



## What is Anxiety?

It can have a lot of names: worries, fear, scared, shyness, cautiousness etc.

**Worries trick kids into THINKING THAT BAD THINGS WILL HAPPEN TO THEM MORE OFTEN THAN OTHER KIDS AND THAT THE SITUATION IS GOING TO BE MUCH WORSE THAN IT REALLY IS.**

There are different types of anxiety and they have names like Separation Anxiety, Social Anxiety, Generalized Anxiety, Panic, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder or OCD

What happens when you worry?

- **Body talk** (tummy aches, headaches, pounding heart, shallow breathing)
- **Thinking** (what you say to yourself in your head - self-talk - "Oh No!", "They are going to think I look/sound stupid", "If I can't be near my mom, then something bad is going to happen to her", etc.
- **Feelings** (embarrassed, frustrated, worried, scared, sad).
- **Behaviour** (temper, refusing to do new things, not going to sleepovers or to friends' houses, not wanting to go to school, avoiding uncomfortable situations or having temper outbursts when scared to do something, doing habits such as washing your hands, checking things, etc.).

**THOUGHTS** - anxious kids have anxious, worrisome thoughts - they often anticipate the worst to happen and they believe that there is nothing they can do about it.

**FEELINGS** - scared, fearful, nervous, sad, embarrassed, frustrated, out of control

**BEHAVIOUR** - anxious kids also act in a way that keeps the anxiety going - they avoid situations that make them feel anxious (refusing to go to school or sleep with the light on, don't want to play with friends, doesn't want to take part in recreational activities, calls constantly on the cell phone to check in on his/her caregiver(s).

The avoidance may be subtle and sneaky. The child looks for reassurance by asking mom to read one more story. The child avoids facing a feared situation and therefore never learns that there isn't anything to fear.

## Steps to Treating Anxiety in Children and Youth

### Key Components of Treating Anxiety

**EDUCATION:** Talk with the child, teen and caregivers about what anxiety is and that it is treatable.

*Caregivers must* learn home management and coaching strategies to help their child!

**Cognitive Behavioural Treatment** - Realistic thinking will help the child explore new ways of thinking about situations (this is never going to work out, everyone is going to laugh at me, I'm going to look so stupid)

Remember that a child who is anxious overestimates the likelihood that something bad is going to happen (irrational) and the seriousness of the situation (irrational).

An effective intervention is for the child to develop positive self-talk - a rational way of thinking - **CALM THOUGHTS VS. WORRIED THOUGHTS**. (It's going to be OK - I've done this before and I can do it again, I may have a tough time but that's OK - lots of other kids have a tough time with the same thing.)

**Problem Solving:** Teaching kids how to work out problems with rational thoughts "calm thoughts vs. worried thoughts" - example:

- (Problem) - "I don't want to go to school because I'm worried that I will fail the math test" - (avoidance behaviour)
- (Assess the Situation) - (use detective thinking) Ask yourself "Am I good at math?" - yes...Ok so what will happen if I don't go to school" - "I'll miss the math test", what will happen if I miss the math test? - I'll fail, "What's the likelihood you will fail the test if you go to school? - "well, not likely cause I've passed all my tests so far this year" - "So what if you do fail the math test - what's the worst thing that could

happen?" Well, I won't pass" (Irrational thinking) - "Is that true - you won't pass if you fail 1 test?..... (challenging the irrational thoughts) - "what evidence do you have that failing 1 test means that you will fail the whole grade?"..... etc. etc.

- (Solutions) - go to school and write the test, stay at home but have to write the test when you return to school
- (Try a solution) - go to school and write the test
- (Evaluate) - check out if this was a good choice - "did this help to make the worries smaller or bigger"?, "how did you feel about being in charge of the worries instead of the worries being in charge of you"?

**Gradual Desensitization and Exposure** - teaching kids to **not avoid** situations that make them anxious - learning ways to work through the anxiety so it doesn't get as big and stay big. It may be called "facing your fears". Developing a stepped approach that works up to facing the biggest fear is helpful - i.e. fear of spiders - Step #1 - the child is able to sit and listen to someone talk about spiders - have the child identify a number that he/she associates with fear (0-no fear to 10-big fears). Continue to talk about the spiders until the number is reduced.

**Relaxation and Calm Coping Skills** - Teach relaxation techniques, including deep breathing, counting to 10, or visualizing a soothing place. Teaching children how to relax can help them to feel "in charge" of the anxiety symptoms and control over their body.

**School Accommodations** - Children spend a large proportion of their time in the school environment and therefore developing a safe place where they can do the best they can is essential for their progress. Change and uncertainty can be troubling for anxious children; therefore, structure, routine and organization are important factors to feeling safe. Children with anxiety problems like all children require clear limits and establishing consequences for positive and negative behaviour. Punishing a child with anxiety will only increase the anxiety resulting in undesired behaviour. Working together as a team (parents and school personnel) is the optimum approach in helping children with anxiety.

Children with anxiety can struggle with self-esteem and have trouble developing peer relationships, even to the point of being socially isolated. Try to structure classroom and recess activities so these children can be included.

***Additional Considerations:***

- **Keep calm when a child becomes anxious about an event or matter.** If a child sees a parent is able to remain calm, the child can model the parent's attitude.
- **Plan for transitions.** Getting to school in the morning or preparing for bed in the evening may be complicated by fears and anxieties. Anticipating and planning for these transition times may be helpful for family members.
- **Support the child's quick return to school,** in the case of school refusal. The best way to reduce anxiety about school is to address specific causes of anxiety and help the child return to school as quickly as possible. A shorter school day may help until symptoms improve. Children's symptoms are more likely to decrease when they discover that they can survive the anxiety. Long absences are likely to cause higher levels of anxiety upon returning.
- **Encourage the child's participation in activities** that may provide a reprieve from worries.
- **Reward and praise the child's efforts** to address symptoms. Young people often feel that they only hear about their mistakes. Even if improvements are small, every good effort deserves to be praised and rewarded.
- **Encourage the child to help develop interventions.** Enlisting the child in the task will lead to more successful strategies and will foster the child's ability to problem-solve.