

# Family exercises

These exercises are designed for parents or caregivers to use with their families. While aimed mostly at managing anxiety, the exercises are also designed to build emotional intelligence in your family. They are more than a set of techniques, but rather an attempt to change the culture of talking and managing feelings, so that this becomes more comfortable in your family.

As with any new thing, it will go better if a trusted adult leads this process for the children. And remember that this is your family; you should choose what to focus on and what to leave behind. Having said that, however, the exercises may bring up challenging ideas or new conversations in your family. Try to be brave about this and don't shut these conversations down; explore new territory with the hope that it will help your family deal with their feelings in a better and more collaborative way. The exercises are designed to be done as a family, but will work with most configurations. You might also like to try some of them with your partner, or with other adults who are part of your family.

## Theoretical and evidence-based background

The basic framework of the exercises looks firstly at identifying thoughts and feelings, roles and repetitive thoughts, then introduces a variety of ways that these can be challenged or changed. The activities have been designed for children in years 5 to 8. Children in this age group are moving towards independence and are continuing to develop skills in making decisions as they become more independent.

They are beginning to look to peers and media for information and advice. They are also developing an increased capability for social conscience and for abstract thought, including understanding complex issues such as poverty, war and natural disasters. For resources appropriate to a younger

age group you could access *Maia and the Worry Bug* (Julie Burgess-Manning, 2015).

Therapeutic frameworks including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Narrative Therapy as well as our own Home and School Scaffolding approach, are drawn on to provide a coherent background to the exercises. Our website [www.theworrybug.co.nz](http://www.theworrybug.co.nz) provides evidence that supports the use of these frameworks with anxiety in families. Our previous project for younger children, The Worry Bug project, was researched by Massey University for usefulness and efficacy. Those positive results are also available on our website.

## Assessment of anxiety

If you would like to complete a questionnaire to assess your family's level of anxiety, please go to our website and follow the links. If you or your family feel overwhelmed by anxiety, there is also list of agencies on our website that can help out.

## How to use these exercises

Choose someone to read these notes to you all, or share it around, but make sure there is an adult in charge.

Write your answers in the book, or use your own paper if you prefer. Some exercises require you to use a large bit of paper, or to have your own private notes. Be prepared for these beforehand.

Most exercises can stand on their own, though there is some order to them, so that you can work through them for best effect or just choose the ones you want to do. The last section is to help embed the changes that you have made, so it needs to be paired with other exercises. There are suggested timeframes on each exercise. As a family you might like to make regular times that you do these – maybe weekly, or you might like to be flexible and dip into them as it suits you.

Symbols to show you how to guide the conversation



**means there is something to read aloud**



**means there is something to discuss**



**means there is something for you to write or draw**



**means there is something to think about**



**means an extra idea that adults can reflect on**

With anxiety, it's important for kids to know that an adult is in charge. You also need to decide that, if things get tricky, as an adult you will manage this and find ways to deal with your own emotions away from your children.

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

Part One: Identifying the stories that define YOU

## 1. YOUR STORY

Timeframe: 30 minutes

Materials: Paper and pens

People focus: You can do this individually, but it works better as a group



So that was Ari's story. What about your story?

How is it that we become the kind of person we are? What is it that makes us believe things about ourselves?

Why is it that some people believe they can do things and others don't? How is it that some people can deal with difficulties easily while others can't?

One idea is that we create beliefs about ourselves through the way we talk to ourselves about things that happen to us. For example, if we come last in a running race, we might tell ourselves that we are useless at running. We might not take into account that we had a sore foot that day, that the race was long and we are good at short sprints, that we didn't train for it and that it was against some champion runners. If we let the idea that we are useless at running turn into a belief we might never enter another race. We might then also avoid other sports with running in them and create a story about ourselves that says we are a failure at sport in general.

