

# **Childhood Anxiety**

by Julie-Ann Richards MCC, RCC, CCC (February 2016)

## **Treatment Goals**

1. Calm physiological reactivity.
2. Eliminate avoidance behaviours.
3. Exchange apprehensive, fear-based “self-talk” for reality-based evaluations and reassuring belief in his/her ability to cope - both with the situation and with the ability to withstand feelings of anxiety.
4. Express underlying emotions.

**Note:** First, consult with a doctor to rule out possible medical conditions that can cause anxiety and/or panic attacks (e.g. hypoglycemia, hyperthyroidism, inner ear disturbances, hyperadrenalism, etc.). With O.C.D., further investigation of possible strep infection connection may also be warranted.

## **1. Daily, Rigorous Physical Exercise**

### **Home-Based Strategies**

Aim for 20-30 minutes a day, but even 15 minutes counts – if rigorous

- Make it fun – something shared together, not chore
- Child-friendly examples: hiking, running, tag, capture the flag, skipping double-dutch, obstacle courses, trampoline, pogo sticks, hula hoops, ultimate frisbee, tag-football, soccer, beach volleyball, skateboarding parks, indoor climbing walls, karate, Wii Fit, dancing ...
- Best if it’s a morning ritual – cortisol, adrenaline levels highest in morning
- Switch walking the dog to jogging the dog
- Anything outside has added value – significant extra boost to mood
- Switch activities often. Pull from a literal hat of ideas. Keep interest and motivation up.
- Avoid “performance goals” or competition
- Make it part of your family dynamic to be active

**Note:** ADEQUATE AND REGULAR sleep and a balanced diet are critical. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, and excessive sugar. Keep healthy routines for exercise, sleep and a balanced diet even on days off or vacation periods

### **School-Based Strategies**

**Note:** For all school-based strategies used to support a child experiencing anxiety, it is critical that the relationships between the child and the adults involved with him/her at school are positive, supportive and trust-based. All efforts should be made to help ensure that the child feels supported, understood and valued by the adults he/she works with. Most children I have worked with expressed huge relief at having their teachers know and understand that they were battling significant anxiety. Often, surprisingly, students with high anxiety are not readily obvious in their symptoms and teachers may not be aware of a

student's challenges without being informed of them explicitly.

- Extra gym period – could also have access prior to school
- Gym teacher's "assistant" for a younger class
- Provide schedule of when gym is free during school day - access to a simple skipping rope and/or basket ball for those critical moments
- Regular movement breaks for entire class. Substitute more active movement instead of simply "raise your hand".
- Teachers often power walk at lunch – add student(s) to this
- Many schools have gardens – gardening with teacher or fellow students
- Recess – provide related fun and novel equipment and encourage active opportunities with fellow students

## **2. Deep and Daily Relaxation Practice**

### **Home-Based Strategies**

- Belly breathing (count of 4 both ways, for 4 minutes or more)
  - Progressive muscle relaxation
  - Accupressure and Massage
- \*Additionally, significantly "de-clutter" home (visual stimulation). Turn off t.v. and radio (auditory stimulation) and aim to lower stimulation of all kinds. Significantly limit t.v. and monitor content for over-stimulation. Reduce or eliminate use of stimulating video games. More face-to-face quality time.

### **School-Based Strategies**

#### **Elementary Years:**

- "Tent time" (**Note:** *all* students should have access to this with time limit). Cosy pillow, throw, stuffed animals. Make sure tent has door that can close, but top is open for you to peek in
- Stations with headphones & relaxing music – optional for all students while completing seat work
- Belly-breathing, simple yoga poses, basic mediation can all be done as class after big transitions – post lunch, post recess or at times of overstimulation. Make this an expected routine.
- Progressive muscle relaxation if class over-stimulated (takes 3-5 minutes). Could also have this on a tape inside the tent with headphones available for use in "tent time"

#### **Both Elementary and Secondary Levels:**

- MP3 recordings – relaxation, meditation, deep breathing, simple waves or background music. Allow student to use his/her own MP3 for this between classes and, if needed, for a 5 minute class break
- Yoga, meditation, visualization, sensory "challenges" as a class post lunch and recess – make this an expected routine. It works wonders!
- Encourage student to use discrete accupressure techniques as needed.
- Significantly "de-clutter" entire classroom. Add lots of plants. Neutral colours. Lower

- lighting when possible. Fresh air. Can have relaxing music playing as students enter class. End of music signals beginning of teaching.
- Establish subtle “signal” to be used by anxious student to indicate need for relaxation activity.
- “Comfort item” in student’s pocket – something to touch in times of stress; often sentimental connection to family member is helpful. Want to slowly ease away from using this as anxiety becomes more manageable.

