Thought-Full

# Activities to Help Children Manage Anxiety

## for parents/carers

**WHAT IS ANXIETY?**

- Anxiety is a **normal emotion** that everyone feels at some point in their life.
- Anxiety is like feeling afraid and has helped us survive as a species.
- Anxiety triggers a response in our brain called the **Fight or Flight response**, which enables us to respond to danger, so we have a better chance of surviving and staying safe. This emotion allowed cavemen to survive because it allowed them to run away, fight or hide from dangerous threats in their environment.
- A little bit of anxiety is a good thing because it prepares our body for danger and helps us get things done, for example, revising for a big exam. If we weren't worried then we wouldn't have any motivation to revise!
- However, anxiety becomes a problem when it is severe or frequent and interferes with our day to day lives e.g. stops us from doing things or stops us from concentrating as we're too busy worrying.

A good way to think of anxiety is like a **faulty smoke alarm**. Imagine you have a smoke alarm that is oversensitive and goes off all of the time, even when there isn't a real fire. Your Fight or Flight response is just like this - it goes off and causes the symptoms of anxiety, even when there isn't any real danger.

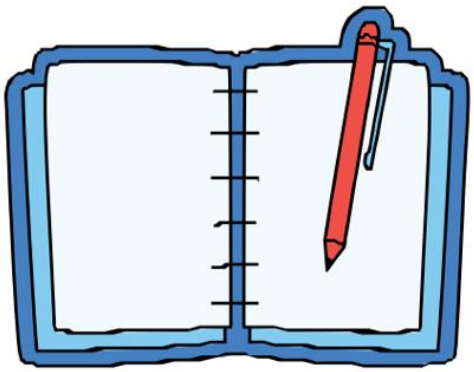
## HOW DOES ANXIETY IMPACT THE FOLLOWING AREAS OF YOUR CHILD'S LIFE?

**IN SCHOOL**

**AT HOME**

**MOOD**

- Talk to your child about how they are feeling and how the feeling feels in their body. It is normal for our hearts to beat faster or have butterflies in our tummy when we feel worried. Children sometimes don't know why they have these feelings, which makes it more scary.
- **Normalise** anxiety so your child does not feel scared by it. It might be helpful to talk about times when you have felt anxious before and how it feels for you. This will teach your child that anxiety is normal and everyone experiences it (even adults!).
- Some parents find it helpful to describe anxiety as waves. Sometime it is big, sometimes it is small and it passes through us like waves.
- Keep a worry dairy with your child and encourage them to write their worries down when they feel anxiety. This will help you identify any triggers, for instance, are they all on a Sunday night before school?
- Listen to your child and **validate their feelings**. Sometimes, all they want to hear is 'I can see you're feeling worried, that's not a nice feeling to experience, but it will pass soon'.
- **Ask questions** rather than problem solve for them. Our gut instinct is to solve all of our children's problems for them, but it can be more helpful to ask questions and prompt them to solve their own worries.



## ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Understanding your child's thoughts from their point of view can be helpful as it tells us what they need to learn to overcome their problems with anxiety. To do this, it is important you ask questions, rather than give answers.

It is helpful because asking questions can:

- Help your child think for themselves.
- Make them feel in control
- Stop them from feeling silly or wrong
- Help them get used to there become some uncertainty.

**WHAT ARE YOU FEELING WORRIED ABOUT?**

**WHAT IS THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN?**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL HAPPEN?**

