



Action orientated anxiety techniques for neurodivergent and neurotypical young people

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In her private practice in Melbourne, Australia, Natalie Rinehart, the Youth LifeCoach, sees young people between 12–30 years of age. She provides a mixture of counselling and life coaching through different activities to help young people set and achieve their goals, better understand themselves, maximise their strengths and manage their challenges.

After hearing from clients that they struggled with standard counselling and didn't know what to talk about or do differently after sessions, Natalie decided to develop a new method — part-counselling, part-workshop, very visual, interactive and challenge-based.

Her approach pulls from multiple therapy types, such as solution-focused, cognitive-behavioural and narrative therapies. Based on her experiences running resilience-building workshops in schools, she has developed multiple methods to help her clients process information and emotional states.

She works with many neurodivergent clients (approx. 75%) and uses a lot of whiteboarding to help show how they are processing information and setting challenges to use that information before the next session. Techniques are tried and tested and work across multiple ages, genders and neurodiversities.



Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of country

I start with acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land I present from today, the Yugambah people, and pay my respects to their Ancestors and Elders past, present and emerging. I extend this acknowledgement and respect to all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people here today. I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

Acknowledgement of my clients and their families

Without my clients and their boundless honesty and creative ideas, many of the approaches we have developed together would not have come to life. I acknowledge their families that have trusted me with their beautiful young people and supported their growth outside of the therapy room.

Acknowledgement of my own neurodiverse family and friends

The support and wisdom of my neurodiverse family and friends has been a pivotal aspect of developing this approach to therapy. Whether through our interactions in the day to day or giving of their time, they have also helped me consider, check and understand when my beige, neurotypical mind struggled.



Part 1: Anxiety Stats and The ND Brain



Anxiety Stats

Worldwide (2019)

- The World Health Organisation suggests anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorder
- Over 301 million people estimated to be affected in 2019
- Higher rates in women and symptoms often start in childhood or adolescence.
- Only one in four people with an anxiety disorder receive treatment



Australia (2020–22)

- 17.2% of people aged 16–85 had an anxiety disorder in the last 12 months
- More prevalent for females (21.1%) than males (13.3%).
- 16–24 years age group, almost one in three (31.8%) had a 12-month anxiety disorder
- Higher for females (40.4%)
- Anxiety is frequent for young people but even higher for the neurodivergent population



Neurodivergent & Neurotypical Brains

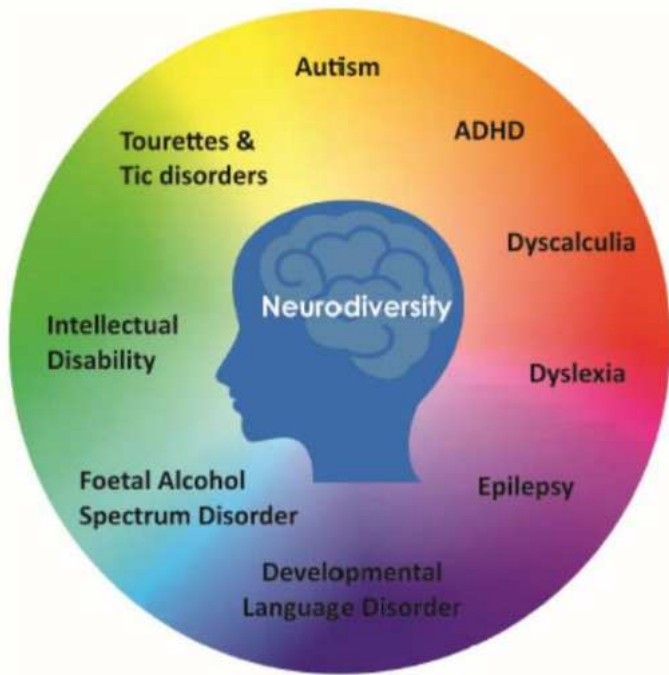
Neurodiversity is the way our brains work and interpret information. How we think, what our interests are, and what motivates us are all impacted.

Neurotypical (NT) brains (80-85% of the population)- Good at big picture concepts, multi-tasking across activities, social understanding, and verbal and physical skills.


Neurodivergent (ND) brains (15-20% of the population)- Good at hyperfocusing on activities and subjects, out of the box thinking, creativity, pattern recognition, and questioning the status quo.

Why we need both- NTs are good at setting up and overseeing how the world is run. However, proportionally NDs are more likely to be responsible for creative and scientific breakthroughs because of their ability to think about things differently.

The world was built by NTs for NTs, so many NDs struggle to find their place in it.




NDs and spoon theory


 **Spoon Theory** @Autisticallity

A theory developed by Christine Miserandino as a way of explaining energy differences for those with disabilities...

Spoons = energy



You start the day with a certain amount of spoons...

 = 15

What this means...





Whilst for most people 'simple' tasks, such as showering or getting dressed, would cost only a few spoons, for disabled and Neurodivergent people it might cost a large amount since we become more easily drained and overwhelmed from tasks.





Tasks might even cost spoons due to the sensory overload that takes a toll on the individual (such as the feeling of water on skin or hair when showering).


