

How to build on the story

After extreme events such as a large natural disaster, children's development may suffer. They may have more behavioural issues than other children, and be so wired with adrenalin that they cannot settle enough to learn properly. Stressed children often come from stressed families, and sometimes parents who are stressed by extreme events cannot settle enough to attend well to their children's emotional needs.

These are all normal feelings after a big disaster, but when you are a parent it is your job to nurture, love, teach and guide your children. It is important that children know that their adults are in charge of their world. If you are worried about the world and feeling out of control, it is harder for your children to feel safe. *But remember, we don't have to be perfect parents, just good enough.*

After an extreme event, parenting with anxiety can start to feel normal. The adjustments we make as parents because of the worry we feel, become comfortable. We feel better if we are constantly checking that our kids are safe. Extreme events justify extreme responses. However, there comes a time when we need to put these adjustments aside, because the adjustments in themselves begin to cause problems.

These exercises are for you as much as for your children. If you engage with them, you may find some ways to lessen your own anxiety. When you do this, anxiety in the family will be lessened. If the children know that you have ways to manage the anxiety as a family, they will be freed up to do normal childhood things like school, friends and learning new skills.



Family Meeting Plan

How to use these exercises:

Write your answers in the book, or use your own paper if you prefer. You don't need to do all the exercises.

The symbols below show you how to guide the conversation.



a section to read aloud to everyone



something for you to write or draw



something to think about



an extra idea that you can use

You need to be in charge of this process. Don't let the kids take it from you – sure they can contribute ideas, but you are running the show. They need you to do that, to see that you can manage this for them. You also need to decide how much of your own worry you will discuss with them. They will know that you are worried, but perhaps they don't need to hear it in detail.

So here we go ... Collect everyone together, grab some paper and pens, and start talking.

How the worry bug affects you



When the worry bug is living at your house, what trouble does he bring? Usually worry bugs make you think, feel and behave in ways that you might not normally. Let's identify some of these thoughts, feelings and behaviours so that we know what we are dealing with. To do this we need to be a bit of a detective.



What does the worry bug make your family **think**? Maia's family thought that they needed to stay home all the time in case something bad happened.



What worrying thoughts does the worry bug suggest to you? Write these out in full, don't just write single words.

What we worry about ...

What Dad thinks Mum worries about ...

What Mum thinks Dad worries about ...

If I had one other worrying thought, it would be ...



Sometimes it helps to write your worries down, put them in a box and lock them up. You can make rules about who looks after the box, where it lives and when to think about the worries in the box. This is a way to stop worries from intruding all day long.

Catastrophising (making small worries into big ones)



Earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes are catastrophes. They cause a lot of damage, often take lives and leave lasting scars. They are outside anyone's control. Sometimes when we have had this out-of-control kind of experience, even small triggers (like hearing a truck rumble by) can set off the same kinds of thoughts that the big catastrophes did.



In Maia's family, the worry bug suggested that some terrible thing would happen if they were not together when a disaster hit. Sometimes the 'terrible thing' is just a feeling – you might not even know what it could be. That makes it even more powerful.



Do your worried thoughts turn into catastrophes? What catastrophes does the worry bug suggest to you?

More detecting



When you think these kinds of worrying thoughts, often big feelings start to come up. How does the worry bug make you all **feel**? Maia's family started to feel scared, Maia felt sick, her heart raced and she sweated. Some of the feelings you have might be physical, or they might be emotional. People show their feelings in different ways.



Draw or write about your worried feelings here. As you do, talk about them with each other.

How do you know when the worry bug is making Mum scared?

If Dad is upset about something, how does he show it?

When I think about my worries, I feel ...

How do other people in your family show their worried feelings?

Calming Down

When you're worried like this, it's common for your body to feel 'sped up', like it's on edge. This is your body getting ready physically to fight the "terrible thing". Unfortunately when you feel like this it can be hard to think properly. Here's some ways to help you calm down so your brain gets on board again. Choose the ones that work best for you.

Breathing

Mindfulness exercises

Listening to music

Doing some intense exercise like running up and down stairs, getting your heart pumping.

Eating an ice block or sucking on ice.

A hot or cold flannel on your neck.

Talking to someone you like, who is nice to you.

Prayer

Relaxation techniques

What other ways do you or your family use to help yourself calm down?

From your list and the ideas above, choose a couple that you will try in the next week. Note them down here so that you have a record. For these ideas to work you need to practice them regularly, so you can use them when you are feeling worried.



