



Understanding Anxiety in Children

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety happens because your brain thinks it has detected danger. The important word there is *thinks* - it doesn't matter whether there actually is any danger, just that your brain thinks there is. Brains are smart but sometimes they get things wrong. Brains are also protective. So when they think we are in danger our brains automatically start doing things that are meant to help keep us safe and alive, like making our hearts beat faster and making us breathe harder. The thing about anxiety is that it always happens *in anticipation* of something bad happening, meaning the bad thing hasn't happened yet (maybe it never will), our brains just *think* it will or could happen. These thoughts often come in the form of worrying about "what if . . . ?"

SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY:

- Worrying - a lot
- Clinginess - staying close to trusted adults.
- Irritability - becoming easily upset over small things
- Dread - as though something awful is about to happen
- Regression - acting babyish or immature for their age
- Inability to relax or feelings of restlessness
- Racing thoughts or thoughts that just won't turn off
- Sleep problems including difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, or waking up during the night and having difficulty getting back to sleep
- Nightmares or dreams that are disturbing or distressing
- Avoidance of feared situations
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, racing heart, sweating, shaking, nausea, diarrhea, shortness of breath or dizziness
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Triggering of fight (arguing, physical fighting), flight (wanting to run away, hide or disappear) or freeze (mind going blank, difficulty speaking) impulses



ANXIETY CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU!

Anxiety's main job is protection. It can stop children from running up to and running off with strangers. It can make a child think twice about trying something that is too dangerous. As they get older, anxiety can help to motivate children to study harder before a test or put extra effort into learning a skill so that they can impress adults and keep up with their peers.



"When we talk about our feelings they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary."

- Fred Rogers



CRISIS HELP

Sometimes anxiety can be so intense and overwhelming that it feels like life is no longer worth living. If you or someone you know is considering suicide, help is available. It can get better. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255), the Crisis Center 330-452-6000 or send a text to 741 741.

HOW TO HELP YOUR ANXIOUS CHILD:



The goal is not to eliminate anxiety but to **manage** it. We want children to be able to do what they need to do without losing any of the benefits anxiety can provide.



Breathe - Taking slow deep breaths helps to clear the mind and settle the body.



Patience - Be supportive, understanding, and patient. Allow time to warm up to new situations and people. Don't try to rush things.



Listen - You don't have to have all the answers or know how to fix every problem. Just listen and empathize with the struggle.



Encourage - Don't let your teen avoid doing the things that need to be done. The longer they try to avoid it, the bigger the fear becomes and the harder it will be to overcome that fear.



Distraction - Drawing, coloring pictures, watching a movie or TV show, listening to music, playing a game, doing a craft. Repetitive, rhythmic movement can have a calming effect.



Perspective - Help to clarify what can be controlled and what cannot and what is a realistic threat and what is not.



Mindfulness - By teaching your brain to come back to the present you increase your ability to take control over your brain and stop it from worrying when it doesn't need to.



Accept - It's never helpful to tell someone who is anxious "stop worrying." It never helps to say they're just overreacting. Let them know you understand how real the fear is to them.

COMMON TYPES OF ANXIETY IN CHILDREN:

Generalized Anxiety - worrying more all the time and/or more than appropriate about a lot of things

Separation Anxiety - excessive fear about being away from parents or other primary caregivers, usually the fear is that something bad will happen while they are separated or that the parents will not return.

Selective Mutism - refusal to speak in social situations even though they may be very talkative at home or in situations where they feel comfortable.

Performance Anxiety - fear of doing something in front of other people.

Social Anxiety - intense fear of being watched and judged by others in social situations.

Phobias - intense fear or dread experienced in response to a specific object or situation.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) - Obsessions are unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or urges that trigger intensely distressing feelings. Compulsions are behaviors or rituals done to get rid of the obsessions and/or decrease the distress.