De-Stressing Success:
The Skills Kids Need to Thrive... and How to Teach Them

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“Dr. Salk was expansive...grinning broadly. ‘If I were a young scientist today, I would still do immunization. But instead of immunizing kids physically, I’d do it your way. I’d immunize them psychologically. I’d see if these psychologically immunized kids could then fight off mental illness better. Physical illness, too.””

—Martin Seligman, quoting a 1984 conversation with Jonas Salk in The Optimistic Child, 1995

Importance of Treating Anxiety in Children

- Prevalence
- Chronicity
- Co-Morbidity

Anxiety Disorders

- 25% of 13-18 year olds
- 6% of these are classified as severe
- Girls 30%
- Boys 20%
- 11 years old is average age of onset
- Women are 60% more likely over lifetime
# The Anxiety Disorders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Age of Onset</th>
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</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>
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<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>
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## 21-year-olds

With single episode of adolescent anxiety

- 28% adult anxiety disorder
- 38% major depression
- 5% drug dependence

With 3 episodes of adolescent anxiety

- 60% adult anxiety disorder
- 60% major depression
- 11% drug dependence

(Essau, 2000)

### Co-Morbidity

75-80% of children with anxiety disorder suffer from another psychiatric disorder

Anxiety & depression **together** is typical

Untreated anxiety in children: leading predictor of depression in teens and young adults

(Wagner, 2002)

### Let’s teach skills to kids (and adults) based on an umbrella principle that reinforces…

Let’s teach skills to kids (and adults) based on an umbrella principle that reinforces…

![Umbrella Image]
...some level of anxiety and stress is normal and inevitable and how we learn to respond and react to stress predicts future well-being.

Anxiety has figured out how to be overwhelming.

On the other hand, anxiety is not that complex.

Understanding Anxiety’s Game...

Anxiety is a disorder of...

• Anticipation
• Expectations
• Reactions
• Perceptions
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!”

Fight or Flight

Avoidance
Avoidance of:

- social contact
- new experiences
- possible failures
- negative affect
- physical arousal

Avoidance Happens...
in a desperate effort to get and stay comfortable.

So what’s wrong with getting comfortable?

**Cycle of Avoidant Worry**

- Child Worries → Feels Uncomfortable with Uncertainty → Feels relief → Seeks Immediate Comfort through Avoidance

What does it look like?
Problematic Patterns

- Rigidity
- Catastrophic thinking
- Global thinking
- Inability to tolerate uncertainty
- Low frustration tolerance
- “Feelings” focused

In the classroom…

- Attention Issues
- Behavioral Issues (refusal, avoidance, tantrums, emotional reactivity)
- Physical symptoms (tummy aches, headaches)
- Sometimes bizarre behavior
- Perfectionism
- Rigidity
- Manipulation

What do we do?

Externalize Anxiety & Worry

hear and see how anxiety operates without immediately reacting to its fears and demands

Psycho-education REALLY helps!
The Skill of All Skills...

The ability to step outside your own experience (cognitive and emotional) long enough to evaluate it.

Emotional, Cognitive, and Social Management

- How we manage the relationship between what happens on the outside and our reactions on the inside has a huge impact on our relationships and how we deal with challenges.

Emotional Management

- The ability to feel and tolerate emotions without putting them in charge of decisions
- Difficult concept for teens: emotions can be NOT so helpful when dealing with relationships and achievement issues
- Most effective therapies move people from a feeling mode to a doing mode
- We are gently challenging the importance of emotions

Modeling Good Emotional Management

- Don’t attempt to problem solve in the middle of the hurricane. And don’t be the hurricane!
- Gently limit the duration of the venting.
- Model stepping back, and predict the problem-solving and planning to come. (It’s called “seeding.”)
When you’re anxious, what happens?

- You get a message
- It can be a thought, an emotion, or a physical sensation
- It can be quick and automatic, even “unconscious”
- Then your brain (your worry, your anxiety) comes up with a strategy to handle the discomfort of the message
- What will the reaction be? (It’s often avoidance!)

What can happen?

- That “uh-oh” message gets sent quickly
- Adult and child recognize the uh-oh message and the uh-oh responses
- They react differently to it

Critical Attitudinal Shift

If I’m uncomfortable or unsure or nervous as I’m learning something new, I’m on the right track…

Distinguish Worries as Signals vs. Noise

Worry

Signal? Noise?
Handling Discomfort Means Movement...

**Cycle of Normal Worry**

- Child Worries → Feels Uncomfortable with Uncertainty
- Learns Skills to Manage Uncertainty → Moves Forward Using Skills

A few words about those physical symptoms...

because they really get everybody’s attention!

The message is NOT that we are eliminating or avoiding the physical symptoms, but that they can be managed and perceived through a different lens.
How you respond to physical symptoms will have a BIG impact on the length and intensity of anxiety symptoms.

Kids need to understand...

- The physical symptoms are real (they’re not faking, you believe they feel badly…)
- What they think and imagine has an impact on what their body does
- The cycle of anxiety and avoidance
- They can learn things that will put them in charge of getting through the school day

Content vs. Process?