Ari thinks that he is useless at spelling and when he can't spell "Theodore Street" he is convinced that this means he has let his koro down. In turn this leads to him feeling worried and panicked that someone will find out about this failing; so worried that he can't ask for help and gets himself into even more bother.

How do you see yourself? What's your story? Are you a hero? Do you have a "reputation" for being a particular way? How would other people describe you?



Write down some words that describe who you are.

Here are some ideas.

Are you helpful, clever, silly, crazy, difficult, worried, funny?

What else describes you?

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Think of some words that describe who you are at home and at school. Are there some words that other people have said about you that you think are spot on?

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What about some words that describe who you are as a brother or sister?

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And a son or daughter?

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What about a grand-daughter/grandson or niece/nephew?

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Now look at what you have written. Are there some words here that keep repeating? Put a circle round them.

Are there some ideas that you don't like and feel you just can't get away from? Put a line under them.

Now think about each word you've written.

How does it make you **feel**? Tell each other about your words and how they make you feel.

## 2. Your family story

Timeframe: 30 minutes

Materials: Large sheet of paper or whiteboard

People focus: A family group

Now let's think about your family story.

Just like you've done for yourselves individually, write some words that describe your family. You might think of yourselves as "funny" or "brave" or "different". Which words do you think describe your family best? Do this as a group – get a big bit of paper and write all the words on it that everyone says.

Now add some words that other people might use to describe your family. Think about how your extended family would describe you all, or your parents' best friends ...

Often in families each person comes to be seen in particular ways – we could call them roles, like characters in a play.

Who are the characters in your family? Does your family have a peacemaker? What about a joker? Is there a "worrier", or a "risk-taker", or someone who always gets into trouble?

Try to identify the roles of people in your family.

List them here.

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Does everyone agree with these roles?

Do you like **your** character/role?

How do you think these roles came about? Usually there are stories that people tell that support these roles developing. We have an experience that we then make into a story, and then we look for more examples in other experiences that fit that story. The story turns into a belief about a person and before you know it, they have a role to play!

What are the family stories that support your roles? Tell some of these stories now.

**You might also like to read about "dominant" stories in the "Magical thinking and mind reading" section of this book. It discusses how we prioritise some stories and forget about others, so that one story becomes dominant in our lives.**

## 3. Talking about feelings

Timeframe: 30 minutes

Materials: Slips of paper, bowl

People focus: Family group



Sometimes we keep secrets because we are scared that telling them will be embarrassing or get us into trouble. Ari doesn't want his parents to know about his difficulties at school because he thinks he will get into trouble and because he doesn't want them to think he is stupid. When we can talk about our feelings, it becomes easier to get help when we need it, and we don't have to deal with things all by ourselves. When we are worried, sharing our feelings means that other people can shoulder some of the worry too, or they can reassure us that we don't need to worry.

Some simple kinds of feelings that we all have are anger, sadness, worry, fear, happiness, jealousy, shame and annoyance.

Think about each of these feelings while answering the questions. (You might like to do this exercise either as a discussion or have everyone write their own ideas down.)



Which of these feelings are easy to talk about in your family?

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Which ones are hard to talk about?

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Which feelings would you like to talk about more?

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Are there some feelings missing from this list that you would like to think about?



Ask the adults in the room about what feelings they talked about in their own families when they were children.



On slips of paper, write at least two things each that you would like to be able to talk about, Put them in a bowl, and ask one person to read them all out.



**Think about the things that your family has said they would like to be able to talk about more. Is there a way that you could make this happen? What is the risk if you do? What would it change about your family? Are there things that your parents never talked about with you? Have these things carried over into your new family?**

## Part Two: Starting a NEW story

### 4. New Action Generator

Timeframe: 45 minutes

Materials: Piece of paper for each person

People focus: Individuals or family group



There's a funny thing about thinking and feeling: when we think in a certain way, it makes certain feelings happen, and then we act on those feelings. For example, when Ava **thinks** about inviting her friend over to play, one of the thoughts she gets is an idea that her friend will say no. This makes Ava **feel** sad and upset. In turn this might make Ava not invite her friend over at all! See how feelings and thoughts can have a big impact on our actions?