**WHAT IS IT ABOUT X THAT IS MAKING YOU WORRIED?**

**WHAT IS FRIGHTENING YOU?**

## KNOWING WHAT TO SAY

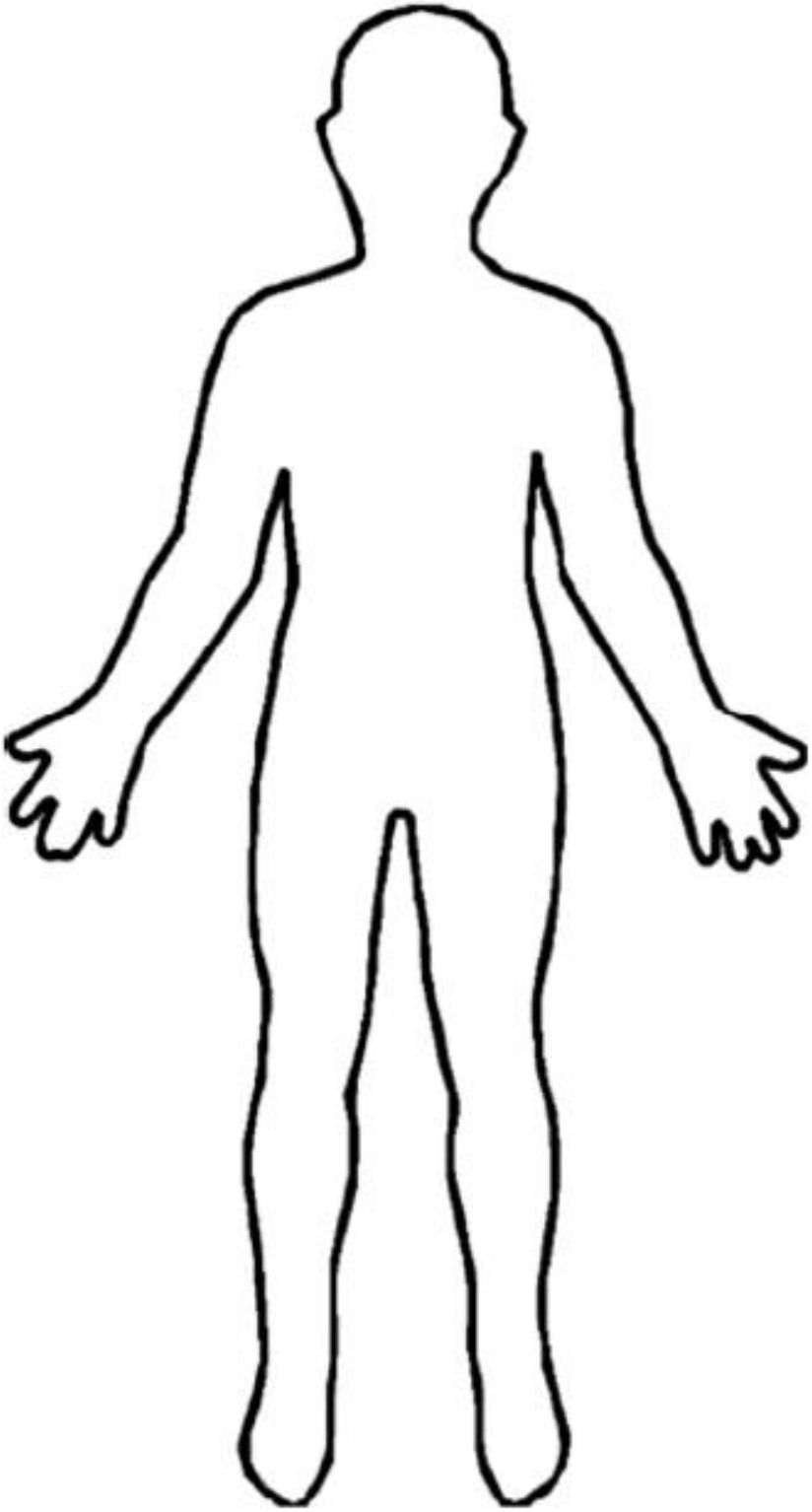
How you ask your child about their worries and when you ask your child can be as important as what you ask them. It works best when you ask your child about their worries whilst they're distracted, like around the table at dinner time or when they're playing or drawing. It can be less intimating when they don't have a look you in the eye.

| Questions | Validation | Normalising |
|---|---|---|
| How do you feel about that? | I think I might feel like that too if it happened to me | Being worried is a very normal feeling. |
| What worries you about this? | I can understand why that would be worrying for you. | Lots of children in your class would be worried about this. |
| What would happen if you go/asked/cried? | I can see why you might think that would happen. | This happened to me when I … |
| Do you notice anything different in your tummy/heart? | It feels scary when your breathing gets faster doesn't it? | I get scared when I feel that too |

