

Understanding Anxiety



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What is anxiety?

One way of understanding anxiety is through the idea that all humans experience stress. There are different levels of stress, but not all stress is bad stress. We all need a small or moderate amount of stress to enable us, get the job done, increase our focus to a task and pull our resources together to be effective and productive. If we are "flat" where our stress energy levels are too low, we are highly likely to be unproductive and not get much done.

As humans we are highly adaptive to our environment, which means we can usually access the "right" level of stress for the task at hand. For example, organising a birthday gathering with family will require lower levels of stress than organising a "zero" year birthday party with a larger number of guests and all the additional embellishments that is entailed at this next level. We are capable of doing both, but they will require different levels of energy which is regulated by the level of stress.

However, our ability to adapt has its limits. If we are operating on an ongoing level of high stress, this has significant and deleterious impacts on organ and body health. **Stress affects our brain's capacity to operate at a healthy functional level, which then can interfere with the development of relational interactions and learning.** **The brain prefers calm and consistency. A young brain lights up when the primary care-giver provides positive emotions on contact, creates interesting and enriched experiences, but also allows for curiosity and risks to occur within a safe environment.**

Safe attachment is vital, which is building intimate and safe rapport with your child in the early years, which acts as an inoculation against mental ill-health in the longer term. **Your child can only know who they are, by what is reflected back to them.** For example, if we approach our child with continuous frustration, then the child learns they are frustrating; but if we approach our child with continuous touch and affection and recognition, then the child learns they are loved. This makes all the difference to how the brain develops resilience around stress. **Your stress is their stress and your calm is their calm - lead and model good regulation.** This is NOT about NEVER being frustrated - of course this is not normal. As parents, and as humans, we all experience a range of emotions and this is important that your child can experience all these too. Vital, in fact. However, if the child experiences ongoing patterns of negative, distant, detached or inconsistent environments, then the brain sets itself up to be sensitive to stress and respond to it as a default position.

The intervention to managing levels of anxiety is organic - increase pleasant emotions; back rubs, positive banter, laughter, recognition. **A strong focus on their strengths rather than identifying them through their deficits, as a general rule.** Tell your child that you can "see" them. Tell your child that you can "hear" them and tell your child

that you can “feel” them. “I hear you had good conversations today with friends” or “I can see you are planning your work calmly” or “I can feel how pleased you are about this project” and my favourite, “You have a beautiful smile”. And then smile back. **These moments of resonance with your child builds their trust and internal coping systems, so that when frustration and adversity arises, young people are able to recover and bounce back, confidently.**

Why is it on the increase?

There is no one reason why we are seeing anxiety on the increase, but here might be some considerations that help us to understand the rising statistics. Firstly, we are far more educated today than 50 years ago in our capacity to recognise and identify anxiety. The more we know about something, the more we see it. Remember when you were first told you were having a baby? Suddenly, you could see prams everywhere. The same with anxiety; the more we know, the more we can identify it. That is a good thing, so at least we have a name for our experiences. **When we can name it, we can respond or treat it. And anxiety responds very well to treatment.** Sometimes, knowing you have anxiety can interfere with taking risks because you want to avoid feeling so bad, however, knowing anxiety is present also means you can choose to manage it effectively rather than learn to avoid. **Avoidance behaviours significantly interfere with learning.**

Another reason is that perhaps as a society, we are leading very busy lives, and the only down-time appears to be bed-time. We work longer hours, we have commitments that take our attention away from connecting and we have social media. I need to be clear, that the internet and the world wide web is not inherently bad [in fact there are extraordinary benefits], but it is the quality and quantity of usage that can take us away from connecting.

Finally, but not exhaustively, we have developed into a society of “worry-ers”, rather than Heath Warriors. We worry about many things, and for some, we like to worry. We use “worry” thinking, when we should simply be using problem-solving, or perhaps asking questions or maybe even attending to facts about a situation. Instead we use unhelpful thinking and we catastrophise. In fact, psychology calls this the “What If” syndrome. “What if I can’t make it on time...what if it doesn’t work...what if they don’t like it...what if I can’t do it right...what if it’s just stupid...what if it’s not good enough...what if I’m not enough”. This thinking holds us hostage, but it significantly raises our level of stress, because we push our brains into believing that we are always responding to a crisis.

Strategies to overcome these stress obstacles:

1. **Smile.** The research by neuroscientists is remarkable; when you smile you release endorphins in your body which nourish your brain cells. Your heart and other major organs also benefit because they find a type of synchrony and harmony between them which allow for optimal health states. However, all of this remarkable chemistry then also occurs in your child because science shows that mirror neurons in the very front of our brain, where our forehead is, talk to your child’s mirror neurons when you are connecting, and their brain and body chemistry then mimic yours. The book Positivity by Professor Barbara Fredrickson, a best seller, is a worthwhile read.

2. **Positivity Offset.** Encourage your child to find 3 good things that happened to them during the day and have them tell you about why they believe those good things happened - a powerful tool that moderates anxiety as a long term application [6 months or more]
3. **Speak gently.** This does not mean quietly, it means respectfully. It is easy to default into harsh or strong language when parents are triggered by unwanted behaviours, this is not uncommon, but can have lasting detrimental affects on your child's integrity and internal motivation. **Children become what you say, not what you think.** Use your words with caution. **Your language and the tone with which children are invited to connect, will then reflect their self-worth.** Language is critical. Moving toward a strengths-based language that enables, grows and promotes health mind states. It is all too easy to use words of unnecessary criticism when we are in a rush, or stressed or wanting our children to perform to our expectations. **Constructive criticism is necessary, and so is the ability for children to fail safely and learn from their failures.** "Keep going; You're almost there; I saw you gave that a really good go; it feels hard, but break it up; What a good effort; That was challenging, but you now know how to have another go...". This is a great video for teachers [as well as parents]: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jf404_H0r8Q&list=PLxsntPEQcqIJZtsfR8VbBTBzH-JkQhB90
4. **Feel emotion.** Speak emotion. Show emotion. Speak emotionally, describe your child's world with emotion. Demonstrate emotions and name them as you are using them. All emotions. You can download a quick and free list on my website as a start - this is a core neurological skill that harnesses wellbeing in the brain. Emotions are simply data - they are information that our bodies and our brain tell us about our external and internal world. **When we develop sound emotional competency, we are capable of the most sophisticated level of thought and coping which makes for an optimal experience of life.** Feel emotion. Speak emotion. Show emotion.
5. **Teach nutrition.** Teach slow, mindful eating. Teach how to grow vegetables where possible. Teach conservation. Teach an appreciation of where food comes from. Our society can disconnect from this process, and children can disconnect from their eating experiences. Let them cook with you. Talk to them about the vitamins and what foods nurture their bodies best.
6. **Promote healthy sleep.** There is not enough space for me to emphasise the critical importance of sleep on the health of the brain and it's development. Be consistent with sleep as much as possible, but don't let it interfere with your social life either. The neurobiological research on sleep demonstrates that good quality sleep replenishes brain chemistry which significantly affects memory and learning at all stages of life.
7. **Laugh with your child.** Laugh with yourself. Laugh with others. Embrace diversity of friendships and confidence with social connections. Watch this TED Talk by Susan Pinker and the research summary of what makes a healthy life: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptlecdCZ3dg&t=1s>. Connecting with other people in positive ways and expanding your child's social connections will be the neural building blocks in brain that enable them to reach out, connect and live wonderfully fulfilling lives.