Anxiety In Children

Liz Douglas
Coordinator – Mental Health Initiatives
Catholic Schools Office
Diocese of Broken Bay

Anxiety Disorders are:

- Excessive worry, fear or avoidance that goes well beyond normal protective anxiety, and normal developmental fears
- The most common psychological problem in children & adolescents. 9-15% meet DSM-IV (diagnostic) clinical criteria i.e. approximately 1 in 10.

Anxiety Disorders

- Generalised Anxiety
- Specific Fears & Phobias
- Social Phobia
- Post Traumatic Stress
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Separation Anxiety

Three Main Aspects of Anxiety

- Physiological – e.g. increased heart rate, tense muscles, dizziness
- Cognitive – fears, worried thoughts, self criticism, underestimation of ability to cope
- Behavioural – avoidance of activities, social withdrawal, non-compliance, anger
What causes anxiety in children?

- Genetics – personality or way of relating to people. Tend to be more emotionally sensitive.
- Life Experience – children are affected by what happens in life. Sensitivity or a tendency to anxiety will mean greater effect of these experiences.
- Modelling – parents are most important teachers
- Parent Reaction – the way parents react to their child’s worries can play a role in the development of anxiety

How do I know if my child needs assistance?

- Interference – is anxiety stopping my child from doing usual things? Is it stopping our family from doing things?
- Age appropriateness – Is the anxiety no longer age appropriate?
- Level of Distress
- Length of time – Has the anxiety been a regular unresolved feature for an extended period of time?

Signals of Anxiety in Children

- Out of character behaviour
- Easily triggered distress
- What if...?
- Reassurance seeking
- Decline in attention, concentration, and/or organisation
- Frequent physical complaints
- Perfectionism
- Inability to complete tasks
- School refusal or resistance
- Sleep problems
- Avoidance

How anxiety is reinforced

- Unhelpful self talk or thoughts
- Avoidance or escape behaviours
- Physical symptoms
- Unhelpful responses from the environment (ridicule, excessive exposure, punishment)
- Living in environment of high anxiety and low predictability
**Challenge Unrealistic Ideas**

- Helpful and unhelpful thinking, Mr Worry/Mr Cool exercise – looking at situations in different ways
- Externalising 'The Wobbles'
- Reality testing or get real thinking
- Big Picture Thinking

**Helpful Thinking**

THOUGHTS

FEELINGS

BEHAVIOUR

**Unhelpful Thinking**

THOUGHTS

FEELINGS

BEHAVIOUR

**Encourage Brave Behaviour**

- Paying attention to anxious behaviour increases it - 'what happened at school today?'
- Reward bravery and encourage it to happen again

**Helping Children Deal with their Feelings**

- I hear you. I care. It is OK to feel however you feel.
- Feelings are just feelings. They're painful but not harmful. You can cope with them. I can cope with them.
- Your feelings aren't you. Feelings come and go, but you're still the same you.
- Your feelings aren't the boss of you. You can choose. Your feelings aren't the boss of me either.
- Your feelings might be different from mine, and that's OK.
• Walk – confident (body language)
• Talk – strong loud voice (body language)
• Bounce – use humour, act confident, use compliments and the element of surprise
• Get Help – (support not doing) mentors, buddies
• Shields – good friends, self talk (negatives to positives), manage feelings, be friendly and respectful

Steve Heron

Developing resilience

• Nature / Nurture
• Encourage problem solving – (the what if’s..)
• Have fun (screen free time)
• Predictability
• Social and emotional intelligence
• Encourage some independence
• Encourage different friendships

SEEKING FURTHER HELP

• The Child and Family Team
  Area Health Service
• School Counsellor
• G.P.
• Private Psychologist
• Macquarie University: Emotional Health Clinic
• Headspace/ YCentral

Resources

• Helping your Anxious Child, Ron Rapee
• The Optimistic Child, Martin Seligman
• Living with IT, Bev Alisbet
• Flourish, Martin Seligman
• Starbright or Moonbeam, Maureen Garth

WEB SITES:
www.kidsmatter.edu.au (e – newsletter)
www.emotionalhealthclinic.com.au
Depression Proofing your kids

Andrew Fuller

About 20% of people experience depression at some time in their lives. That means that almost every family has someone with some times of depression.

