Be You In Focus Webinar Transcript

Practical Strategies to support children and young people with anxiety during COVID-19 times

Presented by Dr Natasha Marston (of headspace), Jennie Hudson (Macquarie University Centre for Emotional Health) and Dr Sally Fitzpatrick (Everymind).

Dr Natasha Marston

Hello everyone. And welcome to today's In Focus Webinar, practical strategies to support children and young people with anxiety during COVID-19 time. My name is Natasha and I'm a clinical consultant with Be You. I'm a psychologist and I've completed a Master of Educational and developmental psychology and a PhD. And I work with children and young people, their families and school community. We're very fortunate today to be joined by two very eminent guest speakers as well and whom I'll introduce in a minute. You can use the Q&A manager to submit a question to the panel. If you've already submitted a question with your registration form, there's no need to resubmit it here today, and we'll do our best to address as many questions as we possibly can in our Q&A later on, and also in our post webinar results.

Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the first nations people as the Traditional Owners and custodians on the lands on which we're meeting. For me, I'm lucky enough to be sitting down in lutruwita in Tasmania. And so I'd really like to pay my thanks and extend my respect and my gratitude to the Muwinina people and to their Elders, past present and emerging. And I'd really like to thank them for their care of the land, the river and the sea, their connection with family and community and their commitment to their rich culture and for sharing that with me. I'd also really like to extend my respect and thanks to the Elders, past present emerging on the land from which you're all sitting today from around Australia and joining us here.

Today is the first day that marks the beginning of National Reconciliation week and I'd also really like to encourage everyone to think about what action or actions you might be taking to mark this week of reconciliation. And if you're stuck for ideas, Reconciliation Australia have a number of fantastic resources and strategies and suggestions for you and which take into consideration the restrictions that we have in terms of physical distancing at the moment.

Today, we'll be talking about anxiety and it's worth recognising that we each bring to this conversation, our experiences and our perspectives about mental health. Talking about mental health may bring up

challenging thoughts, and I'd encourage everyone today to think about what sort of self-care strategies you might put into place if this is the case for you. It's really important that you prioritise your own wellbeing and take a break if you need to, and perhaps consider who you might reach out to and connect with after this webinar or whether you might prefer to use one of the numbers or the websites that we've popped there on the screen available to you. There's no chat box in today's webinar. There's lots of people joining us, but definitely please use the Q&A manager if you'd like to post a general question through to the panel.

Be You is the Australian National Mental Health Initiative that includes a framework, a professional learning development package resources, and secondary Postvention support. All of this is complimented by an experienced and passionate workforce, and which includes educational and clinical consultants. It's led by Beyond Blue in collaboration with delivery partners, Early Childhood Australia and Headspace. Our vision at Be You is that every Australian early learning service in school is a positive, inclusive, and resilient community where every child, young person, staff member and parent or carer can obtain their best possible mental health. Shortly will handover to our guest speakers Jennie and Sally, who will provide their wisdom and expertise around understanding and providing practical strategies and supports for children and young people experiencing anxiety related to COVID-19, as well as ways to embrace practices at school.

Following this, we'll have a Q&A panel, and we'll be responding to some of the questions that you've popped through to us, before looking very briefly at the Be You resources that might guide and support your support for children and young people. So it really is my privilege and to introduce our two guests and expert speakers here with you today. Jennie Hudson is a professor within the Department of Psychology and Director of the Centre for Emotional Health at Macquarie University. Jennie's research focuses on understanding the factors that contribute to children's emotional health and working to improve services available to children experiencing anxiety and other emotional disorders. Jennie's work at the Centre for Emotional Health impacts the lives of Australian families through the development of new ways for understanding and treating anxiety disorders.

We're also very fortunate to be joined by Dr. Sally Fitzpatrick, who is a developmental and clinical psychologist, an Honorary Postdoctoral Fellow at Macquarie University and the acting program manager at Every Mind. Sally's education and which work history combined to highlight her commitment to advocating for the mental health and wellbeing of youth and their families through research and clinical practice. Sally is passionate about understanding the factors that contribute to mental health and wellbeing of all Australians and translating this knowledge into evidence based programs that focus on children and families. Welcome to you both and thank you so much for being here with us today.

Professor Jennie Hudson

It is a pleasure, welcome to everybody. I'm presenting from the Eora nation today, and I'm very excited to be here. Sally and I are very much looking forward to sharing information with you about how we can better support children and young people with anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, as so many educators here from across Australia, and no doubt, you're all experiencing different pressures and issues. I wish Sally and I really could be there in person in your staff room, having a conversation over a cup of tea or coffee. That's not possible today, but we are really grateful for Be You for setting up this webinar and providing us with this opportunity to be able to provide better support for your students.

So I'm going to just briefly touch on the importance of school staff and educators in ensuring children receive mental health support. Results from our National Mental Survey in Australia of children and young people, looked at those children who actually do experience some mental health problem and over half of those Australian children reported receiving some sort of informal support from school staff and this was primarily from the classroom teacher.

