

PARENTING CHILDREN WITH ANXIETY

FALL 2019 NEWSLETTER

Anxiety Disorders have gradually grown to become some of the most common mental health problems across the world. According to Anxiety Canada, anxiety often begins at an early age, affecting more than 20% of children and adolescents throughout their life. It is therefore quite common for parents to encounter anxiety in their children. However, many parents also often find that they lack the proper resources or knowledge about mental illness to be able to help their children. This newsletter walks parents and guardians through some key steps they can take to support their child through anxiety.



The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers a succinct and accurate description of anxiety as “an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it”. While it is completely normal and even useful to experience these feelings when we encounter a real threat or high-stress situation, such as a job interview, anxiety becomes a serious issue when it is ongoing and when we begin to see normal, everyday scenarios as dangerous. It is in such situations that an individual should seek professional help.

SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

As with any form of mental illness, it can be difficult to identify anxiety in your child especially because the symptoms are not as “visible” as with many other illnesses.

Some key things to look out for are if your children are complaining about certain recurring physical symptoms or if you notice any striking behavioural, emotional changes that begin to disrupt their school, social, or home life.

Examples of common anxiety symptoms:

- Changes in appetite, complaints about stomach pain/upset stomach, other digestive issues
- Difficulty sleeping

- Feelings of light-headedness, shortness of breath, pounding heart
- Excessive perfectionism, afraid of making mistakes, indecisiveness, or becoming very upset over small issues, constantly asking for re-assurances
- Avoiding situations or things that trigger anxiety, e.g. meeting up with friends, speaking up in class, being in crowded spaces etc.

Sources: Canadian Mental Health Association, Anxiety Disorders Association of Ontario

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

1) Talk to your child

It is important to have regular conversations with your child about their day at school, their friends, and/or extra-curricular activities as that can alert you to anything being out of the norm for your child. Anxiety can sometimes feel like an isolating experience, so knowing that they have someone to talk to can be helpful. If you notice that your child is struggling, ask them about what is going on and how they are feeling. In an article written for Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), a leading pediatric health centre in Canada, Dr. Anand Prabhu also recommends speaking with your child's teachers, coaches, or other adults interacting with the child to determine if there is anything going on outside of home that may be triggering or exacerbating the anxiety.

2) Enlist the help of a medical and/or mental health professional

It is important to speak with your family physician if you suspect that your child may have anxiety. The doctor may refer your child for further tests to rule out any other medical conditions and advise the next steps which may involve medication, referral for an assessment, or counselling. Early intervention in the form of counselling, especially Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, is considered to be one of the most effective forms of treatment for anxiety.

3) Learn about anxiety and re-inforce healthy coping strategies at home

Educating yourself on anxiety can help ease your worry as well as provide you with ideas and tools to help your child with managing their anxiety. The websites of Anxiety Canada and Canadian Mental Health Association are both helpful online resources for anxiety with a number of articles about managing anxiety for different age groups.

Here are some useful starting points for parents in helping their children cope with anxiety:

- Be kind and understanding when your child is feeling anxious or if they are in the middle of a panic attack. Sometimes, simply being there without being judgemental can relieve the child's fear about the situation or any embarrassment they feel about their anxiety.
- If your child is seeing a counsellor, try to re-inforce the coping techniques suggested by the therapist at home.

These may include challenging negative thoughts, practicing realistic or positive thinking, helping them slowly expose themselves to the feared object or situation, and encouraging healthy habits such as eating a well-balanced diet, exercising, getting enough sleep, and taking time out for hobbies!

- Resist the urge to constantly re-assure the child and instead encourage his/her ability to cope with situations on their own. Dr. Prabhu of CHEO also suggests praising children's coping behaviours which places the focus on their effort rather than the outcome and can promote self-confidence.
- Conflicts at home can be quite disruptive to a child's sense of security and overall well-being. If there are marital concerns or familial issues that are leading to family dysfunction, it is important to tackle those issues and work towards stabilizing the environment at home.

Lastly, it is important to realize that anxiety is not dangerous and it doesn't need to be feared. With some professional help and support, your child can learn to manage his/her anxiety as well as build resilience to be able to handle various challenges that arise in their life from time to time.



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