Unfortunately once someone has experienced depression, they are at far greater risk of feeling that way again.

While I can’t guarantee that we can protect everyone from depression, there are things that we can do to make it less likely.

Sadness is not always bad
Everyone loves being happy but being sad at times is not such a bad thing. Sadness gives us time for thinking things over, sometimes regretting things we have done and helps us to resolve to be better people. Feelings of sadness, disappointment and set backs are part of human lives and without them we don’t live whole lives.

We all want our kids to be happy but know that there will be times they will be sad. Helping young people to know that they won’t be happy all the time is important. Realising that all feelings pass and that we can learn from the whole range of feelings, sadness included, is part of being human.

Lower the amount of stress
Try to identify some of the major sources of stress in your life and develop systems to deal with them. If you can’t avoid the stressful situations at least develop a de-compression strategy. This is a way of winding ourselves down after being revved up. Going for a walk, doing some exercise and being active are some of the best ways.

Find some good friends
Friends are a treasure. Along with family, having a few good friends that we can talk things over with enriches our lives and protects us in difficult times.

Eat healthily
What we eat changes our moods. For example, countries that eat low levels of fish have higher levels of depression. Fish contains a fatty acid known as EPA, which is lacking in those with depression. Fatty acids are also found in flaxseed, walnuts and chia seeds and are good fats.

These are the good fats so if you are hesitant about eating them don’t be. Whole grain oats have been shown to help with depression as they have folic acid and B vitamins and helps with a slow release of energy versus the crash and burn of blood sugar levels that can happen. Foods high in selenium which is found in meat, fish and cereal grains has also been shown to decrease symptoms of depression. Leafy greens have magnesium in them which helps with depression and helps with sleep patterns.

Have some sources of “Flow”
We experience "flow" when we get involved in an activity that captivates us. At the end of these types of activities people often think, “Where did the time go?” There are many sources of flow – computer games, sports, drawing, dancing, reading, swimming and surfing are some. These are the things that you do that absorb you and take you away from your day to day cares and worries.

Losing yourself in a few pleasurable activities that challenge you is highly protective against depression.

Belong to the karma club
Decide to increase good will in the world by doing something positive for someone else. Try this out for one week. Pick someone you know and try to “knock their socks off” as much as possible. Give them compliments, greet them exuberantly and take time to be with them. You’ll be amazed at how much benefit you get from increasing someone else’s happiness.
Be grateful and lucky
Even people who have had rotten things happen to them can rise above them. They usually do this by deciding to be lucky. While we can focus on the things that have upset us, most of us have many things and people to be grateful for. Focusing on that part of your life and deciding that you are lucky makes an enormous difference to your life.

Get enough sleep and rest
Getting enough sleep is one of the most powerful ways we can protect ourselves against depression. The structures in the brain that support the most powerful anti-depressant, serotonin, are built and re-built between the sixth and the eighth hour of sleep.

Over 60% of people who sleep 5 or less hours a night end up obese and depressed.

If you are having difficulty sleeping:
* decrease caffeine consumption late in the day
* decrease sugar in your diet
* go to bed at the same time every day and wake up at the same time every day.
* avoid late nights
* avoid naps especially after 4pm
* avoid spicy, sugary or heavy foods before bedtime
* have the room at a comfortable temperature (some kids want to heat up the room and sweat the night away)
* block out distracting noise
* don't sit in bed while studying get in the habit of reserving it for sleep
* warm milk before bed is good as it is high in tryptophan, which aids sleep.
* try relaxation methods before sleeping
* write out a to-do list for the next day before getting into bed.
* have a pre-sleep ritual e.g. reading or warm bath
* switch off the electronics especially phones

Get some exercise
Exercise decreases stress hormones such as cortisol and increases endorphins (happy chemicals). Exercise also helps release dopamine, adrenaline and serotonin, which work together to make you feel good.