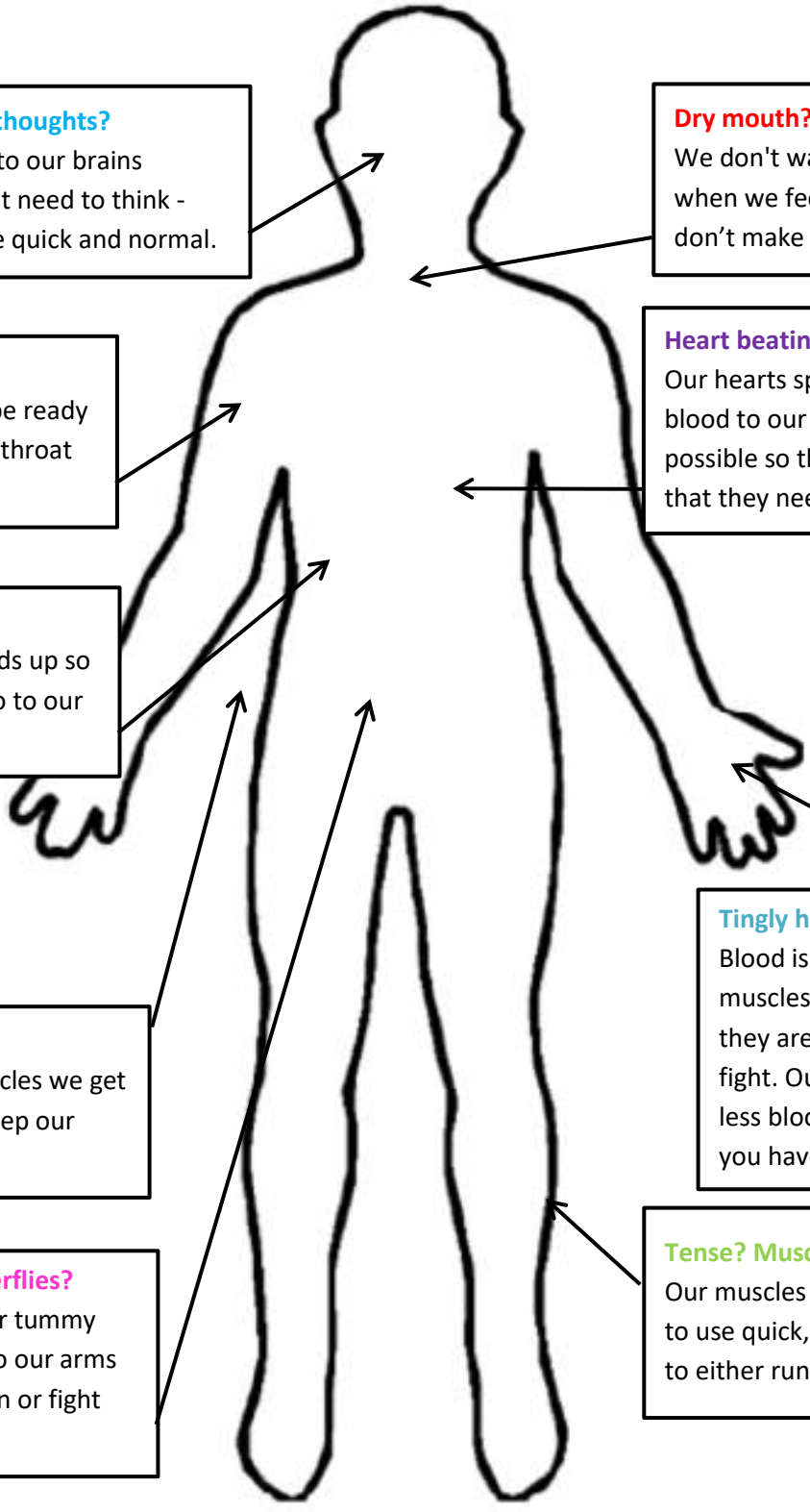
## HOW WORRYING MAKES US FEEL IN OUR BODIES

(COMPLETE WITH CHILD)

When you feel worries, what changes do you notice in your body? Draw and label the how you feel or colour in the parts of your body where you feel a change.



## HOW WORRYING MAKES US FEEL IN OUR BODIES Explained



**Dizzy and fuzzy thoughts?**
Less blood goes to our brains because we don't need to think - our reactions are quick and normal.

**Dry mouth?**
We don't want to eat anything when we feel anxious, so we don't make saliva.

**Lump in your throat?**
Your muscles tighten to be ready to fight or run - even our throat muscles!

**Heart beating faster?**
Our hearts speeds up to pump blood to our muscles as quickly as possible so they get extra oxygen that they need to run to fight.

**Breathing fast?**
Our breathing speeds up so more oxygen can go to our muscles.

**Tingly hands? Feeling cold?**
Blood is moved from small muscles to large muscles so they are ready to run or fight. Our hands will have less blood flow - like when you have pins and needles!

