



What is Anxiety?

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

Generally, when you feel anxious, you THINK something BAD is going to happen.

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

Key areas to consider with anxiety:

- **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 me", 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)

THOUGHTS: Anxious kids have anxious, worrisome thoughts. They often anticipate that the worst will happen and they believe that there is nothing they can do about it.

Worries trick kids into OVERESTIMATING THAT SOMETHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN AND HOW BAD IT'S GOING TO BE.

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 sleeping with the light on).

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

Feeling Frightened: Noticing the anxious feelings

Expecting Bad Thing to Happen: Noticing anxious self-talk

Attitudes & Actions: Developing helpful coping strategies

Results & Rewards: Self-evaluation and self-rewards

Key Components of Treating Anxiety

Cognitive restructuring: Changing the way the child thinks about situations (this is never going to work out, everyone is going to laugh at me, I'm going to look so stupid)

The child's irrational thinking is challenged to look at a more rational view of the situation. 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

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 because 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 one test? (challenging the irrational thoughts). What evidence do you have that failing one test means that you will fail the whole grade?", etc.

- **Solutions:** (1) Go to school and write the test, or (2) 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?

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, e.g., fear of spiders. Step #1: The child is able to sit and listen to someone talk about spiders. Have the child identify a number between 0 and 10 that he/she associates with fear (0=no fear, 10=big fears). Continue to talk about the spiders until the number is reduced.

School Accommodations: Anxious children perform best in a calm, supportive environment. Change and uncertainty can be troubling for anxious children; therefore, structure, routine and organization are important factors to feeling safe. Like all children, children with anxiety problems 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.

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.

Children spend a large proportion of their time in the school environment and therefore developing a safe environment where they can do their best is essential for their progress. Working together as a team - parents and school personnel - is the optimal approach in helping children with anxiety.