Endorphins are a hormone like substance, produced in the brain and function as the body's natural painkillers. During exercise endorphins can leave you in a state of euphoria with a sense of wellbeing.

The most effective type of exercise for the release of endorphins is cardiovascular exercise and aerobics.

Moderate exercise for 10 minutes a day is enough to improve your mood and increase energy but it is suggested that you do 30 minutes per day.

Laugh more.
Laughter raises our levels of serotonin and dopamine. Make a point of watching TV shows or movies that make you laugh. Share funny stories and jokes with friends. People report that laughing even when they don't feel happy improves their mood and sense of well-being.

Checklist of Signs: When should I worry?
In the childhood and teenage years depression can be harder to pick because it is obscured by heightened emotions and times of grumpiness.

Some signs of depression are:
Loss of interest in usual activities - their get up and go, has got up & gone
Increased use of drugs and alcohol
Sleep problems
Changes in energy levels - either sluggish or agitated and restless
Changes in eating patterns change - either disinterested in food or over eating
Speaking about death and hopelessness
In increased and inexplicable irritability,
Your own feelings of anxiety about your child.

It is worth getting some help if your child or adolescent is appearing to be depressed. One way to do this to say, "I'm worried about you and I want you to come with me to see someone so that I can work out whether I should be worried or not". Try to find a good local psychologist, psychiatrist or doctor who can relate to young people.
Mateo really likes football but he’s not sure about playing with the local team. He thinks: “I’m not as good as the other children are. What if they don’t pass the ball to me? What if I drop it?” Mateo often stops himself from having a go at new things. He doesn’t want to look silly.

He would rather let others go first so he can watch what they do. At school when the teacher asks him a question he often says, “I don’t know,” even if he does know the answer. Mateo doesn’t want to get things wrong. When he makes a mistake on his homework he gives up and says, “I can’t do it.”

His parents want him to try. “You’ve got to have a go,” his dad says, “otherwise, how will you learn?”

Children who lack confidence in their abilities sometimes try to avoid even having a go at some things. This can get frustrating for parents and carers. It can also stop children from developing the skills they need to tackle tasks confidently.

How confidence develops

For most children, starting school means spending more time on learning and less on play. It also means more expectations of them— from parents, carers, school staff and also from themselves.

Primary school children typically start out with high expectations. When they see how well they do things compared to others, their view of their own abilities often changes. They learn that they are good at some things and not so good at others. They also see how other children and school staff respond to what they do. These things influence children’s confidence in their abilities. They also influence how willing they are to have a go in situations where they feel unsure.
How parents and carers can help

Confidence improves through building on small successes. Parents and carers (and school staff) can help by:

- explaining to children that skills develop with practice
- encouraging children to persist when they don’t succeed straight away
- praising effort, persistence and improvement
- making sure that goals are achievable by breaking down large tasks or responsibilities into small steps
- being ready to help when necessary, without taking over.

Encouraging children to have a go and valuing individual improvement support children’s confidence.

Confident thinking

Self-esteem is an important part of confidence. Having good self-esteem means accepting and feeling positive about yourself. Confidence is not just feeling good but also knowing you are good at something.

Particular ways of thinking are very important for building confidence. Helpful ways of thinking include:

- believing that, if you try, you can succeed
- finding positive ways to cope with failure that encourage having another go
- enjoying learning for its own sake by competing with your own performance rather than that of others
- making sure that goals are achievable by breaking down large tasks or responsibilities into small steps
- being ready to help when necessary, without taking over.

Dealing with disappointment

Everybody fails to achieve their goals sometimes. Parents and carers (and school staff) can help by:

- responding sympathetically and with encouragement (e.g. "That was disappointing, but at least you had a go.")
- helping children focus on what they can change to make things better, rather than thinking that the situation is unchangeable or that there is something wrong with them (e.g. "What can you try that might make that work better next time?")
- challenging 'I can't' thinking by showing and saying you believe in them and reminding them of what they have achieved.

Optimistic thinking recognises what has been achieved more than what is lacking. It looks at the glass as half-full rather than half-empty.

Parents and carers can help children focus on their own effort and on achieving personal goals as the best way to measure success.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au