

ANXIETY IN CHILDREN & ADOLESCENCE: WHAT TO DO!

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KEY POINTS

- Anxiety is normal - some anxiety is helpful and adaptive.
- Anxiety management is a life skill.
- Review your own temperament and stress coping style (as well as your child's).
- Are you modelling effective relaxation, time management, and problem-solving?
- You know your own child best - anticipate their challenging areas and plan accordingly.
- Consider family-wide/school-wide strategies: eg., exercise, more sleep, "screens off" time to relax in other ways, routines, stop to breathe and listen to each other.
- Re-direct anger/frustration at the worry rather than your child (then you are both on the same side as a team to battle against a common enemy – the worry dragon).
- Play into your child's knowledge, confidence, creativity, and humour.
- Remember: flexibility and frustration tolerance are skills to learn.
- Motivating the Reluctant Child: make a list of the ways anxiety is interfering with your child's life, then make a list of the feelings and things he/she can do when he/she is the boss of anxiety.
- Introduce new things one step at a time.
- Stay calm! Remember your mindfulness skills.

HELPFUL TOOLS FOR CHILDREN

- Worry Dragons: imaginative reconceptualization; externalizes the problem; re-frames anxiety problems and gives a shared language to talk about worries; encourages curiosity and a playful, humorous state of mind; focus on turning a talent for worrying into a talent for taming and trapping worry dragons.
- Externalize Anxiety by identifying it as separate and naming it; eg. "worry dragon", "Mr./Miss. worry", etc.; child is then in charge of taming and trapping the worry dragons.
- Breathing and Relaxation: very useful and easy to learn; slowly inhale and exhale; tense & relax muscles one group at a time or together (remember the cooked and uncooked spaghetti); include visualization; make a time to practice each day for at least 2 weeks.
- Mindfulness: many children & teens already doing this; effective in reducing automatic, catastrophic thinking and reactive emotions in both children and parents.
- Thought Stopping and Trapping Worry Dragons: very engaging activity; may be a "dangerous" or inviting trap for worry dragons; be sure to provide connections between feeling anxious and imagining trapping worry dragons and feeling calmer and more relaxed and being able to face and tackle anxiety-provoking situations; visualize trapping/deleting/shrinking the worry dragon.
- Positive Self-Talk: calm and positive thoughts bring on a more relaxed mood which in turn helps with facing anxiety; positive self-talk must be realistic; generate alternative helpful thoughts.
- Procrastination & Perfectionism: create schedule of all activities (including fun and down time) to see that there is time to complete projects/assignments; break big tasks down into smaller pieces and build in rewards for each step accomplished; practice making mistakes.
- Facing Fears and Challenge Ladders: children must face their worries; they need to experience and tolerate anxiety in order to build "coping muscles"; use Challenge Ladder to create small steps and set child up for success and be sure to reward attempts as well as successes in facing anxiety; encourage self-reliance with "detective thinking", "what would Sherlock Holmes say about this"?

SUMMARY

- Gentle encouragement with gradual approach to facing anxiety.
- Coping tools take time to learn and require practice and modelling.
- Don't forget common sense - food, exercise, sleep, downtime, etc.
- Notice and focus on successes and brave behaviour; praise is the best reward.
- Take child's concerns seriously, while expressing confidence in their ability to overcome anxious feelings.
- Coping rather than cure model; impairment is often increased by anxious family members; lifelong strategies are required; anxiety tends to wax and wane.
- Go slow and give strategies and tools a fair try - remember that negativity and resistance are natural, at first.
- Combinations of strategies will be most effective.
- Measure change in very, very small increments and remember the small successes.

RESOURCES (Selected):

- Taming Worry Dragons, Worry Taming for Teens and other Taming Worry Dragon resources can be purchased through the B.C. Children's Hospital Family Resource Library at <http://bookstore.cw.bc.ca>.
- Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents., R. Wilson & L. Lyons. (2013)
- Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcoming Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias., T. Chansky, (2004).
- Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents., R. Rapee (2008).
- Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child., K. Manassis, (2008), 2nd Edition.
- The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate., S. Greenland, (2010).
- Treating Anxious Children & Adolescents., R. Rapee. (2010).
- Treating Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety: A Guide for Caregivers. , E. Lebowitz & H. Omar, (2013).
- Read "The Book of Yourself" through ongoing mindfulness awareness.

Websites:

www.anxietybc.com

Self-help site on anxiety and how to manage it. Toolkit for kids and parents/therapists.

www.heretohelp.ca

A lot of information for teens and families about mental health issues and self-help guides.

www.keltymentalhealth.ca

B.C. information source for parents, children and youth, and professionals.

Apps: MindShift; Breathr; Calm

Story Books (there are many good books - these are a few of my favorites):

Scaredy Squirrel series

Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda

The Invisible String

Scared Stiff – by Katie Davis

What To Do When My Worries Get Too Big

Nobody's Perfect