**Sweaty?**
When we use our muscles we get hot, so we sweat to keep our bodies cool.

**Tense? Muscle pain or aches?**
Our muscles tighten to be ready to use quick, strong movements to either run from or fight.

**Stomach Ache? Butterflies?**
Less blood goes to our tummy because it is moved to our arms and legs so we can run or fight quicker.

# WORRY TIME

Children who feel anxious can sometimes want to talk about their worries for a long time, which can be hard for parents to manage. Often parents give reassurance, but find that their child carries on worrying about lots of 'what if' worries.

Worry time is a helpful strategy to reduce how long your child spends dwelling on worries. The idea is that you have a set, limited time with your child to talk about their worries. You might start with 30 minutes and over time reduce this to 10 minutes.

- Worry time is your child's time to talk to you about their worries.
- To do this they might write worries down and you could help problem solve the worries with your child.
- It can be helpful to pick a time of day where you have time to do something fun with your child after worry time, like going for a walk or playing Lego, to help distract them from their worries before bedtime.
- It is important that you stick to the agreed length of time for worry time in order for it to be effective.
- Have an activity that you will do straight after that will move their attention away from the worries.

## OUR WORRY TIME PLAN

**WHEN:**

**WHERE:**

**WHO WITH:**

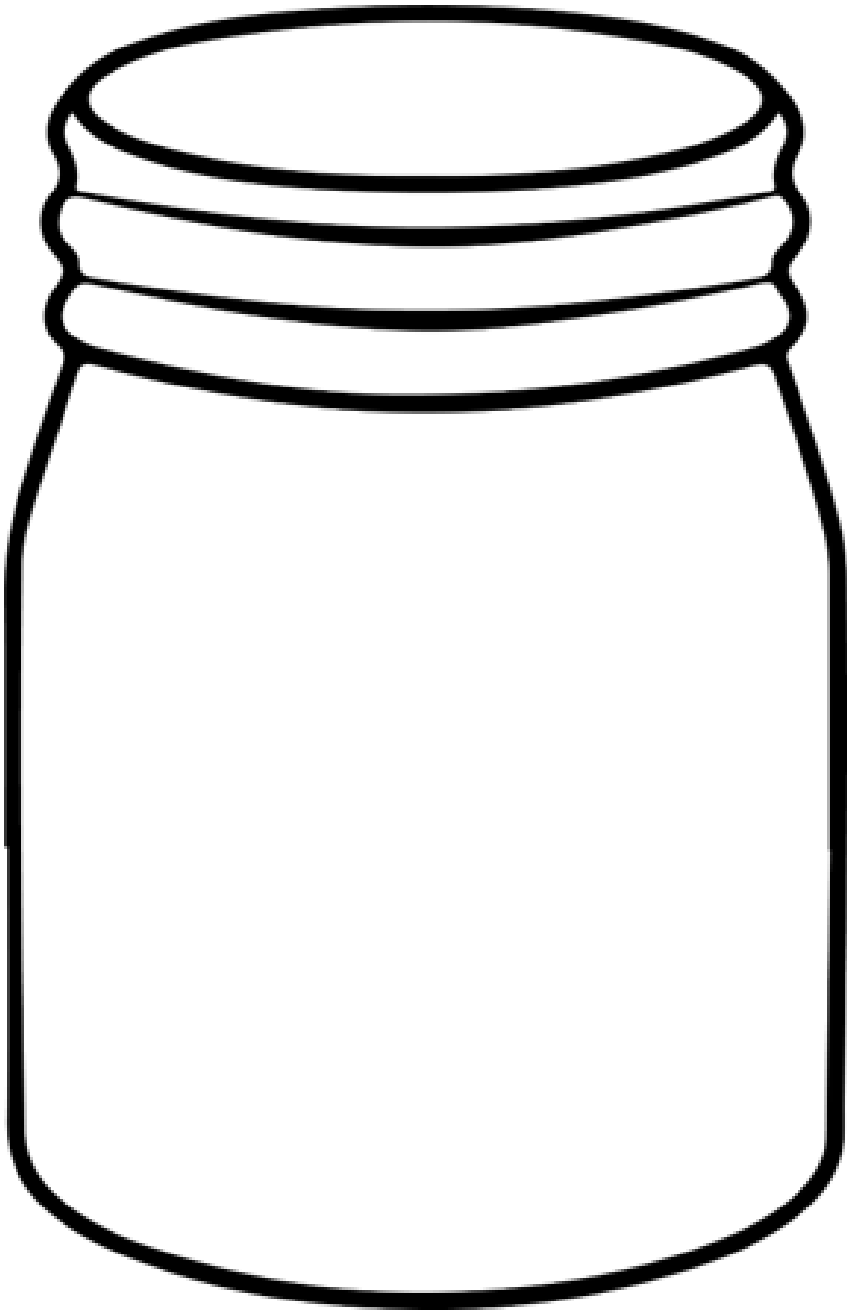
**WHAT WE WILL DO AFTER WORRY TIME:**

# WORRY JAR

This activity helps children recognise and then forget their worries. The idea is that children write their worries down on paper and put it into a jar. Children can then screw the lid onto the jar to stop their worries getting out again.

Children can find this soothing because it gives them a physical way of getting rid of their worries, so they don’t need to carry them around anymore. The jar makes them feel safer by holding their anxious thoughts for them.