It's clear that schools and Australian teachers play a really important role in recognising and supporting, children and young people with mental health problems, including anxiety. Sally and I recently did a study together on this topic and found that Australian educators actually agreed that dealing with anxiety was a shared responsibility and schools are a really important part of sharing that responsibility. So, Sally and I are really excited about trying to help fill that gap today by sharing our knowledge about how to best support our students with anxiety.

Our objectives for today, let's see, there we go. We've got five of them, the first one is really to understand anxiety and what it is that we're talking about and why the situation at the moment with the COVID-19 pandemic is causing so much anxiety for some students. We want to identify the key strategies for children and families struggling with anxiety at this time, and the kinds of strategies that are going to be relevant for you in our school settings. Sal will also talk about knowing when is the right time to suggest treatment, how to know when to suggest treatment and when you can, no longer dealing with it within the classroom setting or not dealing with at a school level, where to go. And Sal has some really important strategies about how you can embed new kind of practices within your school that might be a long-term strategy, in supporting children or students with anxiety. So not just around COVID-19, but more broadly in the long-term. So a lot to achieve in a short space of time. Let's see how we go. And we'll hopefully have some questions, lots of question time at the end to kind of really drill down to some of the issues that we've talked about.

What is anxiety? We're talking about anxiety disorders or problems with anxiety, but in actual fact, anxiety itself is a really normal emotion that we all experience, it's universal. We'll be talking today about how to help children and young people with high levels of anxiety and I'll get to that in a minute, but it's important to understand what this concept of anxiety is, what it is that we're talking about, what is it that we're not talking about, because it is different from other emotions that a person might experience, and we are focusing specifically on anxiety.

As I mentioned, everybody does experience anxiety, it's a basic emotion. And there are really three parts of this experience. The first is what happens in our body and that's really the first thing that we might recognise when we, when we experience anxiety so, we might feel, if you think about the most recent time, you might've felt nervous about something, you might get butterflies in your stomach, your heart rate might, can accelerate quite quickly, you might get sweaty palms, you might kind of all of a sudden feel tense, lots of different things that happen in, in different people, but is all a normal experience when our kind of bodies switch on.

And so that takes us to the next point around our thoughts. Our thoughts are a really critical component of anxiety. We only ever feel anxious when we think something bad is going to happen. Thinking that something bad is going to happen or perhaps might've happened in the past. This anxiety response only switches on when threat has been detected. And it may be real, or it might be imagined, it might be exaggerated, but it doesn't matter it switches on. The system works just the same, whether it's real or imagined.

Now the third really important component is our actions or what we do. We can have a range of different actions in responses to anxiety. One response, could be to run away from the situation, which is really common, to try and stay away from it as much as possible. And another could be to stay and fight the situation. There are a few other different responses that we could have as well, but the primary ones that often happens when we are anxious is to avoid, to stay away from situations that scare us. It's pretty functional because if you've got something terrifying coming towards you, it's important to be able to have the energy to runaway from it and so our bodies are equipping us to be able to respond to threats. But this response does switch on sometimes when it doesn't need to, when it's more of an imagined threat or not as, as real as what it may be.

Anxiety sits on it on a continuum, we've got this kind of optimal range in the middle and most of us sit here in this kind of optimal space. If you're a psychopath, you might sit down this kind of low end. But most of us will sit in this kind of optimal range in the middle. For some people, they experience a high level of anxiety, it's not different from the anxiety that's in this optimal range, it just happens more often and more intensely. So they might experience this bodily symptom as symptoms of anxiety, that kind of stomach, the butterflies in your stomach or heart racing, sweaty palms, all of those symptoms on a more daily basis.

And so, Children might talk about having tummy aches or not feeling well. They might talk about, having headaches or not being able to sleep. We also know that children with anxiety focus on threat a lot, they're more likely to focus on something bad happening in a situation. So if I walk into a playground full of full of kids, other children might be focused on kind of what they're playing or what other things are going on. But a child who has anxiety might go into that situation going, *"Oh my goodness, look at all these people close together, I'm going to catch COVID-19 that's for sure, I'm going to die".* And they're going to be more likely to think something bad is going to happen walking into a situation that is not necessarily threatening.

We also know that children with anxiety are more likely to stay away from situations that are scary. And that's a really key component of anxiety, which I'll talk a lot more about today. But the strategies we are focusing on are really for those children and young people at this high end of the continuum. When we talk about anxiety problems or an anxiety disorder, it's at this high end. The anxiety happens more frequently, it happens more days than not, or on a daily basis and it interferes with their life and stops the child from being able to go to school. We know that anxiety is a common mental health problem, it does place a child at risk for problems later on in their lives as well. They're more likely to be anxious later in life or likely to have depression and other mental health problems as well. It's an important problem that we need to pay attention to.