Beware the CONTENT TRAP
The Content Trap

Content
Focus on the source of the problem, and then talk about how to fix THAT SPECIFIC problem
Reassure about that SPECIFIC problem
Give data, stats, rational information
Go over plans and specifics repeatedly

Process
Focus on HOW worry operates and what it’s up to
Cue “worry-managing” strategies
Be general: “That sounds like worry to me…”
Prompt independent, internal reassurance and problem solving

Reassurance and anxiety:
short term decrease,
long term increase

Accommodation
Anything done in service to the avoidance, without any teaching or skill building
- adjusting family and school routines or schedules
- school accommodations with no “weaning” plan
- allowing “unacceptable” behavior and referring to it as “anxiety”
- medication with no therapy/skill building

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 behavior
— Limits range of functioning
Safety Crutches

**Actions**

- Security props
- Relaxation
- Monitoring
- Escape & escape plans
- Reassurance
- Stability
- Limit/restrict practice
- Distract yourself
- Limit or block symptoms
- Protect from others

**Places**

- Home
- Relative's house
- Best friend's house
- Parent's room
- Sibling's room
- Familiar place

**Objects**

- Night light
- Blankie
- Special toy stuffed animal
- Book
- Food/drink
- Inhaler
- Cell phone
Safety Crutches

*People*
- Primary caregiver
- Parent/guardian
- Relative
- Sibling
- Pet
- Best friend
- Teacher/nurse/coach

School Refusal

- Avoidance &/or positive reinforcement received for staying at home
  - \(\downarrow\) reduce anxiety
  - \(\downarrow\) become powerful motivating conditions for child to continue to refuse to go to school

Working with parents

- Must have an agreed upon goal
- Parents benefit greatly from psycho-education
- Parents dealing with anxious children are most likely anxious, or worn out, or both.
- They are learning the same skills that their child is learning

Separation anxiety
- School phobia
- Anxiety-related school refusal
What percent of children living with an anxious parent meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder?

Lead researcher Golda Ginsburg reports data showing that the children of parents diagnosed with an anxiety disorder are up to seven times more likely to develop an anxiety disorder themselves, and up to **65 percent** of children living with an anxious parent meet criteria for an anxiety disorder.


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**Parents and School Staff Together...**

- Emphasize use of skills IN the classroom
- When child needs to leave classroom, have plans for use of skills in order to return quickly
- School staff & parents should be “speaking the same language” to child
- Getting child into school is essential
- The danger of the “pick-up plan”

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**Traps to watch out for...**

- Accommodations with no weaning off plan
- Creating “escapes” that are warm, safe, & cozy… and support avoidance
- Diminishing anxiety by creating certainty (giving child schedules & warnings of change throughout the day)
Working in/with Schools and 504 Plans

- Is this plan accommodating the anxiety?
- Does this plan address the teaching of skills that reduce anxiety?
- Is there a weaning-off component to the plan?
- What role will visits to the nurse have?
- What is the role of the nurse in the plan?
- Does the plan specifically address physical symptoms?

Perfectionism, Mistakes, Homework & Learning

How can you promote the concept that perfection & learning are incompatible?

A critical skill: DIFFERENTIATION

Autonomy and Mastery

What are you doing for your children that they can do themselves?
Psychological Autonomy

Normal movement toward physical & psychological independence

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

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 their fears, not talk them out of fears.
  - Don’t remove hurdle, teach them to jump over it.
  - Tolerate differences of opinion & feelings (esp. anger & sadness)

Psychological Autonomy

- 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

How you can support students...

- Rewarding flexibility and “moving toward…”
- Externalizing and personifying “Worry Parts”
- Normalizing initial cognitive, physical, and emotional responses
- Dissociating or disconnecting from negative worried thoughts…”Just because you think it doesn’t make it so!”
**Critical Cognitive Skills:**

*I can…*

- handle the uncertainty of life
- be more flexible *(malleability!)*
- problem solve *(vs ruminate)*
- tolerate *(and normalize) discomfort*
- react differently to my thoughts
- learn by doing, failing, & succeeding

**The Worry/Stress Stance:**

- I (my child) have to know, or I (my child) can’t move forward.
- This is uncomfortable, so I’m going to avoid/prevent it. I (my child) have to be comfortable.
- I (my child) can’t handle this.

**What we’re going for:**

- I (my child) can’t know everything, but I (my child) can move forward anyway.
- This is uncomfortable, but I (my child) can handle it. Moving through discomfort is necessary to learn and grow.
- I (my child) can handle this.

**Questions?**
Information Stuff

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Websites: lynnlyonsnh.com AND playingwithanxiety.com

Facebook: Lynn Lyons, Psychotherapist, Anxiety and Children

Sign up for my NEWSLETTER on FB or email me

My DVD is available on my website…
Decreasing Anxiety: How to Talk to Your Anxious Child
PROMO CODE pike for 50% discount

Thanks for coming!

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Specializing in the treatment of anxious families
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