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# nasen CONNECT

HELPING EVERYONE ACHIEVE

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## FORMING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE



### Therapeutic tools

How schools can support pupil mental health and wellbeing

### Phonics: too big for its boots?

Have we taken our eye off the ball when it comes to teaching reading?

How can we transform an embedded culture with behavioural changes?



# Therapeutic tools to support wellbeing in schools

Wellbeing is crucial at any time, but particularly in light of the pandemic and the challenges it presents. Dr Tina Rae outlines how schools can use therapeutic tools to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

At the current time, it is evident that many children and young people are experiencing an erosion in their mental health and wellbeing. For some, this is clearly linked to the Covid pandemic and the uncertainty and anxiety it has brought to all our lives. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (Banks et al., 2020) has reported an 87 per cent decline in wellbeing, and monitoring by the NHS is currently observing spikes in self-harm and eating disorders which are occurring in children younger than previously identified. Recent research from Cardiff University (Moore and Morgan, 2021) has also indicated that the impact of the pandemic will leave a 'lifelong footprint' on the mental health of this generation of children.

It is therefore imperative that appropriate support is provided to those who exhibit the symptoms of anxiety and to whole school communities to both build and maintain a recovery curriculum and the whole school systems necessary to promote wellbeing. At the heart of this, of course, are the teachers and support staff who are tasked with such an objective within underfunded and under resourced communities – despite recent DfE initiatives.

## A NEW ROLE AND A BIG ASK

What does this really mean for those of us who support children and young people at school level? Increasingly, with budgets

being tight, preventative work undertaken at school level is a key focus. The mental health leads in schools, along with SENCOs and designated safeguarding leads, are taking key roles in terms of leading on whole-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing. However, those who are frequently asked to support children and young people with mental health difficulties, both individually and in small-group contexts, are teaching assistants or learning support assistants.

In my view, this is a big ask. Whilst many feel competent in the traditional aspects of their role, there are concerns that they do not have the knowledge base or skill set to effectively support children in this more therapeutic way. There is also a concern that appropriate support and supervision systems are not always in place to effectively support them as they navigate this more nuanced role. Understanding the fact that they are not being asked to be a therapist or provide therapeutic intervention is essential.

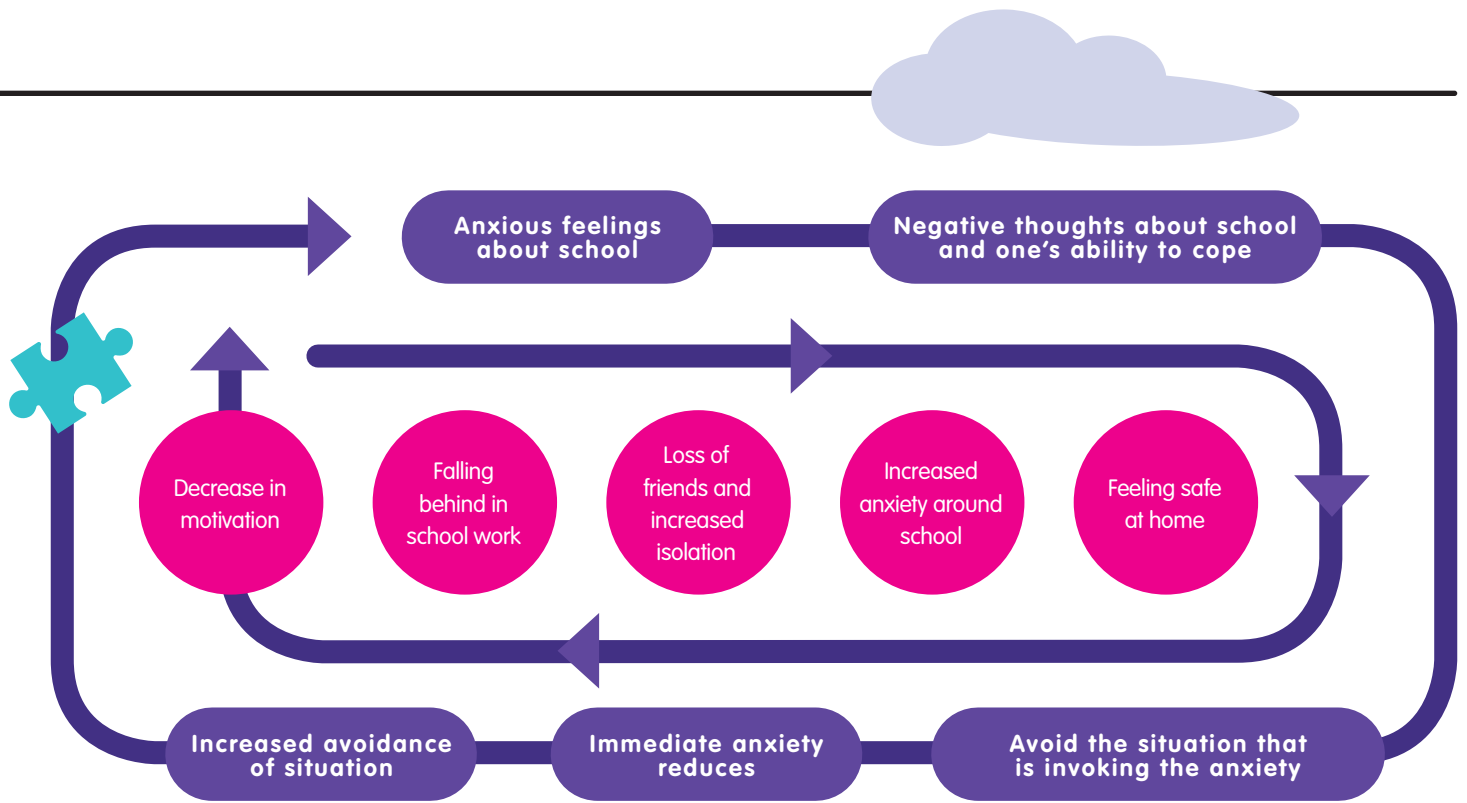


BIO

### DR TINA RAE

Tina is a child psychologist specialising in children's mental health. She is also a prolific, award-winning author.