So why is COVID-19 causing so much anxiety? We know that we feel anxious when we perceive threat in some way. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that our health is more at risk, more than it would be on it on a usual basis. And there's more uncertainty as well, family jobs might've been affected. Family finances might've been more at risk as well. There is more threat compared to usual, something bad is more likely to happen. So it's understandable that some people might be experiencing more anxiety than usual. The uncertainty about whether or not something bad may happen also adds to that as well.

There are a lot of different factors that might impact on how a child might respond to the current pandemic as well. There are lots of different child factors such as the child's temperament, the way they tend to think (their thinking styles), and a range of different factors like their ability to regulate emotions. Also, a lot of family factors and other environmental factors, such as how much exposure the child has had to trauma in the past, how much exposure they've had to the virus, the family situation. There are lots of different things that might impact on an individual child's response to COVID-19. The students you come across will have come from very different backgrounds and have different exposure to these different factors as well.

We are seeing a range of different types of anxiety at the moment, for some kids who are not having to go to school and not having to face the usual things that worry them, for many of these children they're actually not as anxious at the moment. Their anxiety has come down. But we are also seeing lots of different types of anxiety emerging at the moment. Maybe these are children who have had anxiety in the past, or maybe they've been at risk or perhaps they have not been anxious in the past and it's starting to kind of crop up now. The COVID situation has created more anxiety for some children. There are lots of different types of anxiety that a child experiences. There are general worries; worries about getting sick -am I going to get the virus? Is somebody in my family going to get the virus? Is someone going to die? Will I be behind in my schoolwork? A student may have schoolwork or performance related worries.

And often children with general worries might be worried about what might happen in the future. So, if they're worried about not catching up on schoolwork now, they might be worried: "OK, that's it, I'm not going to graduate from high school, I'm not going to be able to get a job, and I'm not going to be able to go to university." So they might have these flow on worries about the future. We are seeing children with general worries searching for a lot of information on COVID-19. They're worried about their health and trying to search for lots of information online about the virus and kind of getting stuck in this repetitive cycle, asking lots of questions about the virus. Children with general worries talk about a lot of stomach aches as well. For children with social worry, so this might be not related to COVID-19 at all but might be as a result of what's happening in the learning environment.

The new learning environments may have led to worry about their online image and whether other students are talking about them while they're on online. Or maybe if they're coming back to school for the first time and they haven't seen their friends and they might be worried about whether they haven't had their hair cut or what they look like. Worrying about what other people think of them is a core part of that social worry. Some other children might be worried about, separating from their parents, so that might be a general concern for them. But perhaps that's exaggerated at the moment because of Covid-19. And there might be a lot of children also who have germ related obsessions and thoughts already. So what we would refer to as obsessive compulsive thoughts and behaviours. So they're worried about getting sick and having to wash their hands a lot more. So what we're seeing is that some children with obsessive compulsive worries are actually feeling like they need to wash and, and be more prepared, even more than usual. There's lots of different things that might be impacting children and young people with anxiety at the moment.

I want to talk about some general principles first, before I focus on specific strategies for anxiety. These are relevant for general mental health, not just for anxiety, but I think they're important, I can't launch into talking about strategies for anxiety without having mentioned these. I'm going to just talk about these first two strategies to start with and then I'll talk more about other six key points, what we see as really critical strategies, in terms of helping support children and young people at the moment.

The first strategy is around providing a safe and secure environment. A child's mental health is really impacted by whether or not they feel safe and secure. If a child is coming to school or coming from an environment where they are not safe and where they're experiencing violence, we know that that is going to have an impact on their general mental health. If they're coming to school and they are being bullied, we know that that's going to have an impact on, on their mental health. So it's important for good general mental health for young people to have a safe and secure environment in which they can learn. This is critical to for a child be at their best in terms of mental health.

Now, the second one is a healthy lifestyle. And these are things that we all know we should do and that young people should do. To some extent, for teachers, this is out of your control, but we know that particularly for teenagers. If their sleep is out of whack, if they're not eating well, if they're not exercising, then all of these things will impact on their ability to regulate emotions and their ability to regulate anxiety and fear. So if they haven't got these strategies in place, then that is going to put them on the back foot in terms of being able to regulate stress or regulate their fear when they're faced with challenging situations. Also because kids have been away from their usual activities, perhaps their sleep routines are out of whack because they've been sleeping in or they're not sticking to the routines at home.

So these are important things to remember, even though you don't as a school necessarily have control over those activities at home, it is important to think of the things that might be impacting on the young person's ability to regulate their emotions.

Now let me get to these specific six guiding principles or six specific strategies. We've just launched this website at Macquarie that Sal and I worked on together along with a number of other people at Macquarie,

where we've set up a website for teachers and we've also got information for parents and we're working towards developing materials for students as well.

We'll give you that link if you wanted to have a look at that. A lot of the content that we're covering today will also be on that website with fact sheets and videos from different people covering these strategies, so hopefully you will find that useful. We developed the webpage based on what teachers were wanting and what they needed. Hopefully it will hit the mark for you.

