

Anxiety

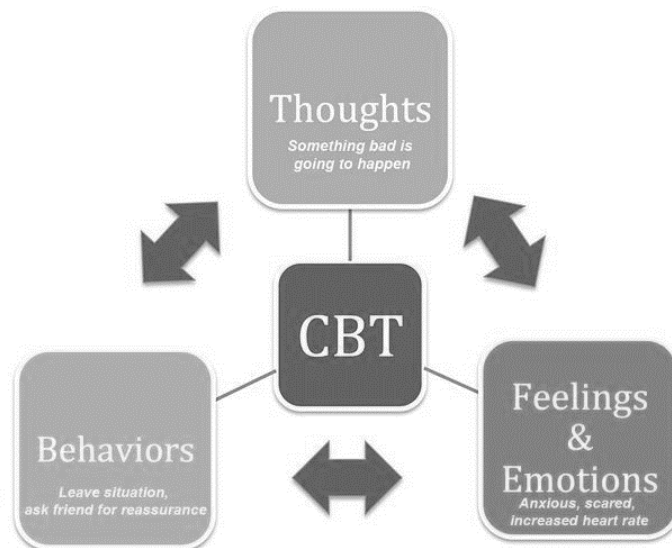
Challenging Anxiety

Approximately 4.4 million children ages 3-17 in the United States have diagnosed anxiety. Anxiety can present as fear or worry, but may also make children irritable or angry. Other symptoms to look for are:

- Increased heart rate
- Quick, shallow breaths
- Increased adrenaline
- Impending doom
- Trouble Sleeping
- Stomach aches
- Increased muscle tension
- Increased perspiration
- Light headedness
- Chest pains
- Emotional dysregulation
- “fight”, “flight”, or “freeze” responses

These reactions are our body’s normal responses to a perceived danger. None of these physical reactions can harm you—they are designed to keep you safe. However, with anxiety, your child’s body is responding to situations in which they are not physically threatened. Anxiety responses may interfere with school, home, and play activities.

Anxiety begins in the “cognitive” (thinking) part of the brain. Physical symptoms ALWAYS begin as thoughts and perceptions based on your child’s personal beliefs. Below is a diagram of how anxiety manifests in your child:



Your child may experience the following kinds of thoughts that lead to anxious feelings:

- Uncontrollable worry
- Fear, apprehension
- Negative thoughts they cannot stop
- Negative thoughts about themselves, the future, or past events

The thinking part of the brain can activate the physical “danger” response even when there is no immediate threat of danger. The physical and cognitive aspects of anxiety feed into each other to continue the negative cycle of worry and physical discomfort. Fortunately, there are several ways to alleviate the physical and cognitive discomfort of anxiety. Some typical behavioral exercises you can use to reduce physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Relaxation breathing
- Physical exercise
- Engage in enjoyable/distracting activity
- Noticing and being curious about negative or distorted thinking

It will take practice to feel comfortable using these techniques, and for them to notice a decrease in their symptoms of anxiety. Remember, learning to feel anxious took time; learning to feel more calm will take time. Soon, use of relaxation techniques and new ways of responding to anxious thoughts and sensations will become natural to them.

How to Help Your Child:

Talk about feelings: When your child is worried, ask them to “draw it out”. Help your child name their feeling (worried, afraid, anxious, sad, frustrated, etc.)

Teach them mindfulness and healthy coping tools: Practicing these tools with your child helps them understand them more and be prepared for when anxiety arises. Some typical tools are...

- Muscle relaxation- tensing different muscles in the body and releasing them.
- Breathing exercises- these can be fun and interactive!
- Grounding techniques- using your child’s 5 senses to help with feeling overwhelmed and bring them back to the here-and-now. (See attachments)

Teach your child how to deal with their worries: Say to your child, “Here are 4 steps to help you deal with your worry, be stronger, and handle anything that comes your way!” Then go over these steps with them...

- First, ask yourself, “what am I worried about?”. Then name your feeling.
- Then, think, “Can I do something about this problem?”
- Next say, “if I cannot do something, let go of the worry and focus on something different that is important to you right now. What could that be?” Then brainstorm things.