Ask one person in your family to think of a situation which they would find difficult to talk about or manage. It can be a real situation or a made-up one, e.g. you were bullied at school, or you weren't picked for the soccer team or drama production, or suchlike. Then each draw the chart on the next page, on your own bit of paper. Put the situation in Column A.

SITUATION (A)	THOUGHTS (B)	FEELINGS (C)	ACTIONS (D)



Ask everyone to write down the thoughts they might have in this situation in Column B.

Then do the same with the feelings you might have that go with the thoughts. Write these in Column C.

When you feel and think this way, how do you act? Put it in Column D.



Now, together, have a look at the thoughts that you all had in Column B. Were there many differences in response? Or were they the same? Are you surprised by some of the responses? If you have a lot of negative thoughts in Column B, think about how this comes out in your behaviour in Column D. Talk about this together.

Now comes the magic! (*If you already had a positive response in Column B, you won't need to do this bit, but it's useful to practise it anyway – you might like to pretend you had a negative response.*) As a family, think of a more positive response to the situation in Column A. You don't need to think of the *most* positive response, just one that is more balanced. For example, if Ari was doing this in relation to the situation with his Koro he might have put "I am useliss at spellign and I have let down my Koro becos of it." A more balanced response might be "I find spellign difficult but I was still able to be brave, talk to a stranger on the phone and help my Koro out of a very triky situashun."



Write in the feelings and the actions that would go with these new thoughts. (Ari would probably have been able to feel brave and proud of his actions in response to this new thought and then he wouldn't have been caught in the escalating situation that happened.)



**Notice how changing your thoughts in Column B has an impact on your feelings and then on your behaviour?!**

Sometimes changing how we respond to things is as easy as that – taking a step back, thinking about the situation and then choosing how we are going to respond, rather than simply repeating our usual role.



**If you're feeling brave, try this out with a real situation that your family found difficult.**

**You might also like to read about catastrophising in the “Magical thinking and mind reading” section as an extension to this activity.**

**Automatic thoughts:** It's easy to get stuck in a repetitive story about yourself, seeing everything that you do in the same way. We often reinforce this story for ourselves through something called “automatic thoughts”. They are the thoughts that occur throughout the day, like a running commentary in your mind. Some of them are judgemental and negative; some are positive. For instance, when I drop a cup and smash it, I might think “I'm so clumsy!”. If I say this kind of thing to myself often, I will often feel a bit stupid. Feeling stupid a lot will lead me to act in ways that match this, rather than acting in positive ways.

Negative automatic thoughts need to be identified and changed.

## 5. Finding new stories for ourselves

Timeframe: 40 minutes

Materials: Paper and pens (or use the book)

People focus: Family group



Sometimes we get so involved with the familiar negative story of ourselves or our family that we begin to believe it completely and think that there is no other way to be. Ari thinks that he is useless at school and this thought turns into a belief that pervades his whole life. He can't see the other story his friends have of him being a hero for his koro. That negative belief shuts down his ability to see himself in good ways. Imagine if he had been able to challenge that negative story and see himself as smart and good in other ways. What other actions and events in his life would have changed?



Pick a negative thought or role that someone in your family has had. Take turns to talk and remember with each other the times that they or you have acted against the negative thought/role.

For example, in the story, Ari's sister Kiri is usually teasing him or telling him off, but when he feels bad she steps up and protects him. What are the times when you have acted differently from your negative thoughts/role?



If you and your family disagreed with your negative thoughts all day tomorrow, what other options would that open up for you? How would your day be different? For instance, now that Ari knows that trouble with reading and writing is in his family but that it didn't stop his dad from being successful, how might he act differently at school? How might he think differently about himself? If he decided he wasn't a loser, or useless, how would that affect other things in his life?