The first strategy is to provide a safe and supportive space for young people. This means listening to them and providing opportunity for them to come and talk to you about things that they might be worried about. And if they are coming to you talking about their worries or letting you know about them, then it is really important to reflectively listen to them. You might want to make a comment back to them if they're telling you about their worries or if you notice that they're worried in the class so saying something like, "I see you're really worried about being at school today" or "I can see you're worried about whether or not the other kids are following the rules about washing their hands (…or whatever it is that they might be worried about that you've picked up on). If they've talked to you about their worry, using their words if possible. Some kids don't like using the word 'scared', they might say they're 'stressed' about something but they're definitely not 'scared' about it. So using the words that they've come up with is really helpful, but if they're not using any specific words, it may just be that you, you reflect on what it is that you've noticed and providing a safe space for them to come to you to talk about their worries.

You may notice that the child is struggling. You may want to reach out to them and talk to them or to their parents and acknowledge that they're worried or stressed about something. And sometimes this may be all that they need is for you to just connect with them and to have another adult in their life to listen to their words, that may be all that they need. But then if, if that's not all they need, there may be some other strategies you might want to put in place that we'll talk about.

One important thing to remember, I think that is easy to forget, particularly if you see yourself as a very supportive teacher and if you're here on this webinar today, I'm guessing that you prioritise mental health and think that it's important. You might see yourself as a supportive empathic educator, but it's easy to forget that for some children, particularly those with generalised worries or concerns, that they might see you as a major threat, they might worry about getting into trouble even though that you've never raised your voice in your classroom before or they've never gotten in trouble or done anything wrong, they may still be terrified that they're in trouble in some way. So please remember that in your interactions with them. You want to support them and let them know that you're there to help them. But just keep in mind and especially if you're calling them up be or pulling them out of class in some way to talk to them, the first thing that a child with anxiety is likely to think is, "Oh my goodness I'm in trouble, I've done something wrong." Even though they may have never done anything wrong before. So just, just keep that in mind when you are providing a safe and supportive space for, for young people.

The second strategy is, if you only take away one point from today, I want you to remember this one: avoiding situations makes a student feel safer in the short term, but actually in the long term it makes anxiety worse, it prevents a child from learning accurate information about the situation and accurate information about their ability to curb. Kids with anxiety focus on the negative, they focus on all the bad things that might happen. So we want to actually help correct that information. We need to encourage them to approach difficult situations rather than, staying away from them or avoiding them. So as much as possible we want to encourage children to approach difficult situations. It's a really normal response for students to want to stay away from scary situations, but it does in the long run, make it much worse.

It is all so really natural for the teachers as well, to actually want to protect the child and to take them away from scary situations. So if a student doesn't want to come to school or if they don't want to do a

presentation in class, it's easy for educators to say "well, we don't mind about it, let's do it next time" or not support them towards actually approaching the situation. We strongly encourage school staff to encourage children to gradually approach situations that they're scared of. So if a child's worried or nervous about something, we would actually help them to organise a gradual step ladder for them to face the situation.

So I'll show you what we would use in a treatment setting. And, I've made this one relevant for the learning environment. I will provide you these resources at the end of the webinar, so you can have access to these worksheets. You may want to work collaboratively with your students to develop this, or you may just want to have it in the back of your mind - this is what you're working towards in getting the student to gradually approach situations that they find difficult. So here we've got the, the situation, the goal that the student wants to work towards is joining in the online learning environment, being able to face the online learning environment.

And here's what they're worried for and what they're worried about is going to happen in this situation. So we're wanting to set up steps that will help challenge this thought and help them develop new more accurate information about what they think will happen in the situation. You want to help teach them that actually that thought is not accurate. We break it up into low, medium and high steps. You can see these numbers beside the steps. We use a worry rating scale of zero to 10 and so 10 are really highly anxiety provoking situations and these ones here are lower, A little bit stressful but not too much.

We start with these low steps and gradually work through them. We set up a reward system as well that you could set up in the classroom, or you could work that out with the parents as well and getting the child to gradually work up to these challenging situation. Rather than kind of saying, OK, don't worry about some participating in online learning, I'll give you something else to do. Here is a step ladder that you can work towards joining in instead. So the strategy is about getting the student to gradually approach situations that they find challenging.

The next tip is around encouraging realistic thinking. We know that students with anxiety will think the worst in a situation. So to help them think more realistically, and more rationally, we encourage them to be more like detectives with their thoughts. So it's not about telling them that nothing bad is going to happen, but it's about encouraging them to take a different approach with their thoughts.

One way to do this is for teachers to be curious about the students' worries, help them to be more curious about their worries too. Working out what their worried thought is: what do they think is going to happen in the situation? And what happened last time? What's most likely to happen? Will you be able to cope? So those kinds of questions really help a child to be more realistic about the situation and develop more rational and more realistic thoughts. It takes practice, but it's something that, that we find really works.