 

@Autisticallity

Throughout the day, tasks and activities cost spoons...

 -   - 

 -   - 



 = 9

@Autisticallity

Why this is important to know...

Spoons vary from day to day, with some tasks potentially taking more energy to complete one day than another. Not to forget that you might wake up with less spoons on some days than others.

Getting through an entire day can sometimes be a struggle. You should never compare or assume someone's ability to do things and you should allow someone time to rest and relax to recover spoons. It is perfectly fine to take time out for yourself to regain spoons.

@Autisticallity



Why can an ND person do something one day and not the next?

Low spoons often increases anxiety substantially



Masking and how does it impact anxiety?

Masking

- Masking happens when we hide or suppress parts of ourselves to fit in better socially
- Masking happens when we don't want to be seen as weird, out of control or broken
- Masking often happens with ND people, but also those with mental health conditions

Problems with masking

- It's exhausting and stressful trying to hide parts of yourself from others
- It re-enforces the concept that there is something wrong that others will judge
- It takes up energy resources we could use elsewhere
- It can lead to an emotional meltdown when we finally get home or somewhere we can unmask



Common anxiety sources for young people I hear

- Social anxiety is number one, including rejection sensitivity
- Exam or other assessments
- Life choices for study and work
- Relationships
- Family and friend wellbeing
- Sexuality and gender
- Body image
- Drug and alcohol use
- Environment- climate change
- Rising costs- affording housing, etc
- 'Adulting' well- fear they don't have the skills to do the transition
- Lots MORE!!!



Where young people learn about anxiety



Parents: Some experiencing and role modelling their own anxiety and some just telling them to 'stop being anxious' or 'take deep breaths'

Friends: Watching anxious friends struggle, not knowing how to help and feeling its insurmountable. Alternatively seeing some friend use anxiety as an attention seeking mechanism

Schools: Most schools do some activities regarding mental health but its too generalised for many

TV/Movies: For many shows with young people, overwhelming anxiety becomes a key narrative

Social Media: Many put up reels and tiktoks about their own or others' anxiety to normalise- but some can be quite dark and don't paint the picture of something that can be managed

Previous therapy: Often understand where it comes from better, but taught techniques haven't cut through and became annoying



Part 2: The Anxiety Approach and Techniques



The story: Anxiety as a frightened child



Picture you are babysitting a young child around three years old. They could be your little brother, sister, cousin, niece or nephew. You've had a great night, and everything has gone smoothly. They went to bed after a story and fell asleep easily. Now it's around 11 pm, and you suddenly hear them screaming, "There is a monster under the bed."

What do you do?



The response and the techniques

“For me, I’d probably go up to the room and first give them a big hug. When we are really scared like that, our whole body is very tense. We are breathing fast, and our hearts are racing. The hug helps them slow down so they can think straight. We can’t think straight when we are that anxious and frightened.

The next thing I would do is get out my phone, turn the torch on, and shine it under the bed so they can see there is no monster. This is looking for the evidence. Is there actually a monster, or did their brain just dream one up?

Finally, once I knew their body had calmed down a bit, that they knew there wasn’t a monster, I’d read them a story. This is to distract their brains from the fright they had so they can slow down enough to get back to sleep.”