### **3. *Calm the Mind – Mental Techniques and Strategies***

#### **Goals – reduce child’s overestimation of danger and increase confidence in ability to cope**

- Avoid discounting their worries. Do not try to convince them of your view of things or “jolly” them out of it. Acknowledge, listen, and ask for more information with openness. State their emotion and acknowledge that it feels very real and difficult. Ask them what strategies have helped them in the past first – see what resources they can draw on to cope. Next, move on to CBT strategies... (**Note:** if panic attack happening, skip talk and move straight to physiological and observational strategies.)
- Enlist support of a psychologist or counsellor trained and experienced in using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (C.B.T.) for treating childhood anxiety. Ensure that “homework” assignments between therapy sessions are completed as the vast majority of the real work happens through these exercises, not “in session”.
- Educate yourself regarding C.B.T. and support the principals at home. A good resource is “Mind Over Mood: Change the Way you Feel by Changing the Way You Think” by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky.
- Once familiar, “thought records” can be used at home as a way to deconstruct anxiety-ridden situations. (Templates of “CBT Thought Record” on internet.) Work through records with your child, but have the child (if old enough) be the one to write in the responses, not you. As you both become more familiar with this process, can move it to a verbal process of discussion. Eventually, the questioning will become internalized and the child will begin to ask the questions of himself/herself.
- Ask child to walk you through what the “worst-case scenario” would be. After each step ask “and then what would happen?” ... to the point of absurdity (a further CBT technique).
- Imagery Exercise: Have child use all senses to create an image of something/someone fictional who sits on his/her shoulder and feeds anxious thoughts to him/her. Use ALL senses to build elaborate image of this – the more hilarious, the better, but must be child-created. Then, have child notice his/her anxious thought and immediately imagine it coming from this “little pest” on his/her shoulder. Child flicks him off, or squishes him, etc. and begins to recognize that buying into any given thought is a choice. Surprisingly effective!
- Visual Schedules: Aim to maintain a predictable and regular family schedule to the best of your ability. Anxious children often find comfort in routine and aren’t often fond of big surprises or changes to what they had expected. Use a visual schedule (for younger children) to show what will be happening on each day of the week and

move a magnet each morning onto the new day. (Lots of resources to download for this on the web). For older children, use a schedule with words. Keep the schedule in the same place, posted clearly (on fridge is ideal). This is an introductory, comforting strategy as, slowly, over time, the child will need to be exposed to less and less predictability in order to increase tolerance for uncertainty (a key factor in battling anxiety). Wean as you go along.

- Set check-in times with teacher (or other adult) - prior to first class and after lunch, for example
- Connect child with school counsellor if available – ensure approaches used by everyone involved are on the same page – ideally, C.B.T. approaches. (Counsellor should be assigning behavioural experiments as homework for the child/teen that are aligned with any outside therapy involved.)
- Prearrange for student to let you know what level of anxiety he/she is experiencing as he/she enters room by discretely giving a number by fingers as enters. You will then know what you are dealing with at outset.
- Encourage the child to practice peaceful visualization at stressful times – including those at school. Incorporate all senses extremely vividly when establishing and recreating the vision.
- Provide student with a set number (which will be slowly reduced over time) of discrete hall passes to be used for moments of extreme anxiety. The student is allowed to leave class to walk in the hall for 5 minutes to do belly-breathing or another calming activity (that can't be done comfortably in class), but must then return – no questions asked. These can be useful in promoting a student's ability to observe his/her level of anxiety and decide how much anxiety they can successfully tolerate as they must be selective in using up their cards for the day. Please ensure that other teachers do not chastise the student for being in the hall – best if they know ahead of time, but at write your name on the pass with the time limit as well.
- For the younger child, include the child in a care-taking role for a classroom pet or small window-box garden. Give the child a reason to become involved or to simply enter the room and a sense of purpose that is valued and altruistic. Low-key and nurturing activities are better than “class star for the day” types of activities.