- Finally say, “if you can do something, let’s make a plan about what we can control and what we can do about the situation. I am excited to help if you want me to!”

Praise: Say “You were so brave the way you handled that thunderstorm. You stayed calm and talked with me about your feelings. I know you worried that it might hurt us, but it only made a lot of noise. Then, it was over, and the loud noise stopped.”

- Talking about what happened will build a sense of capability into your child, so they know themselves, without you even saying so, that they can be resilient and cope when they are worried.

Helping Your Child Challenge & Change Negative Thoughts

Negative thought cycles perpetuate the physical symptoms of anxiety. It is important to teach new ways to respond to negative thought patterns to decrease the experience of anxiety.

Have your child examine their thoughts for key words:

- must, should, have to (unrealistic standards for yourself and others)
- never, always, every (“black and white” thinking)

This kind of thinking does not allow room for alteration, compromise, or change. Using these words casts blame, and they are judgmental.

- awful, horrible, disaster (catastrophic thinking)

This kind of thinking encourages the sense of despair and doom.

- jerk, slob, creep, stupid (negative labels)

Helping them change their choice of words makes a big difference in the way a situation or person is perceived. The way we react to a situation is the determinant of our moods, not the situation itself. Our thoughts influence our moods, so by altering the way we respond to them we are able to alter our mood.

Simple ways to help your child challenge their thoughts:

1. Help them Question the negative/worrisome thoughts they are having. ***Is the thought valid?***
 - a. provide evidence *for* and *against* the truth of the thought (Help them be a “detective” with their worries)
 - b. Challenge the likelihood that an event will occur.
2. Challenge their need to “fix” all problems, do all chores, or take care of things *immediately*. Ask them, “What is the worst thing that will happen if does not happen?”
3. Help them change the negative thought into a positive self-statement.
For example: If they say something like, “I am never on time, I am such a loser”, help them change the phrase to something like, “Ok, so I am not always on time, but I am

not always late either. Sometimes I am running behind schedule, but that does not mean I am a loser”.

4. Play with the negative thought:

- a. Try saying the opposite of the thought. For example, “I am always on time, I am a complete winner”.
- b. Try saying the thought very slowly and then quickly, softly and then loudly.
- c. Try singing the song to the tune of happy birthday.

Recommended Reading Materials & Apps

Ages 3-7:

- “The Don’t Worry Book” By Todd Parr (2019)
- “Too Many Bubbles: A Story About Mindfulness” By Christine Peck (2021)
- “Ruby Finds a Worry” By Tom Percival (2019)

Ages 7-12:

- [“The Worry Workbook for Kids :Helping Children to Overcome Anxiety and the Fear of Uncertainty”](#) By Muniya S. Khanna PhD & Deborah Roth Ledley PhD (2018)
- “What To Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Anxiety” By Dawn Huebner (2005)
- “ The Self-regulation Workbook For Kids” By Jenna Berman (2021)

Adolescents:

- “The Teen Girl’s Anxiety Survival Guide: Ten Ways to Conquer Anxiety and Feel Your Best” By Lucie Hemmen PhD
- “The Anxiety Workbook for Teens” By Lisa M. Schab LCSW (2008)
- “The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook for Teens” By Jennifer Shannon LMFT (2012)
- “Mindfulness for Teen Worry” By Jeffrey Bernstein PhD (2018)

For Parents:

- “The Opposite of Worry: The Playful Parenting Approach to Childhood Anxieties and Fears” By Lawrence J. Cohen (2013)
- “Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-By-Step Guide for Parents” By R. Rapee PhD, A. Wignall D Psych, S. Spence PhD, H. Lyneham PhD, & V. Cobham PhD (2008)
- “Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents” By Reid Wilson PhD & Lynn Lyons LICSW (2013)
- “The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind” By Daniel J. Siegel M. D. & Tina Payne Bryson PhD. (2012)

Apps:

- Moshi Kids: Sleep and Meditation (Kids)
- DreamyKid (Kids)
- Headspace (Teens)
- Mindshift (Teens)
- Calm (Teens)