Write down here what might change if you acted in the opposite way to your negative role/beliefs for a day.

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How might your family change if everyone acted on positive beliefs about themselves and each other?

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### 6. Weaving a new family korowai (cloak)

Timeframe: 20 minutes

Materials: Paper and pens (or use the book)

People focus: Family group



Changing your family is hard work. We can think of it a little like weaving a beautiful cloak or korowai. All the different family beliefs and actions are the warp and weft of the cloth, weaving together to make something that will keep you all warm and cosy and protect you against the harsh elements of the world, as well as look beautiful and reflect your environment.



Remember the words that you wrote describing your family. Are there some other words that you would like for your family? What would they be? Does everyone agree? What new roles would this mean that you each have?



Write down your ideas together.

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What would you need to change for this to happen?

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What would the consequences of this change be? What will happen if you don't do it?

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**Kōwhaiwhai are intricate symbols used in wharenui to tell stories through art. For example, there are kōwhaiwhai that convey meanings such as bravery and aroha. Traditional kōwhaiwhai were drawn with white, black and red, but modern kōwhaiwhai are of any colour, and can use symbols from other traditions. Think about the values and beliefs that your family holds. Use the symbols from the website below (in the “Reading kōwhaiwhai” section), or make up your own, to create a family kōwhaiwhai that shows who you are all together.**

**You can find examples of kōwhaiwhai here [www.maori.org.nz](http://www.maori.org.nz)**

Part Three: Embedding your changes

Timeframe: 15 minutes and then regular check-ins

Materials: Paper and pens (or use the book)

People focus: Family group

## 6. Weaving your feathery cloak



It’s really important to encourage the growth of your new identity. Make it bigger, get it strong! Take some time now to generate a list together of things you will do to embed your new stories in your family. What are the things that you can all do to support your cloak to be woven well?

Here are some ideas.

- Do you need to be reminded of your new roles or beliefs regularly? Would it help to put a list of these on the fridge or on the back of the toilet door?
- Can you all commit to noticing and commenting when each of you is doing something positive to support the new story? Parents especially could comment on this at bedtimes.
- Is there a secret sign you can use to show others in your family that you are noticing their positive changes – like a thumbs up or a special wink?
- Make it a habit when you sit down to dinner together to start the meal with a discussion about what each person has done differently today.
- Or start each meal with a time when you all talk about something you are grateful for in this family.
- Set a time once a month when you get together and check in about how your new story is growing.

Write your list here.




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New habits generally need a few things to flourish.

1. Repetition. They need to be repeated so that our brains get the feeling of them and continue to go there and not back to the old habit. About two weeks of consistent attention to the new habit will give it a good start; it will need several months to really embed it.
2. A new context that supports them. If you want to stop being distracted in class, you need to change your social habits too – it's no good sitting with the same friends who want to engage in the same conversations. List here the things you need around you to continue in your new story. For instance, do you need your family to act differently? Do you need to let your friends know what you are doing?
3. Check-ups. Schedule a time in the near future when you will check in with each other as to how things are going. Is it working? Do you need more help? What other things would support your changes? What are the temptations that pull you back to the old story?



**What are the new things you have discovered about each other by doing these exercises? How will these new discoveries support your new family story? What kind of new story could you have about each other as parents because of this? Will your roles change? Will this mean that you act differently towards each other?**

#### 7. Get some witnesses

Timeframe: Open

Materials: Trusted people

People focus: Individuals or family group

Take your new story of your family to someone who you trust – it could be someone in your extended family, a friend, your teacher, your minister, kuia or koro. Show it to them and talk about it with them. Ask them to help you keep noticing the new story in your lives – to be a witness to it.



**A new family culture: If this is new territory for your family, you might like to also incorporate more of this talking into your family on a daily basis. Think of a time that might work to ask how things are going with each other – in the car on the way home, when you first get home, or after dinner but before bedtime. Create a family culture where it is safe to talk about feelings without fear of mockery.**