The most effective way is actually facing the situation, but detective thinking is a good coping strategy that can help. Here's an example of another worksheet that we use in treatment. You can think about this as a structure for helping a child be more like a detective with their thoughts. You can see here is the worried thought at the top. And then if you go down on to this bigger box, you can see a whole lot of different evidence-collecting questions. You might ask questions like, what are the facts?. What's happened last time?

Here is an example of all the different pieces of evidence that a child might come up with. And then they come back to a more realistic thought. Once they've collected all the evidence, now what do they think is most likely? What's a more realistic thought they can have? This will hopefully bring their worry rating down. So this is a strategy that works well in conjunction with getting them to gradually face the situation. You don't have to use this worksheet, but it's just there as a structure to think about how you might want to challenge or how to respond to their anxious thoughts.

The next tip is around encouraging independence and avoiding reassuring the child too much. We want to encourage children to face difficult situations. Part of this is to encourage them to be more independent. Children with anxiety often tend to elicit more help from those around them. It might be a natural response for you to want to provide more help or answer a lot of their questions. But we actually find that providing lots of reassurance makes the anxiety worse.

What we want to do instead is to push it back to the child to solve the situation on their own and encourage them to think up the solution for themselves: "What do you think might happen here?" "What do you think might be a good strategy?" Or, "How do you think you can help yourself feel better right now? What are some, some strategies that you think you could put in place?" So those kinds of questions don't solve the situation for the students, but they put it back to them to solve. You're there supporting them, but doing it in a way that's encouraging their independence and not providing too much reassurance.

Step five is similar to that, but paying attention to courageous behaviour. We know that the more attention you pay to something, the more likely that behaviour is to increase. So in a sensitive way, try and encourage or focus on the times when the child does push themselves out of their comfort zone. Maybe it's that they don't usually answer a question in class and that you've noticed that they've done that. Or that they're not usually at school and you've noticed that they've actually attended. So focus on that, but not in front of other students and calling them out and embarrassing them in front of their peers. Remembering that you as a teacher may be perceived as a threat. But notice when they are actually being courageous and pushing themselves out of their comfort zone.

Finally, this is a really important one and it's about being a calm and coping role model. We know that children learn how to react by watching how the adults in their life deal with stress. So this is really hard for school staff and educators at the moment, because you're under enormous pressure to be flexible with all of the changing rules. You have needed to move your teaching online and then move back again into the classrooms (for different states) but think about the messages that you're communicating in the way that you handle your stress.

And when you turn up to a classroom session, whether that'd be face to face or online, think about what you're bringing to the classroom in terms of the way that you're managing stress. So try to be a calm, coping role model. I am talking about a coping, not a mastery model. It's not that you've got to have it all together and have all the strategies, but responding in a way that's teaching children how to manage stress. It may be that you need to put some strategies into place to better support your own mental health. On our website, we've got some tips around that - things that you can do to support your own mental health as well.

We've talked about six strategies you can put in place in the classroom, but also, that may not be enough. Maybe you've noticed that a child is really struggling. They're skipping a lot of school. When should you suggest referrals? And Sally is going to talk a lot more about this and how best to manage this in a classroom, in a school setting. But we think that intervening earlier is easier. We know that a child who is anxious is more likely to be an anxious teenager and also more likely to be an anxious adult, and getting help earlier is better.

If the anxiety is impacting on their life in any way, if they're not able to come to school, if they're skipping a lot of classes, not able to attend, I think it is important to seek help. Or if the parent is distressed about the child's anxiety or the student is showing signs of distress, I think that is really important to seek help. And I'm going to hand over to Sal now to talk more about how to embed practices and how to kind of take these strategies and take it to the next level that's going to work for your school setting. Thanks Sal.

Dr Sally Fitzpatrick

Thanks Jen and hi everyone. Welcome from the Indigenous land at the Awabakal people here in Newcastle, where I am at the moment. Unfortunately, due to tech difficulties, I can't see the slides on the screen. So Jen is going to do that for me, and I'm going to talk to them. We know from our research that a lot of teachers haven't had specific training about how to respond to a child who's anxious, but most teachers tell us that they still have seen children with elevated anxiety in the classroom at school. And they've also told us that they're really unsure where to go, to get helpful information about how to respond to children with anxiety. The knowledge and skills that you've heard Jen just go through - those six principles - are going to help with some of this.

And what you've really heard is some of the best practices you can use to directly help the children in your classroom. The research also tells us that attending training like this webinar, probably isn't enough to really result in change in the teachers or the students. That's because implementing anything new takes planning and practice. And I'm talking to the converted, when I tell teachers that you know more than most, that practice and planning is really important. You don't teach your students something new and expect that they will automatically learn that information or be able to apply it. You set up lesson plans to reinforce the content and you go through that with your students.

