

Helping Anxious Children

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What is anxiety?

-Feeling nervous, scared or worried.

-Amygdala has perceived danger.

Four Parts to Anxiety:

BODY: Tense muscles, sweaty palms, fast heartbeat, shallow breathing, stomach aches, etc.

THOUGHTS: Worries, negative self-talk, thinking mistakes, racing thoughts, perceived threat.

FEELINGS: Scared, nervous, sad, hopeless, frustrated, defeated, desperate, etc.

BEHAVIOR/ACTION: Avoidance, nervous behaviors (seeking reassurance, nail biting, fidgeting)

When is anxiety a problem?

In general, anxiety becomes a problem, or disorder, when it causes “clinically significant distress or impairment in social, academic, or other important areas of functioning”.

Normal fears and worries can become more of a problem for children than adults, as they have less experience to rely on in order to cope.

How Can We Help Ourselves and Each Other?

Use the principals and techniques from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

BODY

Relaxation Techniques:

- 1) Calm breathing (In through the nose for 4 seconds, HOLD for 4 seconds, out through the mouth for 4 seconds, all the while pretending to fill and then let the air out of a balloon in your belly; nostril breathing: close one nostril and breathe in and out through the other)
- 2) Muscle tensing and relaxing (turtle: curl up tight into a pretend shell and then gradually stretch out of the shell; robot / ragdoll: tighten all of the muscles to pretend to be a robot and then relax all of the muscles to pretend to be a ragdoll.
- 3) Imagery: imagine a place you feel safe and calm, and then imagine what each of your five senses would pick up – sounds, smells, sensations, tastes and sights.
- 4) Beaker Exercise
- 5) Changing the Channel: doing something that takes your mind off of the “worry channel” and gives it something else to do. Examples: alphabet name / animal game; listing the Washington Redskins, the states in our country, all the bugs you can think of, etc.; reading; yoga; talking with someone about something else; etc.

THOUGHTS

Detective Thinking: Check out your worry to see if it is really something you need to worry about.

Five Questions: 1) What is the worst that could happen?

2) What are the chances that this will happen?

3) How do you know? (what evidence is there that it will or won't happen?)

4) What is most likely to happen?

5) Even if, by some small chance, the worst did happen, could you handle it? (ANSWER IS ALWAYS YES; what choice would you have?)

Check Thinking Errors

Rewrite the worry into a realistic statement.

Make SELF-TALK cards: examples: "I must face my fears to overcome them" "I am okay. Everything is fine. It will all work out" "I can do this. I can face my fears and win!" "What would someone who feels secure in this situation do and think?" "I can change the way I think to change the way I feel." "It is my choice to be calm or anxious. I am choosing to be calm. Let me start with calm breathing."

FEELINGS

Reflect back what you have heard your child say.

Empathize with the feelings.

Try hard not to provide too much reassurance, as doesn't tend to be as effective as asking the questions of your child to answer.

Notice your own anxiety level. If it is elevated, can model for your child ways to bring it back down, or find another adult to talk it through with. Children will often take their cues from the emotional "read" they get from adults.

BEHAVIOR / ACTIONS

Face fears! Make a list of situations that are currently being avoided (making a mistake on homework, looking at a bug, staying with a babysitter while Mom and Dad go out, etc.) and of nervous habits that would be good to eliminate (example: stop asking Mom what time the bus is coming, spend an hour without biting nails, etc.). Place the list in order of easiest to hardest and create a ladder. Start to put stickers on the ladder next to each step that is accomplished.

What makes us more likely to feel anxious?

Transitions (big and small)

Illness

Hunger

Too much junk food

Dehydration

Overeating or undereating

Injuries or wounds

Recent losses or accidents

Too much sleep or lack of sleep

Someone around us is anxious

Change in routine

Lack of exercise

Good stress management tips:

Eating well-balanced meals with good nutritional value.

Sleeping regularly; consistent patterns of sleep.

Regular exercise.

Nurturing your social needs, spending time with others.

Keeping up with work / school demands; getting behind causes stress.

Expressing your feelings; not keeping your emotions “in”.

Make time for hobbies, interests, etc.

Books:

Anxiety Free Kids: An Interactive Guide for Parents and Children by Bonnie Zucker

Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step by Step Guide for Parents by Ronald Rapee

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