Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents:
Seven Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle

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“If you believe that feeling bad or worrying long enough will change a past or future event, then you are residing on another planet with a different reality system.

The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”

William James (1842-1910)

Prevalence

• Anxiety is #1 mental health problem in USA
• 1 in 5 kids has diagnosable anxiety disorder
• Most frequent reason parents bring children to mental health provider

The Anxiety Disorders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Age of Onset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Separation anxiety disorder</td>
<td>7.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific phobia</td>
<td>8.4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized anxiety disorder</td>
<td>10.8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCD</td>
<td>10.8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social phobia</td>
<td>11.3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panic disorder</td>
<td>14.1 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Children of parents with anxiety disorder

…are 6 to 7 times more likely to have anxiety disorder than the control group.

(Manassis et al., 1995)

Children of anxious parents are more likely to…

- perceive ambiguous situations as more threatening
- have lower estimates of their competency to cope with such situations
- engage in all-or-nothing thinking (perfectionistic)
- become masters of negative expectancy

Children of anxious parents are more likely to...

- have more somatic complaints
- be fearful of physical symptoms
- have higher levels of “anxiety sensitivity”

(Barrett, Rapee, Dadds, & Ryan, 1996; Bogels & Zigterman, 2000; Weems, et al., 2001)

Teaching skills to kids and parents based on an umbrella process principle that…
...guides my interventions more than the content and diagnostic categories

Anxiety has figured out how to be overwhelming
On the other hand, anxiety is not that complex

Anxiety Demands TWO Things:
- Certainty: “I have to know what’s going to happen next...and I want to control it!”
- Comfort: “I want to feel safe and comfortable...or else I want out!”

Teaching skills to kids & parents

3 target areas
- Physiological (those uncomfortable bodily reactions)
- Cognitive (those worried thoughts)
- Principles (beliefs)
Instead of resisting worry, let's give it respect & appreciation

- incredibly powerful, natural, protective process of mind
- cannot (and should not) simply be turned off by command
  - Kids don’t need to stop being scared
  - They need to take action while they are scared

Principles for the Kids

- When you avoid, anxiety gets stronger
- Go toward fear, & anxiety gets weaker
- During treatment, anxiety will probably get stronger before it gets weaker
- You can tolerate anxiety
Principles for the Kids

It’s a game, so PLAY the game!

✓ When emotions compete, you win (inhibits ability to be scared)
✓ Externalize anxiety/worry over time
✓ Build a schema/Frame the Game
  — Can’t win game with only defense; must have offensive strategy
  — Opposite of what anxiety wants

Caregivers

Start by saying, “You’re right to be scared,” instead of, “You’re wrong to be scared.”

“Of course you are scared. You’re not sure if you’re going to be able to handle [that upcoming event.] It’s perfectly natural to have worries in that situation.”

Externalize Anxiety & Worry

▪ Learn to “step back” to hear & see how anxiety operates
▪ Don’t immediately react to its fears & demands
  [dissociation]

Seven Puzzle Pieces

Each teaches a skill that helps kids & parents shift their response to anxious thoughts, sensations, & beliefs.
1. Expect to worry
   • stop acting startled by each new occurrence of worry
   • expect worry to appear in certain situations
   • figure out
     o when to ignore those normal, expected worried thoughts
     o when to pay attention to them
2. Talk to your worry

- The Content Trap
  - focusing on particulars of each worry
  - content of worry is moving target

- 3 ways to talk to worry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Content Trap</th>
<th>Process (good!)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content (not good)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus on HOW worry operates &amp; what it’s up to</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on &amp; talk about how to fix SPECIFIC problem</td>
<td>Cue “worry-managing” strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassure about that SPECIFIC problem</td>
<td>Be general: “That sounds like worry to me…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give data, stats, rational information</td>
<td>Prompt independent, internal reassurance &amp; problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go over plans &amp; specifics repeatedly</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three Ways Kids Can Talk to Worry</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXPECT IT</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I know you’re just trying to help.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You usually show up at these times, so I’m not surprised by you.”</td>
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<td></td>
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3. Be unsure & uncomfortable on purpose

- Worry says STOP. Worry is not a big fan of moving forward.
- Worry fires off your alarm system, usually way too much.
- Anxious kids & parents try to stay comfortable & certain
  - With certainty-seeking behaviors...

CRITICAL ATTITUINAL SHIFT!

