but we’d have that conversation and then I would go where I wanted to go despite feeling anxiety. We named the monster part of my anxiety ‘Gavotte’ – sometimes when you’re really anxious, Gavotte is ‘having a party’, or if it’s less strong then maybe it’s ‘sleeping’. And it’s like another part of me living beside me. I’m lucky I have the people around me and the support and strategies given to me because it’s enabled me to avoid medication through strategies.

What Techniques did you use and how did they help you?

1. Giving your anxiety a name and a visual image. Separating it from your own brain. That helps you understand it
2. Breathing techniques.
3. Physical stimuli.
 - Using pressure points
 - Hugs! If I’m feeling anxious it always helps to be hugged by somebody! You can just look for people who make you feel less helpless.

4. Grading your anxieties and challenging them gradually

When I had bad compulsions I had tens of different tics – my worst one was that I had to breathe in too far which could be dangerous and almost impossible. I numbered them in order of which was the worst. Start from the easiest ones to get rid of. I noticed that I wanted to do them, and then I wouldn’t do it.

5. Rationalise

-I ask myself: ‘what’s the worst that can happen’? It can help you rationalise, because so much of anxiety is irrational. It shows you that nothing bad will happen.
-It doesn’t help to talk to people who take anxiety as a real fear. It helps if you rationalise that that anxiety comes from a place of survival, but it’s then blown out of proportion living in this day and age – you aren’t going to get eaten by a bear – but you have that same reaction in your body when you’re anxious to leave your house to buy milk. So, it doesn’t help to be like ‘if you are scared of going out to buy milk then I can go and buy milk for you’. It helps more to talk to someone who is down to earth, who can even point out the ridiculous in it, even having a laugh about it.

Feeling OCD is often anxiety – if I’m feeling engaged in a task then the ticks don’t really bother me so much. When I’m bored I get super anxious! It’s like when I’m bored there’s more room in my brain for it to make stupid connections”

6. Keeping my mind busy and engaged

Feeling OCD is often anxiety – if I'm feeling engaged in a task then the tics don't really bother me so much. When I'm bored I get super anxious! As HLP young people we are really susceptible to making stupid connections between things that aren't inter-related. It's like when I get bored there's more space in my brain for stupid stuff to happen.

Do you feel like anxiety today is an underestimated issue which most people consider a character slight rather than something more serious?

Yes, I think so. I think society has made lots of progress on mental health and seeing mental health as a real health issue, but that anxiety has lagged behind.

I think a lot of problems that people have in the West are related to anxiety. There are loads of problems in the world, but a lot of people who are generally very privileged and don't need to have a problem, do have a problem because of anxiety.

Lots of people are more prone to anxiety and they have really tough lives-it feels like everything is against you. Some people have really low-level anxiety that really affects them: more than it needs to.

Anxiety actually has really simple solutions, like sleep and a healthy diet and strategies. A lot of people think there's just something wrong with them, when actually a lot is down to their habits. My main point is that there are so many external problems that people have, but anxiety is something we all have, but it is a really big internal problem if we don't know what to do with it or how to deal with it.

What do you think should be done by institutions such as schools to make things better for children and youths struggling with anxiety?

One of my local schools is getting investigated because it treats its students so badly – there's a push from schools just to get really good grades and have no individuality or personality – there are lots of rules that are crazy, like you're not allowed to touch each other in school, just as students. Things like this really affect HLP kids and the obsession with grades is really dangerous – schools need to be a completely different environment to the way they are right now.

And I think it reflects how we only really value people if they contribute economically to society, and I think that gives people anxiety, that level of capitalism. I think we need to reframe everything.

Creating environments where people have choices: you can go outside when you need to, for instance, would be a start. I think especially HLP people, we really need choice. I think we feel attacked if we're being backed into the wall because schedules are so regimented – we need to have more flexibility and freedom in schools.

Talks about mental health in school are often only about depression, or done vaguely, or are not very relatable, or they're geared to extreme situations like if you're suicidal. Obviously support for suicidal people is extremely important, but there is more to mental health than that. There should be more mental health support in schools, focusing on anxiety management techniques. Almost everyone gets anxiety, and if there's support at the beginning you'll never need to get to the point where you're discussing and dissuading suicide. And there needs to be support for people with underlying mental health issues running throughout their life- like interactive workshops rather than just one off talks.

Do these measures apply for adults as well, such as in the workplace?

Yeh, I definitely think so. In my experience, if it's not dealt with anxiety gets worse and worse. Adults probably deal with it worse than younger people, and behaviours are also more engrained and keep developing in that direction: anxiety is a behaviour which adds to itself infinitely. That doesn't mean that adults should have less support in dealing with it! They should have the same support and access – to interactive learning, building, drawing- it isn't geared towards adults but it should be.

Where can people experiencing anxiety seek alleviating resources, training and measures?

I would go to my friends, and my mum. But It's because I have so many anxiety-management strategies. It should be more common knowledge on the internet, and more widespread, and in books. There are techniques on social media, or adverts, or even therapy – but I know people who have been on therapy waiting lists for years, and funding for the NHS is a whole other problem. Definitely seek techniques that work for you!

Anything I haven't mentioned or asked about that you'd like to add?

I think societal awareness is one of the most important things!

But I also think it's really dangerous how much we tolerate anxiety for kids – that's what makes them get really anxious. People say 'you'll grow out of it' but you don't grow out of it. And shyness is often confused with anxiety – children are only 'shy' or 'easily scared' because they're anxious. It's parents' responsibility to do the best job you can for your kids, but just because you're a parent doesn't automatically mean that you have the tools to deal with your kid's anxiety, so parents who feel like they don't know how to deal with their kids' anxiety should definitely look out for anxiety management techniques and seek out people who can help them address this challenging aspect of their kids' lives. So, it's parents' responsibility, but also our responsibility to share our tools with other people like us.