However, it is also clearly essential that they develop an appropriate skill set and knowledge base to engage therapeutically in support of children with these complex needs and issues.

### WHAT CAN WE DO TO ENGAGE MORE THERAPEUTICALLY?

In my view there are four keys to successfully engaging therapeutically. The first is to develop an understanding of trauma and anxiety. It is important to remember and understand how chronic stress, and the effects of trauma and anxiety impact our thinking. This can then help us to support children more effectively in terms of making the right kinds of adjustments to the learning context and in relating more therapeutically with individuals exhibiting such difficulties.

Children and young people may exhibit symptoms such as poor concentration, less reliable working memory and problems with organising and prioritising their work or activities. It is therefore vital that all involved in supporting them take care to allow additional time to process information and to support them in maintaining organisational skills with a range of tools including personalised checklists, visual timetables, and breaking tasks into manageable chunks.

Children can also become hypervigilant and focus on only the negative outcomes, underestimating their ability to cope. This can lead to a loss of confidence and lowering of self-esteem overall. They may also engage in more black-and-white thinking, where they think that everything will always be bad or always go wrong. Making such assumptions can lead to a cycle of negative thinking, feeling, and behaving alongside distortion of their own perceptions. Again, it is important to understand these key factors and how to support the child or young person in gently challenging such negative patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

It is also important to understand that anxiety very often exhibits itself as anger and embarrassment. It is vital that the child or young person is supported on an emotional level and not punished for displaying such symptoms.

### SAFE SPACES AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS

The second key is to develop an understanding of how to create trauma-informed classrooms and safe spaces. The trauma-informed classroom ensures that all children can feel safe, nurtured, and included.

There are six areas we can focus on right now:

- 1 **Belonging** – making sure the children feel welcomed, wanted and part of the group.
- 2 **Predictability** – making sure that changes to routines are explained clearly and with empathy.
- 3 **Organisation** – ensuring that the routines and activities are consistent and visual checklists are provided as necessary.
- 4 **Regulation** – teaching an emotional literacy curriculum and ensuring a safe space or calm corner is available to children and young people and that they understand how to use this effectively to self-regulate.
- 5 **Differentiation** – reduce processing demands in the classroom and provide clear structures or plans for each task.
- 6 **Relationships** – keep connections healthy and empathic, modelling social skills and valuing and celebrating strengths and achievements.



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The third key is to develop an understanding of how to use self-regulation skills and strategies from key therapeutic approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), positive psychology and mindfulness.

Self-regulation skills start to develop in early childhood. When children have experienced co-regulation through consistent, sensitive, and nurturing relationships, they begin to learn how to manage their own emotions. Neuroscientific research suggests that these relationships help to develop the links between the emotional limbic brain, and the cerebral cortex, allowing children to be better able to rationalise, reason, empathise and problem-solve.

Some calming techniques to model to them and to teach them to self-regulate include mindfulness, visualisation, grounding, sensory activities and controlled breathing.

Making use of tools and positive psychology and CBT are also extremely effective in terms of supporting overall wellbeing. These include challenging and reframing thoughts, engaging in positive self-talk, using affirmations, identifying three good things on a daily basis, expressing gratitude and journaling.

Supporting children and young people to make use of simple grounding techniques, mindful breathing exercises, visualisation and challenging negative automatic thoughts is something that all adults can undertake. This is so long as they also take the time to make use of these strategies themselves and fully understand how to model them.

The final key is to develop an understanding of how to maintain self-care routines and peer support for staff teams.

“We know that unregulated and stressed adults cannot effectively support and help children and young people who are also unregulated and stressed. It is impossible.” (Rae 2020 p.7). So, a final essential task for all who engage therapeutically is to look to ourselves first. We cannot pour from an empty cup.

Ask yourself – what are you doing to maintain wellbeing in these key areas? And what are the systems in your school which ensure staff wellbeing and mental health?

These questions need to be answered before you begin to take on the role of the therapeutic adult who can successfully nurture our children and young people in a time of evident stress and anxiety.

**DOWN TIME**

Let your mind wander. Don't think about any particular goal. It helps the brain recharge.

**FOCUS TIME**

Closely focus on a task or goal. This challenge makes deep connections in the brain.

**PLAY TIME**

Sit back, relax, and be spontaneous! Being creative and allowing time to 'just play' helps the brain make new connections.

**TIME IN**

Shhhh. Quiet reflection helps to better integrate the brain. Focus on sensations, thoughts, and feelings.

**CONNECTION TIME**

Connecting with others – in person, not via the screen – as well as stopping to connect with the natural world (literally stopping to smell the roses).

**PHYSICAL TIME**

Get up and get moving! It strengthens the body, including the brain.

**SLEEP TIME**

Get your Zzzzzz! While the brain snoozes, learning is consolidated. Sleep also allows the brain to recover from the day's experiences.