If I’m uncomfortable or unsure or nervous as I’m learning something new, I’m on the right track…
We are NOT eliminating or avoiding physical symptoms
We are perceiving & managing them through a different lens

If you will stop telling your alarm center that there’s danger, it will learn on its own not to push that danger button

These are messages to try out
- “I’m willing to feel uncomfortable”
- “I’m willing to feel unsure & to not know what will happen”
- “I’m willing to grab onto my courage & do it”

Reassurance and anxiety: short term decrease, long term increase
Step into unknown territory, &…

- **Stop** saying, “I’ve GOT to know that everything will turn out just right”
- Start saying, “I’m WILLING to NOT KNOW how things are going to turn out”
- **Stop** saying, “I’ve got to feel comfortable”
- Start saying, “I’m WILLING to feel UNCOMFORTABLE”

**Safety Crutches**

- Reduce, mute or prevent anxiety symptoms
- Increase perception of personal control
- Child feels more secure
- Can serve useful functions & be developmentally appropriate

**Excessive reliance**

- Strengthens anxiety through avoidance
- Limits range of functioning

4. **Breathe!**

- Simple, brief relaxation skills to manage discomfort as brain relearns
- Parents get to practice staying calm when their child escalates
- Allows you to experiment with new activities
- Creates mastery & the experience of malleability
5. Know what you want

Reaching a goal requires finding a “WANT-TO” & then figuring out steps that will get you there.

How to get what you want

• Deliberately choose to do what’s hard & uncomfortable
• Worry must show up if you are to learn a new way to manage it
• Trying new things is a good way to get worry to show up
• Pick goals that you really want to accomplish — you’ll feel more motivated to face your worries

I want __________________________
So I’m willing to ______________________
6. Bridge back to your successes

- anxious children suffer from amnesia
- learn from new experiences & create pattern of remembering (reminder bridges)

Helping kids connect to their past successes:

- What can you do now (automatically) that you couldn’t do a few years ago?
- Can you remember something that was really challenging when you first tried it but now seems simple?
- Make a list of accomplishments that make you proud.
  - Learned to ride a bike?
  - Mastered your times tables?
  - Went to sleep away camp (and had fun?)

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7. Take Action on Your Plan

- pieces of puzzle are assembled
- a written, step-by-step plan
- emphasis is on problem solving
- movement away from CONTENT of each

A Really Clever Guide to Winning over Worries

- Know what you want to accomplish
- Remember past successes that can help you
- Expect worry to show up
- Talk to your worries so they can't run the show
- Make a plan & step into that new situation
- Be willing to feel unsure & uncomfortable along the way
- Let your breathing skills support you

Parenting Patterns that Make Sense …& DON’T WORK
• Reassuring, rescuing & overprotecting
• Providing certainty
• Identifying child as “worrier” because it “runs in the family,” overplaying genetic card
• Allowing “bad” behavior (yelling, swearing, tantrums, hitting) because it’s part of anxiety
• Modeling with your own anxious behavior
• Pushing too hard, becoming angry & explosive, punishing

**Accommodation**

Anything done in service of avoidance, without any teaching or skill building

• adjusting family routines or schedules
• school accommodations with no “weaning” plan
• allowing “unacceptable” behavior & referring to it as “anxiety”
• medication with no therapy/skill building

**Overprotective, Indulgent Parents**

— Have difficult time with ignoring
— If anxious, don’t want child to feel what they feel, & so teach avoidance

Task: model calm postures

• Fearful facial expressions & body language reinforce anxiety
• Parents can **think** whatever they want, but should try to show confidence in child through coping postures

**Percent children with NO diagnosis at end of treatment**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Child CBT</th>
<th>Child CBT + Parent anxiety mgt</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Without</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parental anxiety</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parental anxiety</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
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(Cobham et al, 1998)
A few words about the non-anxious parent

- Often marginalized by anxious parent
- Important role model
- Will need coaching/validation if hasn’t been involved

The ultimate goal for kids & parents...

Psychological Autonomy

Normal movement toward physical & psychological independence

Parents → shift from overprotecting to promoting competency = decrease in childhood anxiety

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Psychological Autonomy

- Encourage child to think independently
  - Ask for child’s opinion
  - Acknowledge & demonstrate respect for child’s views
- Teach them how to talk themselves through fears, not talk them out of fears
- Don’t remove hurdle, teach them to jump over it

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Psychological Autonomy

- Tolerate differences of opinion & feelings (esp. anger & sadness)
- Focus on problem-solving & negotiation of conflict
- Skill of arguing & successfully managing conflict within family = better handling peer pressure & decision making
- Begin to think for themselves, make own mistakes, & gain confidence in ability to access what they have mastered thus far
- “I can handle this” attitude
Information Stuff

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  • playingwithanxiety.com

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• To get my newsletter: Go to FB page and click on EMAIL SIGN UP, or email me and ask.

www.playingwithanxiety.com