And that's what happens with learning to support children with anxiety. Taking this information today is the first step, but I'm going to encourage you to try and embed it in your school environment. In essence, training really is only one part of successfully implementing anxiety management for children. But there were some key things that you can do to ensure that your best placed to help children. The first thing to understand is the extent to which children are actually showing high levels of anxiety at your school, particularly in response to COVID-19. The quickest way of doing that is in a staff meeting. Going around and talking generally about what is the response that you are seeing from your students.

This is also really important to do outside of COVID. It can be really helpful to not only know the extent to which children are experiencing anxiety, but also the extent to which teachers in your school feel like they're also struggling to respond to the issue. So highlighting the needs of children is important, but also being able to recognise and support teachers' needs is equally as important. And doing a survey at school can tell you whether staff members feel, they've got the required skills and knowledge to respond to children and the skills they wanted to develop. And then you can plan the type of training that meets those needs.

So a simple scanning exercise is not only going to help teachers, but it's also going to help your school executive understand the needs of students in your school and for yourself and to plan how to respond.

In terms of what to do, if you're concerned, sometimes it's not enough to have new knowledge and skills. Sometimes as Jen said you are going to need more support or guidance from maybe your school counsellors, school psychologist, welfare staff, depending on the system that you're in. But it can be really hard to know when you need to contact these people, who they are, when they work or even what they can offer you. So it can be really helpful for all of this information to be kept in a central place, and keep it up to date and easily accessible by all staff.

It can be equally important to have a list of external referrals. It may sound simple, but having the contact details of local child and family psychologist, or even online programs such as those offered by the Centre for Emotional Health can be really helpful when you're talking to parents. But we know these processes don't happen by themselves. So developing those internal processes in school, creating and maintaining external referrals and evaluating whether they support you even working, needs to be undertaken by someone.

And we all know that these sorts of initiatives, the most successful when they're the responsibility of an identified person or people. Now that could be your school executive. It could be your welfare team. It could

be a member of staff who is really interested in anxiety. But it is really important to have someone who's willing to take this on. Otherwise, everyone is really unsure about where they should go, why they should go there or how they do it. So once this person or people have been identified then what they can go back to the staff with a proposal about the extent to which anxiety is causing concern based on the survey that you've done and how teachers in the school can respond to anxiety within that environment .

All the research about implementing any new knowledge and skills tells us that engaging staff from the beginning in this process is really critical, if we want teachers to effectively respond to children with anxiety. So everyone on the webinar today is taking that first step and starting to learn those processes. I really encourage you to go back to your schools and talk about how you can embed them and how you can embed these processes widely across the school, so that you are also supported to be able to support children. The Centre for Emotional Health at Macquarie has a range of online and in-person resources that you can access. And this includes a range of programs, the children from pre-school all the way through to late adolescence.

Our Cool Kids programs, which are our most well-known programs have been in existence for more than 20 years. They're evidence based programs that can be used to target specific types of anxiety, such as social anxiety, or maybe anxiety for students during the HSC or they can be used much more broadly to look at anxiety and depression. The other thing that the centre does is to trial new programs to ensure that what we offer is based on evidence and it's effective. And sometimes this can give families a chance to a safe high quality programs at are much lower cost. So for example, we're currently running a trial of a new online program for primary school aged children who are both anxious and victimised by their peers.

So if you're interested in this sort of program, don't hesitate to email me, my details at the end of this webinar (sally.fitzpatrick@health.nsw.gov.au>) And I can give you more information about that program. But I've also listed on this slide, a range of other wonderful resources, including resources that they use that provide great information for teachers, for students and families. And this information really does target primary school children and puts it in a language that's accessible for them. The same skills and knowledge are also provided for adolescents and the strategies are contextualised and adapted to the student's age.

We've given you a lot of information today in a relatively short period of time. And I suppose for us, the take home messages that we really want you to be focused on are really those six guiding principles that Jen spoke about before. It's important to be able to provide a safe and supportive space.

The most important take home message is to encourage approach, not avoidance because avoidance maintain anxiety. We want to encourage realistic thinking. We want to encourage independence and avoid reassuring too much, which is a really hard thing to do with either a parent or a teacher. But it's really important in not maintaining anxiety. We want to pay attention to courageous behaviour and we want to become and coping role models, which means we also need to be conscious of our own anxiety and our mental health.

And finally, we really encourage you to think about how you can embed these new practices into your school. We've provided you with our contact details. So please don't hesitate to contact Jen or myself about today's webinar, about other ways that we might be able to support you with students at your school or even about the trials we're running, where your families might be interested in engaging with new programs.

Dr Natasha Marston

Thank you so much, Jennie and Sally for providing us with all your wisdom and your information and with such relevant and transferable and practical strategies and I feel like all that you've spoken about is going to really support our teachers and our school communities, not only in this time, but in times long after

COVID-19 has been and past. We'd like to take this moment now to post some of the questions and I can see from the question and answer manager that there've been a number of really interesting and fascinating questions put to the panel by the audience. We might kick off, if it's OK Sally with you. I've got a question here from a participant who asks "What can we best do to support students, particularly anxious students as they return to face to face learning and what the staff need to do to create a positive mindset around school being a safe place"?