#### **4. Express Underlying Emotions**

##### **Home and School-Based Strategies**

Many children (and adults) who experience anxiety harbour unexpressed fear, sadness, anger, frustration and/or rage. Help Build your child's emotional vocabulary. With younger children, play emotional charades. With older children, use modelling to express the nuances of your own feelings out loud (e.g. “I feel so unappreciated when nobody even bothers to say “thanks” for this nice meal. It makes me feel angry too.”) If your teen is open to it, discussing emotions openly is ideal, but sometimes the “backdoor” method is more accepted. Within elementary classes, it is extremely useful to include a unit on “emotions” and the expression of emotions. Move beyond the most basic emotions into the more subtle emotions as well.

- Take a careful look for unhelpful messages that may be being relayed (however unintentionally) in your family around expressing emotion. It's never too late to change these. Have an honest talk with your spouse about this point as well and get

on the same page if change is needed.

- For teachers or educators, the same advice holds – review the messages you send about the acceptability of certain emotions. The children in your class need to know that their emotions are acceptable – even if you disagree with how they are expressing them. They also need to know that respectful expression of their emotions is acceptable. How can you model this? How will this look in your classroom? It is a powerful model to put forth and very helpful for many students - not only those experiencing anxiety.
- Encourage (and model) safe and honest expression of emotion – especially anger. Give the message (through both words and actions) that it is normal and acceptable to feel anger – even at you or at others who care for you. Encourage your child to tell you when he/she is mad at you or at a situation and let them know that they will not be punished for it or told to calm down, etc. as long as it is a respectful (i.e. not abusive) expression of that anger.
- Provide and encourage the use of physical expressions of anger such as pounding a mattress with a racket or pillow, crunching recycling by jumping on it or crushing it, hurling a basketball at a net, or ripping paper to shreds (old phonebooks/magazines are great for this). It's often hard for a child to move straight to "using my words". This is best done on their own to give them a sense of privacy to "let it all out." Encourage this method particularly for situations where the child seems to be "stuffing" his/her appropriate anger and expressing anxiety instead (e.g. being the victim of bullying or of nasty comments from peers). School-based strategies here often involve the gym!
- Physical expression of anger at school can be very effective if it involves gym equipment (punching bag, basketball, skipping rope, etc.). If at all possible, create options for a child to access these for critical times. "Talking" to a child in the throes of anger is counter-productive and can exacerbate the situation. Physical outlets work most effectively here. Even bouncing wildly on an exercise ball, with a stress ball in his/her hand until he/she calms down can be very effective for a child. Ensure that the child has relative privacy to do this and it is not done in front of his/her peers to ensure dignity is kept intact.
- For the younger (or older and artistically-inclined) child, artwork can be quite powerful. Have your child keep a journal or scrapbook of images (made or cut-out) that help him/her express how he/she feels. This is a great daily ritual – better than only being used for "difficult" emotions. For the older child who isn't naturally drawn to artwork, a written journal can be a very useful tool for expressing emotion.
- Seek the support of a psychologist or counsellor specifically trained and experienced in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for the treatment of anxiety.
- Find a trusted adult at school whom the child feels close to and is open to sharing with. Have this person be the child's "go-to" person when she/he is dealing with challenging emotions and wants to talk. This is not "at any time", but rather at an appointed time. Remember, increasing tolerance for feeling anxiety without trying to eradicate it completely in the moment is part of treatment. The go-to person could be the school counsellor, but does not need to be. Supportive listening – not advice-giving – is needed here. If the counsellor is involved, ensure that he/she and the outside therapist are on the same page in treatment.

