

*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, which she now manages more effectively, but still struggles with self-worth and disappointing/letting down others.

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

I’ve struggled with anxiety surrounding self-esteem and other people’s perception of me for a long time and am still working on managing those. Being in an academic, exam-results-driven school used to make this a lot worse, before I gained the confidence to talk to my teachers about it, who are now very understanding and try to make arrangements where possible.

When I was in early teens, anxiety was a prevailing feeling most of the time, and disrupted my academic performance, friendships, and my hobbies. Having the right friends is very important – I was still finding my place in my year group at the time, and some people were less approachable. It’s very natural to feel left out when you haven’t found the right people, and I often thought I had to be a ‘certain way’ to be friends with who I wanted, which was really just a sign that they weren’t the people I really belonged with.

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

There are techniques you hear regularly throughout your life, even if you don’t look for them: take a deep breath, think of something happy, close your eyes and count to ten, etc. I started using those to calm myself down from when I started performing cello, so around 4-5 years old. Other than those (helpful but not the most effective) techniques, I only really learnt about anxiety techniques from PPUK when attending their workshop on HLP. Before I knew about HLP, I thought it was a universal experience, and that people who didn’t show signs of it were just better than me: by learning how to manage anxiety, I feel like I’m catching up with and experiencing my life to its full potential.

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

- Keeping myself occupied: I found out that my anxiety spirals when I'm alone and bored. Picking up something enjoyable that doesn't result in some sort of academic achievement is really important, because I don't get worried about how to get better at it, and all that matters is how much I'm enjoying it
- Square breathing: this really stuck with me from one of the PPUK workshops, and it combines breathing deeply with counting. This links to the point above: it keeps my mind busy while also relaxing my body.
- Knowing when to remove myself from a situation: I really struggle with loud noises, and staying in a loud situation/sudden loud noise makes me very stressed, and can cause panic attacks. Lots of enjoyable situations are loud, and I used to convince myself that I would be better off if I toughed it out and didn't miss out on any of the fun, but in reality, I have more fun by stepping out for a minute when I need to: I don't get overwhelmed and don't worry about getting upset.

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

Yes, and I also think that it would be a lot smaller of a problem if we were exposed to anxiety management and normalisation from a younger age.

Many people experience anxiety around other people's judgement, and the knowing that people are empathetic makes anxiety-inducing tasks much less daunting (anxiety around an exam would be decreased if you knew the teacher marking understands that it's a stressful situation, anxiety around friendships would be decreased if it were more normalised to share your anxiety issues with your friends) By educating people about anxiety and how to manage it better, I feel that many of the problems that cause anxiety are diminished.

'Being an anxious person' and 'having anxiety' have very different meanings when you compare 'character trait' to 'serious issue'. If someone says they have anxiety, people are likely to be more aware of their issues and tiptoe around their feelings, whereas if someone is described as anxious their feelings are likely written off as 'a weakness' and they are more disregarded.

In reality, we see it as very black-and-white, as either 'having anxiety' or 'just a character trait', but I think we need to see it as more of a spectrum, and not ignore people's worries just because they don't experience them as often.

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

As mentioned above, I go to a very results-driven school and this caused a lot of anxiety in my year for our GCSEs, myself included. While teachers tried to give us information booklets on how to revise healthily and how to manage exam stress, to many of us it felt superficial because they

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hadn't experienced the same thing recently enough to connect through it.

What I found most helpful was my friends in the year above: they had recently gone through the same thing and were willing to give realistic advice (the booklet advice was very idealised and not actually manageable) about what was actually best. How to get students to connect? My school tried out a buddy system this year, where they pair people from 6th form and GCSE year, but again this felt too forced for many people to sign up. What I think would work best is organising fun, appealing events that would bring together people that had an approaching anxiety-inducing experience, and those who have finished it and would be willing to chat about it.

Having teachers that you are close to and feel like you can approach easily is also really important: asking for extensions and time to go over work relieves a lot of stress.

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

I think that in a workplace, there isn't as much separation between different groups (maybe disciplines, authority?) as a school, but nevertheless there should still be plenty of opportunities to make friends and socialise outside of business-related meetings, as anxiety is less potent when it's shared with someone.

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

Action is the enemy of anxiety: whether it's talking to someone, doing something to prepare for that anxiety-inducing event, or just distracting yourself with something else, even if you don't have access to resources at that moment, there is always something you can do.

As for resources or training, there is so much both online and in person: online is great for finding many different resources, and therapy is widely available online and in person, and often isn't a big commitment or hassle.

And if that feels too impersonal, speak to friends! I wasn't allowed to contact my friends when I was younger, and this really increased my anxiety: while I know I can go to my parents for almost anything, not every problem is best solved by them, and that everyday issues like a test or friendships would be dealt with better with a friend

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

So much of your anxiety takes root in early life, even from before primary school, so parents have such a big influence. If you have unshared/unresolved anxiety about something, it often affects your confidence in that field, which impairs your performance, creating a cycle. Most of the confident, happy people I know have supportive, approachable parents who are always open to talking with their kids' friends and teachers. Not to sound too business-y, but a strong and positive network from parents (that the child knows about and is comfortable with) is great for catching any issues and dealing with them before they self-perpetuate and become a more consuming part of their life.