Dr Sally Fitzpatrick

Thanks Natasha. I think that's a great question. I think it's important to recognise that children around Australia are at different points of returning to school. Some are not back yet, some are coming back in a staggered fashion and some are back full time. But ultimately the strategies that Jen spoke about can be used at all of these points. I think the very first thing to remember is that returning to school can be a little anxiety provoking for children and teachers alike, regardless of whether anxiety is an ongoing issue for you. This is really normal and to be expected. Anxiety shown by children at this time doesn't necessarily mean they have an anxiety disorder.

So normalising these feelings and acknowledging that things really are a little different can be really helpful to children. But focusing on how children can cope and modelling coping with them will help them settle and it will also help staff settle. So it's really important to be able to focus on the measures, the positive measures that your school has in place to be able to support children and staff. But for children who are typically anxious or find transition difficult, they're probably the children that are going to be most likely affected. So going back to the two main strategies that Jen talked about, are really what we want to be able to focus on for those children. The first one is around recognising and changing unhealthful thinking, which is mainly catastrophic. When you hear children predicting the worst thing that's going to happen, that's usually an indicator for you that they worry is really high. So you can use the detective thinking skills that Jen talked about to help children. But the trick is to ask the question and let the child answer, as adults what we often do is we ask the question and then if the child doesn't come up with an answer straight away, we try to reassure them by providing the answer.

The best questions you could use are: What are the facts? How likely is it be an event that you're worried about going to happen? And how are you going to be able to cope? So for example, if you have a child who's really fearful about going back to school because they thinking they might get COVID-19, what you might be able to ask them "Well what are the facts?" And the child might say "Most people don't have it. Most people get better." In terms of what's likely to happen, "Well I probably won't get it. Only a very small number of people in all of Australia have got it." And what about coping? "How would you cope?" and that's when you get to focus on the things that work in your school: Washing hands, social distancing. "I've being sick before, I've had the flu before, but I've got better." This questioning we use for almost any anxieties children are going to raise during this time.

But it's worth practising with a colleague. It's not always easy to remember the questions. The more you can practise them, the better it's going to be. Now I think the second strategy that Jen talked about is the main one. It's about reducing, avoidance of situations. That's because avoidance maintains anxiety. We want children to face the thing they're scared of, but to do it in a gradual and stepped way. So for children who are back at school and they're scared of going out into the playground with their peers, you might be able to set up a gradual approach to being able to achieve that. They might initially start talking to a friend, they might spend part of recess or lunch in the playground and part of the library. They might play with one friend then gradually play with more friends for longer periods of time. So that step ladder approach or step by step approach really does work the best.

Dr Natasha Marston

Thank you so much, Sally I can really appreciate the way it's broken down into those sorts those simple steps and strategies, but also so many opportunities perhaps to support young people to do exactly what

you've both talked to around practising new skills and developing those new skills and over time. I've got another question now and I might post this to you Jennie if that's OK? A participant member has asked, how can we assist parents in understanding how their anxiety is impacting the successful return of their children to school? How can we do this compassionately? Not disregarding their concerns but trying to limit the fear that is creating with their child.

Professor Jennie Hudson

Now, it's a really good question because we know that if a child is experiencing high anxiety that it's also likely that the parents are experiencing anxiety. We talked about the anxiety continuum. When you're at that high end of the continuum, there is heritability. We know that anxiety does run in families both through genetics and also through the environment. So it is likely if a child is anxious that the parents are also anxious and that can be really challenging for teachers to be able to manage. It can be quite frustrating or overwhelming if the parents are calling up a lot and worrying a lot.

As that question was suggesting, it does have an impact on the child's stress and anxiety. If the parents are communicating these negative messages and it's going to impact on how scared the child is about coming back to school. And that can be really difficult because you're responsible for the child and not necessarily for providing mental health support for parents. In the same way that we talked about supporting young people with anxiety, we can use those same strategies such as providing a safe and supportive space for parents. To be able to listen to their concerns and their worries and use those same reflective listening techniques I talked about. "So you're really worried about what's happening for your child at school. You are really concerned about him returning to school and whether or not it's safe."

Reflect back the parent's anxiety or worry and that may be all that they need. For the school to understand that they are worried. Think about how you can support the parents to better support their child. What we want to do is get the child back to school or we want the child to be facing those challenging situations rather than letting the parents protect the child too much or not allow the child to push themselves in challenging situations. How you can work together with the parent to use that gradual step by step approach to help them return to school or whatever it is that the parent's worried about. Maybe it's working with them on a step ladder of how they can get the child back to school, and putting some reward systems in place perhaps. Working together with them. If the parent is worried about the child, they want the best for their child. They're worried about them. They want to provide the best, have the best outcomes for them.

