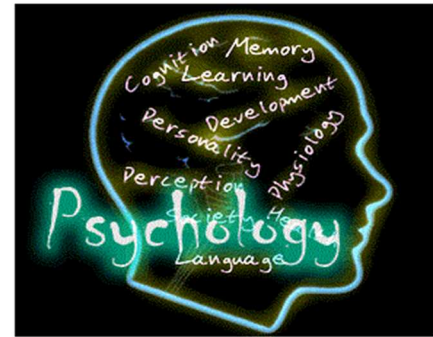


PSYCH CORNER

ANXIETY EDITION

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FACTS:

- Most common disorder in children
- Nearly 1 in 3 students could meet criteria for an anxiety disorder before they turn 18 years-old
- Equally prevalent with girls and boys up to adolescence
- Behaviors can be very similar to ADHD and/or appear oppositional
- Anxiety is the brain's way to keep us safe
- Everyone experiences anxiety, but it becomes problematic when it causes **avoidance, interference, and/or everyday distress**
- Avoiding situations that elicit anxiety will only teach/reinforce the child to avoid anxiety, not how to cope/manage it
- Anxious thoughts come to fruition less than 5% of the time.

COMMON TYPES:

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Social Phobia
- Specific Phobia
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Anxiety is the most common psychiatric condition I see in students today. Even though it is very normal for everyone to feel nervous/anxious at times, anxiety in children can become very maladaptive/problematic if not addressed properly. Below are some characteristics of anxiety and some general things to do and to avoid if you have an anxious child/student. On the second page, there are examples of these and other strategies.

Characteristics:

- Restless/appears 'on-edge'
- Worst case scenario ("What if")
- Perfectionistic
- Poor attention
- Irritable
- Worries a lot
- Somatic symptoms
- Constant questioning
- Difficulty sleeping
- Socially withdrawn

Things to do:

- Listen to their worry, empathize, and then challenge/question their negative/anxious thought(s)
- Share adaptive (positive) ways you cope with anxiety
 - For the perfectionistic students, point out when you make a mistake or recall when you made a mistake in the past.
- Increase structure which increases predictability
- Teach relaxation techniques when they are **calm**
- Engage in 'Flow' activities (see page 2)
- Give praise/reinforcement when he/she perseveres through an anxiety
- Exercise/playing outside
- Be sure they are getting sufficient sleep
- No screen time/electronics 30 minutes before bedtime
- Plan in advance what strategies the child will use when anxious

Things to avoid:

- Over-accommodating the anxiety ("You don't have to do that if you're nervous" when you know your child will be safe and wants to do it.)
- Always avoiding anxiety-inducing situations
- Excessive reassurance ("You'll be fine. There's nothing to worry about.")
- Put negative thoughts/ideas in their head
- Ridiculing/singling out of the child
- Punishment because they were anxious
- Excessive screen time
- Exposure to the news since it tends to be mostly negative
- Placing your worries onto your child

Specific Strategies:

- **Relaxation techniques** (Practice these when they're calm so they know how to use them when they're anxious)
 - Deep breathing
 - “Slowly take a deep breath in through the nose, hold it for 3 seconds, and then slowly let the breath out of your nose.” Repeat this exercise 5-10 times.
 - Key-word recognition
 - Have your child get into the calm place (eyes closed, calm breathing, quiet setting, etc.) and have them silently state a word/short phrase that elicits a positive feeling (i.e., Disney World).
 - Practice this multiple times to condition him/her to say the word and become calm without having to do all the relaxation training in advance.
 - Grounding
 - Have your child silently point out: 5 things they see; 4 things they feel; 3 things they hear; 2 things they smell; 1 thing they taste.
 - Flow activities
 - Tasks that are fairly easy, but require some level of attention/effort
 - Examples can include; coloring, singing, yoga, exercising, playing a sport, cooking/baking, etc.
- **Exercise**
 - Increased activity level increases production of serotonin (anxiety fighting chemical) in the brain
 - Go for a walk/run with your child and talk through something that may be bothering them
- **Be aware of the common thought holes** (irrational thinking)
 - Jumping to conclusions: judging a situation based on assumptions as opposed to definitive facts
 - Mental filtering: paying attention to the negative details in a situation while ignoring the positive
 - Magnifying: magnifying negative aspects in a situation
 - Minimizing: minimizing positive aspects in a situation
 - Personalizing: assuming the blame for problems even when you are not primarily responsible
 - Externalizing: pushing the blame for problems onto others
 - Overgeneralizing: concluding that one bad incident will happen again
 - Emotional reasoning: assuming your negative emotions translate into reality/confusing feelings with facts
- **Things to say/try**
 - Help them distinguish between what are “helpful” thoughts and “unhelpful” thoughts.
 - Have them answer questions about their anxiety and be sure not to answer for them.
 - Example... “I’m going to fail the test!” You can respond, “Did you study for the test? What didn’t you understand? So why don’t you think you’ll do well? Because you struggled on the last test, does that mean it will happen today?”
 - Example... “I don’t want to go to school!” You can respond, “Who do you play with on the playground? I wonder what they’re going to play at recess today? Didn’t you say that yesterday, but you had a great day at school? What’s the most fun thing you do in school? I need you to take this very important note to your teacher. He/she needs it today.”
 - Divert their thinking (anxious thoughts can pull someone in like a black-hole unless they change thinking)
 - Bring up different topics that are enjoyable. Talk about previous positive experiences. Talk about positive things that will happen later (after stressor). Use humor. Tell them to smile since smiling releases endorphins and makes you feel better almost immediately. (You just tried it, didn’t you?)
 - Worst case scenario (Example; test anxiety)
 - What will happen if you don’t pass this test? Will you get kicked out of school? Will you be retained if you fail one test? Do you think colleges will look at this one test grade?
 - “How many times have your big worries actually come true?” Help recall some of their previous anxieties that didn’t come true and share times when you were anxious and they didn’t come true.
 - Re-label the anxiety
 - It’s not me, it’s worry. I am not weird/in danger/etc., this is a false alarm. No thought, no matter how horrible, changes what is going on in front of me at that moment.
 - Objectifying the worry
 - Have your child write down their worry(ies) on a piece of paper and throw it away or keep in a locked box so the worries can’t get out. Tends to work well with younger kids.

“Just because you have an anxious thought, does not mean it is true or going to happen.”

“Anxious thoughts occur from thinking about something in the future, so stay in the present.”