Using a real jar works best, but try this activity by writing down your child's worries in the jar below.



# STRESS BUCKET

This activity is helpful for both adults and children in identifying things that increase and lower stress. The rain drops, which are filling the bucket, represent things that cause us stress and worries. For children, this might include homework, tests and friendship difficulties. The taps, which are lowering the water level, represent things that help lower our stress. This could be exercise, spending time with family or breathing techniques.

In the rains drops, write three things that fill up your bucket (things that cause you stress and worries) and three things that lower the water level (things help you feel calm or less worried).

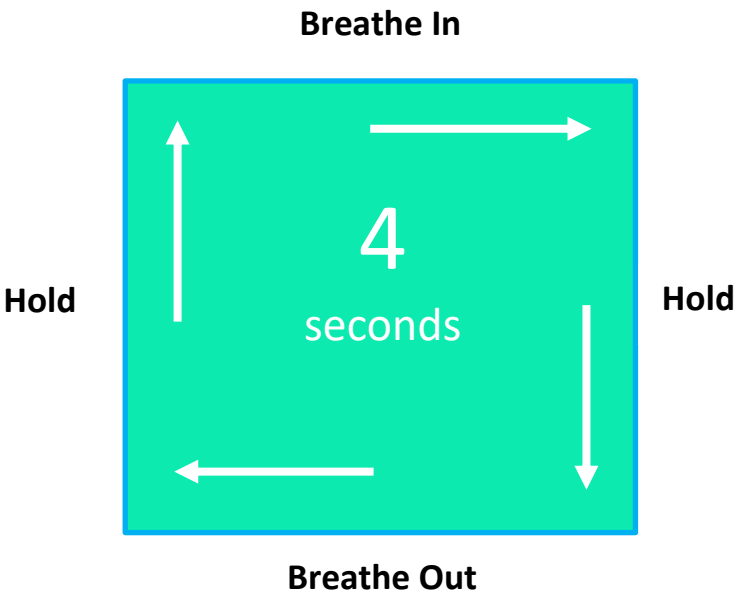
# BREATHING TECHNIQUES

When we feel anxious, upset or distressed, we often start breathing too fast (hyperventilate). By using these breathing techniques, your child can reduce their anxiety and lower their blood pressure and heart rate. This will help them feel calmer and better able to face their fears. Encourage your child to practice these next time they feel anxious as well as when they feel calm.

## Finger Breathing

- Use your index finger to trace around the edges of the finger on your opposite hand.
- Count 1,2,3,4 and breathe in as you go up the first finger.
- Count 1,2,3,4 and breathe out as you go down the finger.
- Repeat until you have done all 5 fingers.

## Box Breathing




- Imagine you are drawing a square with your finger in the air.
- Breathe in whilst counting to 4 as you draw the top line then pause. Breathe out whilst counting to 4 as you draw the line down the side then pause.
- Repeat

# GROUNDING

Grounding techniques help control anxiety symptoms by turning attention away from our worries and anxious thoughts and refocusing on the present moment.