➤ **Fight/flight**

➤ ***Finger breathing***

➤ **Can think logically**

➤ ***Likely Analysis***

➤ **Distraction so anxiety less likely to return**

➤ ***Colour Scan***

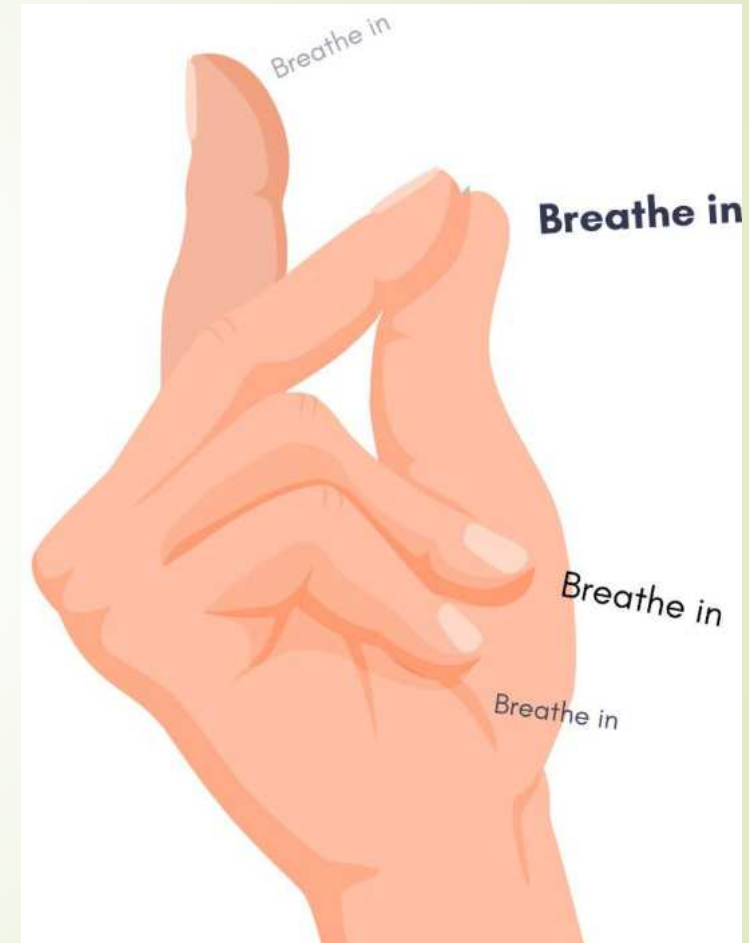


Finger breathing

First, you get your thumb and push it into the pad of your index finger. We don't want to hurt ourselves, but we want to push hard enough to feel it. We want to get our attention back into our bodies.

Then we take a slow but deep inhale of breath through our nose, around a count of five. Then, we hold our breath for around a count of five. Finally, we exhale through our mouth slowly for a count of five.

Then, we move our thumb to the next finger, the middle finger, and repeat. Then repeat for the ring finger and the little finger.





Likely Analysis

Anxiety Trigger	Worst	Best	Likely

1. Remind anxiety is a frightened child who throws its worst nightmare into situations where the outcome is unknown
2. Ask for triggers for their anxiety- if they struggle, offer some examples.
3. Get all the triggers down first- aiming for at least 3-4
4. Start with first one and ask what is anxiety voice telling you is the worst outcome (fear).
5. Then ask them to push fear out and what is the best possible outcome (hope)
6. Then ask them to push all emotion out. Based on previous experiences what is 'Likely'



Likely Analysis- Example

Anxiety Trigger	Worst	Best	Likely
Having to talk to new people	I'll say something stupid, and they will think I'm an idiot or annoying. They will tell everyone else they hate me, and now everyone will hate me.	We actually hit it off. We have heaps in common and the same humour. They end up becoming a good friend over time.	Nothing really bad happens. Some people I get along better with than others. It's nice if I find someone I get along with well.



Likely Analysis- Inaccuracy of anxiety voice



- For people who have experienced bad trauma through family abuse or intense bullying- the likely analysis may be closer to the 'worst' which must be acknowledged
- Remind them that it was unfair and harsh and understandably left a mark



Colour scan



- Pick a colour that you will search for in your office
- Explain our minds like puzzles and feel happy when we solve them
- Get client to stand next to you and start scanning for the colour in a slow, methodical, ceiling to floor move (about 1 metre wide)- point with finger.
- Do first two walls and then pass over to client.



Your turn!



1. Partner up with another workshop attendee
2. One take the lead in teaching the other Finger Breathing and the other follow them.
3. The second take the lead with Likely Analysis with one or two triggers from the other
4. Paper, rock, scissors who will lead a Colour Scan. Stand up together and scan the room.



Why do these techniques work well for ND young people?

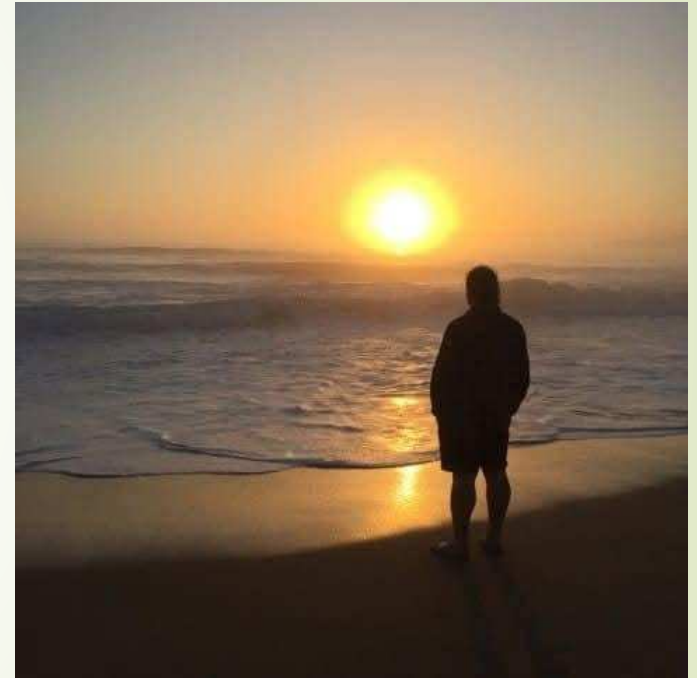
1. **Memory**- techniques linked to the 'story'
2. **Reframe**- anxiety reframed as scared child not big monster
3. **Specificity**- there is little left to guess
4. **Leans into visual strengths**- being role-modelled, on the board and general environment
5. **Practice**- and reminders on their whiteboard to practice
6. **Teach**- ask them to teach their parents to re-enforce





Other techniques

- Anxiety Education
- Reflection session- how is the practice going? Any obstacles to use? Any experiences where it didn't work? When is it working?
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Anxiety prison visualization (for really stubborn experiences)





Q & A: If we have time

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