## **5. Gradual Exposure**

### **Home-Based Strategies:**

- Enlist support of the child's family doctor and of a C.B.T. trained psychologist or counsellor wherever possible if an anxiety disorder is involved. Psychiatry should also be involved in the cases of OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).
- Regardless of whether you work with a C.B.T. trained psychologist or counsellor or work on your own, expect anxiety to increase before it starts to improve. Work through this slowly and gently, but persistently, rather than giving up and reinforcing the child's belief that he/she can not handle the scenario. Let the child know how you plan to support him/her and explain how this works in simple terms he/she can understand before beginning.
- If working on your own, talk with child to create a list of fearful situations from least fearful to most fearful. (e.g. thinking of speaking in class up to giving a 5 minute presentation to class). Wherever possible, have the child come up with this list as opposed to guessing at it yourself. Try to keep the list focused on one domain at a time and break it down into small chunks of progression towards the ultimate goal.
- Address the very least threatening situation first and make this a goal. Make sure to have taught and practiced the relaxation, physical and mental techniques ahead of time and to continue with daily practice of physical activity and relaxation activity. Brainstorm with child (and provide if needed) coping skills that relate to the challenging situation.
- Role-play the scenario at home before the "real" event is required. Make sure to include the physical, relaxation-based, and mental calming techniques as the situation unfolds. Make sure the techniques will be realistic to use in the "real life" event, not just in the role play at home.
- Have child monitor his/her anxiety as they enter and are involved in the challenge. Child will say (or, better yet, write down) their anxiety number as it varies throughout the activity. Very important to get a rating before they start as this often highlights that the anticipation of the event is often more anxiety-provoking than the event itself. Continue the rating of anxiety at intervals throughout the exposure situation. Get rating once the child has completed the event and then note how long it takes him/her to return to an anxiety-free place. Celebrate the attempt!
- Repeat the scenario a few times to witness decreasing anxiety and to have it documented for the child to see in a concrete way before moving on to the next level of fearful situation. Celebrate effort and progress. Then, repeat the strategy above for the second-least threatening situation. Continue upwards on your list, but move slowly and reinforce each learning stage by providing ongoing opportunities to use this new skill/ability. (e.g. If the child overcomes a fear of talking on the phone to a store employee, but still fears talking on the phone to a peer, continue to provide phone opportunities to stores, (or any other option) while you begin working on the fear of talking on the phone to peers.
- Be careful not to unintentionally introduce variations on the avoidance theme. For example, if afraid of elevators, only taking an elevator if he has a "safety item" (good luck charm, sentimental item) in his hand as a comfort item is better than not taking it at all, but it continues to send the message that he needs to be afraid of the elevator. The stuffy holds the "power" that she himself needs to eventually see as

coming from within herself. Better to have the child deep breathe in the elevator – calming method that is self-generated, physiologically powerful, and portable.

- Expect that, in spite of progress and success, in times of stress, the conquered anxiety may resurface. Repeat the above strategies, but start at one level below the level of fear that the child indicates that he/she feels able to handle this time around. This may not be at the very bottom of the fear list this time. Progress is likely to be faster, but don't rush the process.

### **School-Based Strategies :**

Communicate with student and student's parents regularly to be kept abreast of plan and progress. Aim to expose student to anxiety-provoking situation at the level he/she is presently working on.

### **Answering/Asking Questions in Class**

- Give the child a discrete signal (agreed upon in advance) that will let him/her know when his/her turn is coming up to answer a question. This allows child to mentally prepare for it. (One step lower on the fear ladder would be to tell the child prior to class what question you will be asking him as well.)
- Begin with asking closed questions (can be answered by "yes" or "no" or a one-word answer) and slowly move up to more open-ended questions. Tell the child you will be doing this.
- Pre-arrange with student that he/she has to put up his/her hand to ask to go to the bathroom, and to raise hand with one finger up (signalling a non-verbal request for the bathroom as opposed to a subject-related question). The child does not need to speak for the first step of the fear ladder work. The child in this case, would may simply leave and go. Slowly work up to actually raising hand and asking to go to the bathroom.

### **Making Presentations**

- While working up the fear ladder, allow the child to make the presentation in front of you alone, rather than in front of the whole class. Once mostly comfortable with this, move up to presenting in front of you and one or two chosen classmates (child chooses). Work towards presenting in front of whole class without having to first present to you alone.
- Allow the student to read from notes (or index cards with picture cues) during the presentation.
- Some schools I've worked in provide an after-school form of short-term group support around this issue as it is so common. They help students work through the gradual exposure exercises by practicing presentations in this manner ahead of time. A very useful tool is to videotape the student giving the presentation (with permission) and then have them watch it afterwards. This is powerful as the students are often shocked to see that what they are feeling (extreme fear, embarrassment, etc.) is not often visible! One student I know experienced a full blown panic attack during a presentation and had evidence that it was invisible to others - thus helping her sense of feeling exposed and vulnerable. This is a relief for students and makes it concrete for them.