With all this worrying going on, it's pretty normal for family members to feel upset or annoyed with each other. Sometimes kids get upset when Dad or Mum is worried, or Dad gets mad when Mum is worried, or Nana gets upset when the kids are upset. In Maia's house there were lots of worry circles. Mum got worried and started to fix and fasten things, Dad got worried that Mum wasn't doing it well enough, Maia got worried that they both needed her to help, and then Maia's Mum and Dad got worried about Maia's health. These worries made them want to stay home and worry even more. How does it go in your house?



Try to detect the worry circle that goes on in your house. Draw it here.

Even more detecting



What does the worry bug make you **do**? How does it change your behaviour?



Sometimes when we are worried about something and we think a catastrophe might happen, we do things to avoid the catastrophe. That is pretty normal, right? For example, Maia's family all stayed home from school and work to avoid what they thought would be a catastrophe (not being with one another when a disaster struck). But then, all these new behaviours (staying home and checking stuff), started to get in the way of them having a normal life. The worry bug that began as their friend, started to be a real pain.



What kinds of things do you do to avoid your worries? Do you ... stay home from school? Sleep in odd places? Check things? Not talk about your worries?



List the ways the bug makes you all act here.

What does your Worry bug look like?



Everyone's worry bug is different, to some it is a monster, to others a wee fly, what is yours like?



How big is the worry bug at your house? Is it squashing the guttering yet? Or is it small like an ant that you could stomp on?

On a separate piece of paper, draw a picture of your family's worry bug. Is it big, small, hairy?

Does your worry bug have a name? What would it be called? It's a good idea to settle on one name for your worry bug.

Write its name here _____

Put your picture of the worry bug up somewhere that you will see it regularly, maybe on the fridge, or on the back of the toilet door.

Shrinking the worry bug



Now we have discovered how the worry bug affects you and your family, we are going to do some more detective work and discover how **you** affect the worry bug! Just as the worry bug has ways it gets bigger, so you will have ways that you shrink it.



What successes have you had in not giving in to the worry bug? (Look carefully for these, the worry bug would like us to think that we are not succeeding against worry at all – even a decision not to yell at the kids, or choosing just to relax and have fun together can be a success against worry. What are the ways that you fight the worry bug in your house?



What does Mum do that makes it scurry away?

What does Dad do that shrinks it up?

What do you kids do to scare it?

When you have a good long list of strategies that you have used to fight the worry bug, pin the list up next to the picture of the bug. That way you can be reminded often about ways to fight the bug. You might like to make a couple of copies to have in different places in the house.



Dealing with the worry bug's catastrophes

When we have any kind of thought, we can respond to it in different ways. For example, you might be thinking about going to a wildlife park on your birthday with your best friend. You feel excited about this because you want to get to the lion cage and see those big cats close up. But your friend says that he is afraid to come because the lion might reach through the cage and get you. These are two different responses to the same situation.

To manage these difficult and worrying thoughts and feelings, we can be a detective again and look around for evidence or proof of whether the catastrophe we are worrying about will happen or not. For instance, how many times have the lions at that wildlife park done this before? Have they ever bitten anyone? Has this ever happened to anyone you know? What do these answers make you think about your worry? Is it the worry bug catastrophising things and stopping you going to the wildlife park?

What responses would other people have to the worry bug's catastrophic thoughts? Are there people you know who don't respond like you do? How come they can do that?

Do this kind of detective work with your catastrophes. Ask those kinds of questions of your worries. When you get new and different answers to these questions, do you notice that your feelings are different too? Our feelings calm down a lot when we change our thoughts.



Maia's family did three things to shrink the worry bug.

1. They stopped believing his catastrophising.
2. They stopped their new worry-bug-led behaviours.
3. They had a plan for their biggest real worry.



Now you have a go at this. (On another piece of paper)

1. We are going to stop catastrophising about ...
2. The behaviours we are going to stop are ...
3. Our plan for dealing with our biggest worry is to ...

Put this work beside the picture of the bug.

Noticing change



It is quite important to start to monitor the changes that you make. Then you will be able to watch the worry bug shrink, and if he makes a comeback, you will know the ways that you can shrink him again.



First, let's think about how it would look in your house if the worry bug was gone.



If you woke up tomorrow morning and the worry bug was gone, what would be different about your day? Draw a picture on a piece of paper of how life would look in your family.

What would be different about the way you speak to each other?

What different things would you do?



Now plan how often you will check up on the worry bug in your family. When will you hold your next meeting to discuss it? Are there people who could help you on your journey?



Date for next meeting _____

People who can help _____

And finally, how will you celebrate your success against the worry bug? Who will you share this success with?