And so use that motivation to get the right outcomes and help support them. For teachers and school principals, give parents the rationale for why you're taking the action you are taking e.g., (it's really important that we get your child back to school. And the reason this is important is because we know that by staying away, it makes the anxiety worse. To help your child's anxiety come down, based on the evidence, we know this approach works best." Giving some kind of rationale or thinking behind why you're putting these strategies in place, (or these suggestions in place) might be really helpful to calm the parent's anxiety.

Dr Natasha Marston

Thank you so much, Jennie. And I really liked how you framed that. So really that the child is at the centre of the discussions there. So there's acknowledgement and validation to parents, that the child's best interests are acknowledged as being in the forefront of everyone's minds and, and are at the centre of the conversation. And it certainly, it reminds me, we have a whole module within Be You about family partnerships that people might like to look to, and that can support people in having those sorts of challenging or potentially challenging conversations. I'm just looking at the time. And I can say we've got perhaps time for one more, or maybe even two more questions. So I might throw to you Sally, with the next one. Sally, I've got a question here that says, we have students with ASD, who are returning back to school after a break away from routine. Can you suggest any strategies on how to help them handle the anxiety as they return?

Dr Sally Fitzpatrick

Yeah, that's a great question. We know that children with more specific needs can be experiencing high levels of anxiety at this time. And we know from the research that autism and anxiety are really closely linked, there are some underlying neurological reasons, for that we can't change these and there's not time to go into them, but there are all sorts of social reasons, which help maintain anxiety for children with autism. And the first one here says, children with autism like routine. And so they're less keen on trying new things. So avoidance can be really helpful for them, in keeping their anxiety going and maintaining that anxiety, but not ever really dealing with it.

And I also think that adults supporting children with autism, whether that's parents or teachers, also try to maintain the status quo, because what that means is that it causes less distress for the child. Now, the severity of autism is going to impact on the extent to which both of these things occur. So being aware of the level of the child's functioning is going to be really helpful in planning the way that you respond. But basically what we want you to do, is use the same strategies that we've already discussed early on, which Jen talked about from the Centre of Emotional Health. We use detective thinking. We use facing fears to help children with autism, and we do it really successfully, but there's a couple of points to remember. Some children on the spectrum will engage with detective thinking more easily than others.

Now we want to try and encourage children to think differently, not to focus and to focus on the probability, the feared event. But sometimes these children can be really concrete in their thinking and determined to provide evidence for the unhelpful thought. At those times, we don't want to end up with an argument with the child. And if you're finding yourself in an argument about trying to change thinking, don't go there. What can be more helpful is to focus on the behavioural strategies around reducing the void.

And so trying to start with those easiest steps and working your way up to the harder ones, encouraging the child to identify these steps, and rewarding them for that can be really helpful. If the child won't engage in the process to take the pressure off and ask them to do one thing at a time with a reward, you can, in your own mind, gradually increase the level of those steps for the children. And I would use the strategies that you use in teaching children with autism. What are the things that are most useful for your kids? Are they reward motivated? Do they want to play? Can they be easily encouraged? Use those sorts of strategies to engage them with the facing fears approach.

Dr Natasha Marston

Thank you so much for that, Sally, that was fantastic and really helped to bring to life, again, the strategies that you've each spoken to. I think unfortunately, we've run out of time for any further questions today, but thank you, Jennie and Sally so much for sharing your wisdom and your experience with us. We are really appreciative. I just wanted to quickly finish, to let everyone know that there are also Be You resources that might be able to further support, the sorts of supports and actions that you might take away from today and to try out and to enact in your classrooms and across your schools and with your staff as well.

I think one of the takeaway points to make is that with Be You, there is a consultant allocated to every school across Australia. So certainly, if there's been anything that's been particularly interesting, or you would like to have further conversations about how this might look in your school, please do reach out to your consultants because they are available to have those conversations with you. Very quickly, we have a range of fact sheets and other professional learning resources and equipment that's going to support you to be that calm, coping role model and to help your confidence, to feel as though you're going to be able to manage the conversations that you are having.

We have another resource that I'd really encourage you to have a look at, which is the mental health continuum. I won't have time to go into it today, unfortunately, but definitely check it out on the website. And that can really guide your understanding of, understanding, noticing and supporting students with mental health concerns more generally. Thank you all so much for coming along to today's webinar. To let you

know, the webinar has been recorded and will be made available on the Be You website. We'll be sending out your certificates of participation, and we'd really appreciate you to complete a post webinar feedback that you'll be redirected to in just a moment, so that we can capture your feedback and make sure we continue to provide you with meaningful and relevant events.

Lastly, though, we just wanted to leave you with this final message, that we cannot have the same expectations of ourselves and others as we would in normal weeks. These are not normal weeks. So please be patient and kind with others and yourself. And thank you so much for joining us here today.

End of webinar.