## **Taking Tests**

- First and foremost, explain the science behind low levels of anxiety and performance enhancement! The goal is not to eradicate anxiety completely, but to take it to optimal levels.
- Allow the student to take the test in private and work up the fear ladder from there as is logical.
- Do not give “pop” quizzes. Honestly, there is very little benefit to these in my opinion and are extremely anxiety-evoking for many students. Give adequate notice for an upcoming test.
- Allow the student to submit a portfolio or project instead of the test where possible at first, then work towards being able to take tests by gradual exposure methods.
- Provide study skills training and good note-taking methods to help the child feel more prepared and in control.
- Provide tips on test-taking. How to approach a multiple-choice test, for example.
- When giving the test, provide a blank piece of paper as well. Have student use paper to cover all but the one question that they are attempting to answer at any given time.
- Teach an older child how to skim the test first and use a highlighter to note questions they feel most confident answering. Then have them use the paper method above to cover the un-highlighted questions as they move along answering the highlighted ones first. (This strategy should be taught prior to test day)
- Teach the entire class the test-taking, study-skills, etc. methods as a group. All children can benefit from these and it openly normalizes that taking tests causes anxiety for most people.
- I once had a fabulous history teacher who made us all laugh our heads off in one way or another right before we took a test. Sometimes a comic was put up. Another time he displayed a mini pencil guillotine he claimed to use on fingers caught cheating! He was wonderful. I didn't realize until I grew up that he was trying to reduce our anxiety. It worked like a charm. Humour is a fabulous anxiety-releaser. This teacher also used to have Buddy Holly playing in the room as we entered. We **were** instructed to bow to Buddy as we came in. Talk about alliance-building! You don't need to be as "out there" as he was, but make it fun.
- Get the entire class to get up and out of their seats - jump around and do just about anything physical (you can be the leader here) right before giving the test. If you incorporate humour, it's even more effective. At the end of this, to wind down a bit, have them all deep breathe five times with you and then sit and begin.

## **Social Anxiety During Unstructured Periods**

- At the beginning, have child enter school a few minutes earlier than the bell and get prepared at his/her locker/cubby.
- Some schools have a “lunch/recess club” in the resource teacher's room or another adult-supervised area. This is for children who prefer a smaller group of peers and a less-chaotic environment. Board games, Play Dough, puzzles, and other games can be provided for younger children. For teens, consider “Foosball”, ping-pong, or more challenging board games/mind-bending puzzles, etc. Many of these can be found quite cheaply on used-items sites such as “Used Nanaimo” or “Craig's List”.
- Slowly encourage exposure to the larger group at lunch and recess times. Challenge a student to spend a few minutes in this environment at first (while he/she monitors and notes his/her anxiety levels) and then return to the smaller group setting.



Slowly increase exposure time and celebrate effort and progress. With more serious cases, start the exposure to the large group by having a “buddy” with the student. Work up to longer times with the buddy and then short times without the buddy and so on...

## **6. Panic Attacks**

### **Symptoms**

Many people incorrectly assume that panic attacks are highly visible to others. They are not. Please believe your child and/or student if he/she expresses experiencing these highly distressing events.

- Shortness of breath
- Rapid/irregular heartbeat
- Trembling/shaking
- Sweating
- Choking sensation
- Nausea
- Dizziness/unsteadiness
- Numbness
- Feeling of detachment from yourself
- Fear of losing control or of going crazy
- Fear of dying

**\*Four or more symptoms experienced simultaneously define a panic attack.**

### **Coping Strategies for Early-Stage Panic Attack**

Treating recurring panic attacks is best done by a CBT-trained professional and/or psychiatrist. However, if you need to support a child/teen when he/she is actively experiencing a panic attack:

- Move child/teen to a somewhat more private place, but, if possible, not completely away from the situation causing the anxiety (exposure work happens here by staying put).
- Get down to eye level of child/teen and model slow, calm breathing and ask them to look only at you and breathe with you. Keep with this for a few minutes.
- Avoid excessive talking. Don't reassure. Simply say “I'll breathe with you. Look at me. Breathe.” Adopt a very casual, relaxed, but solely attentive look that communicates the sense that you have complete confidence that this will pass just fine. Very serious and anxious looks from you will increase anxiety. Calm and assertive is the key atmosphere here.

Once the moment passes, praise child/teen for withstanding anxiety. “You nailed that. Well done.” Ask them if they are ready to move on and then do so. Provide low-key, solid praise for the child's accomplishment.