

Helping Students with Anxiety

A guide for parents and a synthesis of a professional
training with Lynn Lyons

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What Is Anxiety?

- The overestimation of the problem and the underestimation of the coping skills to manage it.
- A disorder of the anticipation of bad things happening.
- This might look like: avoidance, rumination, or perfectionism.



What is Anxiety?

- Anxiety demands 2 things:
 - **Certainty**-- I want 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!



On a positive note...



Stress and anxiety are an essential part of human survival and have, in fact, kept us safe for millions of years!

Anxiety and the Brain

Getting to Know and Love Your Brain

There are three big helpers in your brain. One helps you make smart choices. One helps protect you from danger. And one saves your favorite memories and your ABCs. Can you name the three helpers?

Prefrontal Cortex

(pree-FRUN-tuhl KOR-tek)

I'm prefrontal cortex—PFC, for short. I help you solve math problems and get to know your favorite book and TV characters. Give me time to work, and I can help you make friends, or make the best decision in a tough situation.

Amygdala

(uh-MIG-duh-luh)

I'm amygdala and I'm here to keep you safe! I react FAST. If there's serious danger, I'll help you run, freeze, or fight back.

Hippocampus

(huh-puh-KAM-puhs)

I'm hippocampus and I'm like a scrapbook in your brain! I save everything important that you want to remember—from your ABCs to the names of all the people in your family. When something happens to make you smile, I'll save that as a happy memory!

- The Amygdala- “security system” of the brain.
- Amygdala triggers the fight, flight or freeze response in the body.
- Prefrontal Cortex- higher order thinking, imagination.

The Anxiety Cycle:

Triggering Event

[Hear from Lynn Lyons!](#)

Worried Thoughts

Amygdala
Activated

Intensified
Physical
Reactions

More
Worried
Thoughts

Physical
Response

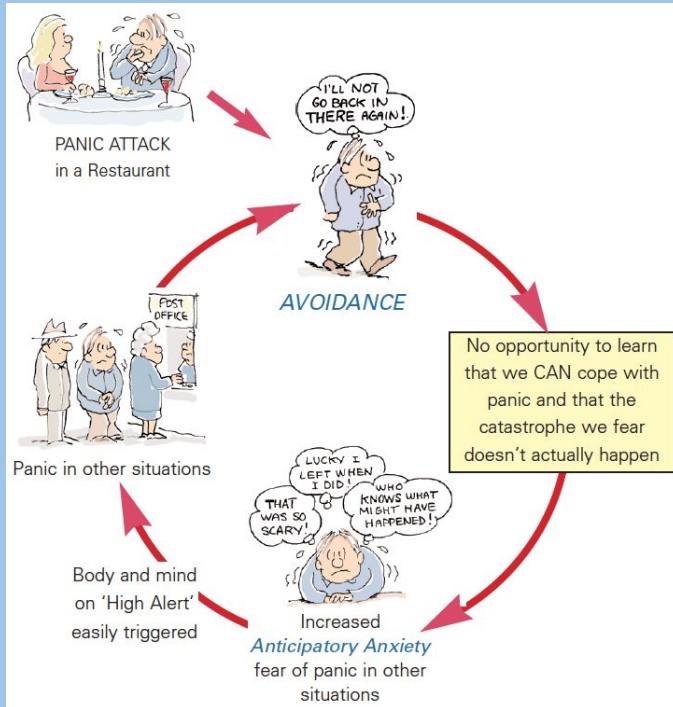
Do's and Don'ts



- DON'T focus on the CONTENT of the worry.
- DON'T focus on the ELIMINATION of symptoms or “triggers”
- DON'T provide constant external reassurance or evidence for the content of worry--rationalization won't work!
- DO focus on the PROCESS of worry and helping kids understand their own.
- DO teach about anxiety.
- Do validate- “of course, of course, of course...”

Do's and Don'ts Continued...

- DON'T enable AVOIDANCE.



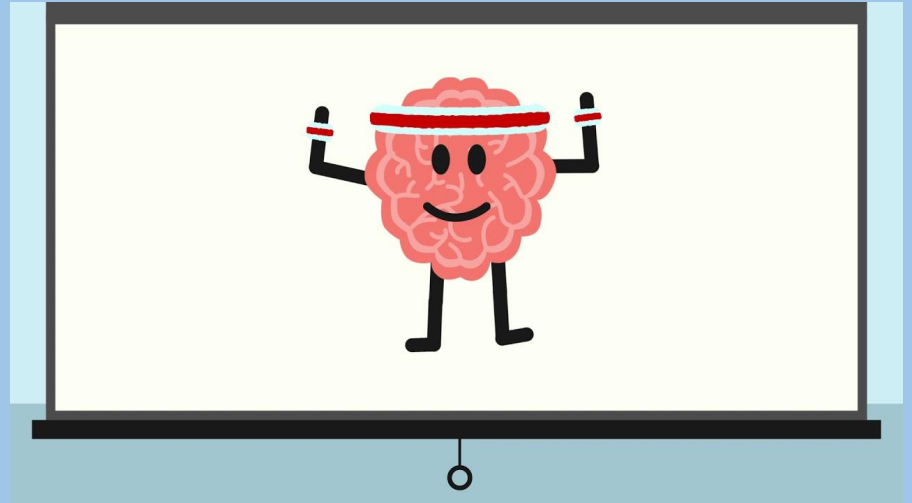
- Help your child externalize and name their anxiety.
- DO lean into and face anxiety --Take an offensive rather than a defensive stance.
- DO rehearse and prepare for worried thoughts and discomfort.

What About Accommodations??

- Accommodations are problematic in the world of anxiety treatment.
- “Indeed, higher levels of family accommodations are associated with increased OCD symptoms, increased functional impairment, and poorer treatment outcomes in both children and adults” -Family involvement in the psychological treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder: A meta-analysis by Johanna Thompson-Hollands, a Aubrey Edson, Martha C. Tompson, and Jonathan S. Comerb- May 2014.
- Need plans that do not support the disorder, but that support action rather than avoidance-- Plans should focus on skill building.

Critical Skills Necessary to Manage Anxiety

- Tolerate (and normalize) discomfort
- Externalize and react differently to thoughts
- Learn by doing, failing, and succeeding
- Handling the uncertainty of life
- Being more flexible
- Problem solving vs. ruminating



Specific Strategies

- Have your child name, draw and externalize their anxiety
- Come up with a script: what can they say to their anxiety when it arrives?
- Teach and rehearse calming strategies: clarify that this is not about elimination
- Expect, Externalize, Experiment
 - Expect that anxiety will show up. What will it say?
 - Externalize the anxiety and distance yourself from your worried thoughts
 - Experiment with taking action and leaning in
 - Make it a game!
- Success Journal: “When my worry showed up, I was able to ____”
- Reward systems for taking action and being uncomfortable on purpose

Specific Strategies for Flexibility:

- List the unexpected or mistakes of the day
- What went well/10 good things of the day
- Spaghetti challenge
- Jar of flexibility
- “How I Built This” podcast stories



Helpful Coping Strategies

- Snacks
- Rest
- Journaling
- Coping worksheets
- Positive self-talk
- Pets



- Exercise
- Listening to music
- Deep breathing exercises
- Muscle relaxation
- Guided meditations

THANK YOU!
Questions?