**TAKE A DEEP BREATH TO BEGIN**

5 THINGS THAT YOU CAN SEE

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

4 THINGS THAT YOU CAN

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

LISTEN FOR 3 SOUNDS

☐ ☐ ☐

SAY TWO THINGS YOU CAN SMELL

☐ ☐

SAY ONE THING YOU CAN TASTE

☐

**TAKE ANOTHER DEEP BREATH TO END**

# RESILIENCE

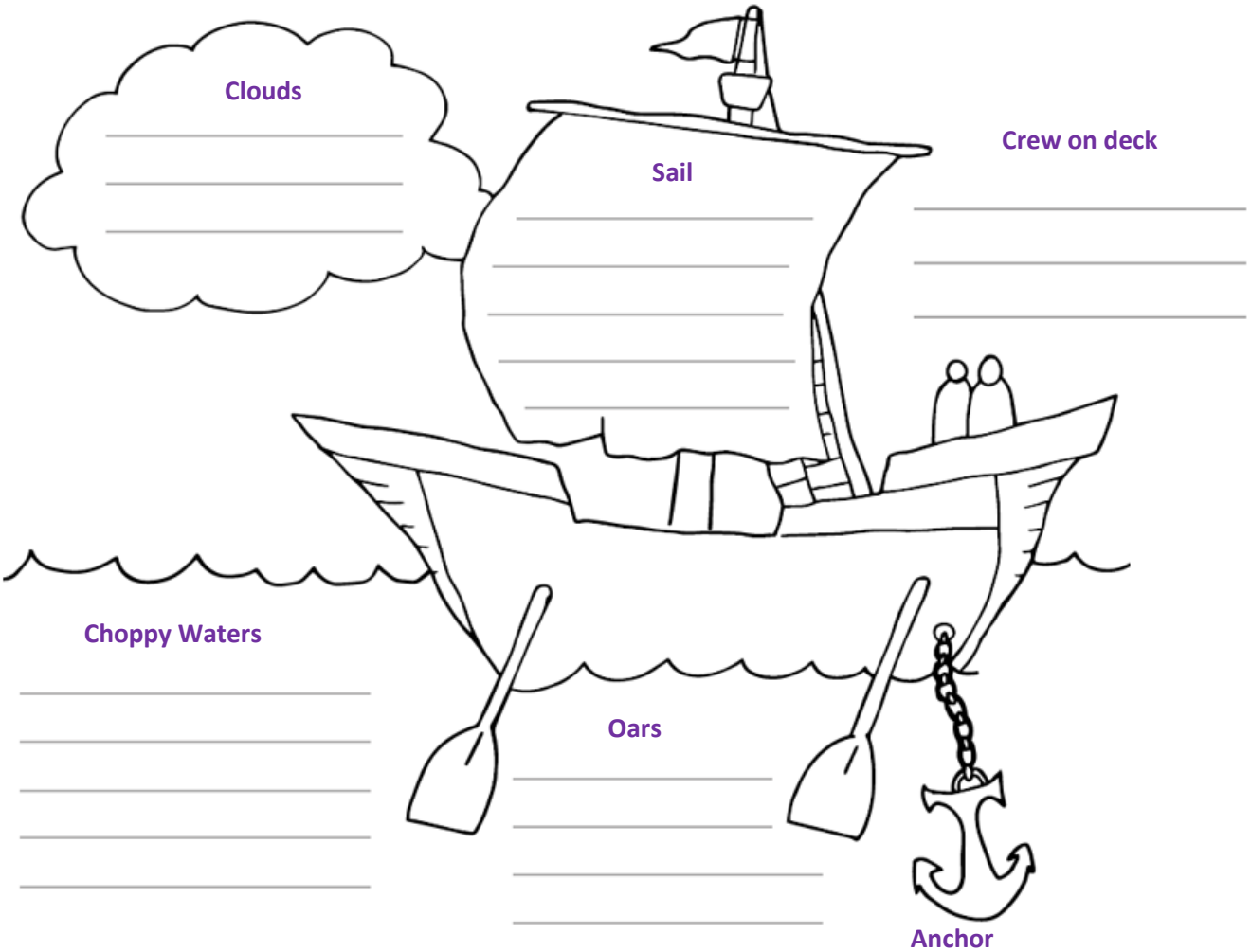
This activity helps children identify the things in their life that make them resilient during difficult or challenging times.

**Clouds:** What are the things happening right now that make you feel that affect how you feel?

**Choppy Waters:** How do they make you feel? Happy, sad, worried?

**Oars:** What are your strengths?

**Anchor:** What helps you feel safe and supported?

**Sails:** What can do you to feel better?

**Crew on deck:** Who are the people important to you?