

Understanding Anxiety

BY TEA BEZOS & SIOBHAN O'GORMAN



Anxiety is a feeling of fear, apprehension, worry or nervousness about something with an uncertain outcome.

We know that sometimes bad things do happen to everyone from time to time. And some children and adults are good at reassuring themselves and finding ways to solve their own problems, but for many, they can internalise these negative events and feel like it's somehow their fault. For example, if you had an awkward encounter with a new person - you might say - "I'm just having a bad day", that didn't feel right. While an anxious person might think that they are just terrible at making friends.

This is not about having to always be happy and full of joy. It is being able to understand and be with our uncomfortable feelings.

When we feel anxious we have 3 stress responses. It's our body's natural reaction to danger.

- **Fight:** for example you're dropping your child off at the school gate and they are anxious and the way they show is they start to shout and scream, possibly kick and get upset, in order to get away from the anxiety inducing situation.
- **Flight:** your child avoids going to school or a party or they want to leave early because they don't feel comfortable.
- **Freeze:** at the checkout, when that adult is trying to be friendly and says 'hi' to our little one, your child might go blank they can't answer. Often you can see them taking a breath in - and hold that breath in.

I am possibly the best person to give this because giving webinar was something new for me. I was having very uncomfortable feelings. I observed my own stress levels and before the talk started I just wanted to run.

We all get anxious, including animals. The stress response is useful when our safety is threatened. However, it sometimes happens when there is no real threat or need to be afraid, but it's our thoughts and our bodies that perceive danger. Anxiety only becomes a problem when the level of anxiety does not equal the threat.

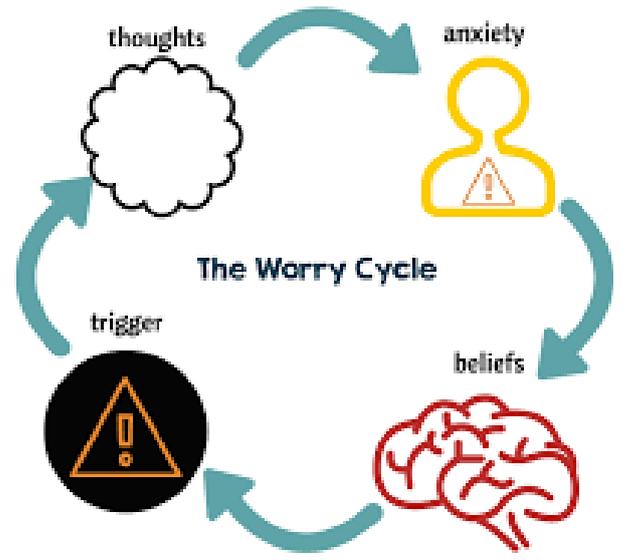
So we need to change the language, change our perspective. We can consider if this is a threat, a challenge or an opportunity (ref. Grow Your Mind).

3 Categories of Anxiety

- **Physiological:** responses that happen automatically in our bodies when we face a situation that we perceive as threatening. This can be feeling dizzy, or hot and sweaty, breathing quickly, your legs even shaking, wanting to get out, run away or hide, feeling scared or having butterflies in your tummy. These are the symptoms that our children often feel. Because they don't understand anxiety they may interpret these feelings as sickness.
- **Cognitive:** Worried, overly concerned, self-conscious. This thinking tends to be catastrophic and negative and tends to result in negative predictions of outcomes. Blowing things out of proportion, blaming ourselves or jumping to conclusions. For example I would have been very happy for Tea to give this presentation tonight. It all seemed like such a good idea a month ago when we were planning. It would have been such a relief for me to not have to go through with this. I am currently feeling all the physiological symptoms (the sweating, heart palpitations butterflies in my tummy etc).
- **Behavioural Anxiety:** Underneath the iceberg we have negative emotions or uncomfortable feelings. See image below.

As a parent we don't want our children to have to go through these uncomfortable feelings. It is very difficult to watch. However, our job is not to fix the problem or to try and cover it over so they don't have to feel these uncomfortable feelings.

Our job is to allow the child to express how they are feeling and to release their emotions. Our job is not to rescue them.



Worry Cycle

We need to remember that we build on the strategies of past experiences, and if our past experience is to avoid uncomfortable situations the cycle forms.

Let me give an example

- **Anxiety:** your child is on their way to school and they become anxious about who will play with them in the garden.
- **Belief:** nobody will want to play with them
- **Trigger:** when they arrive in the playground, the friend your child wants to play is already playing with someone else
- **Thoughts:** nobody wants to play with me, I am on my own, nobody likes me, everybody hates me.

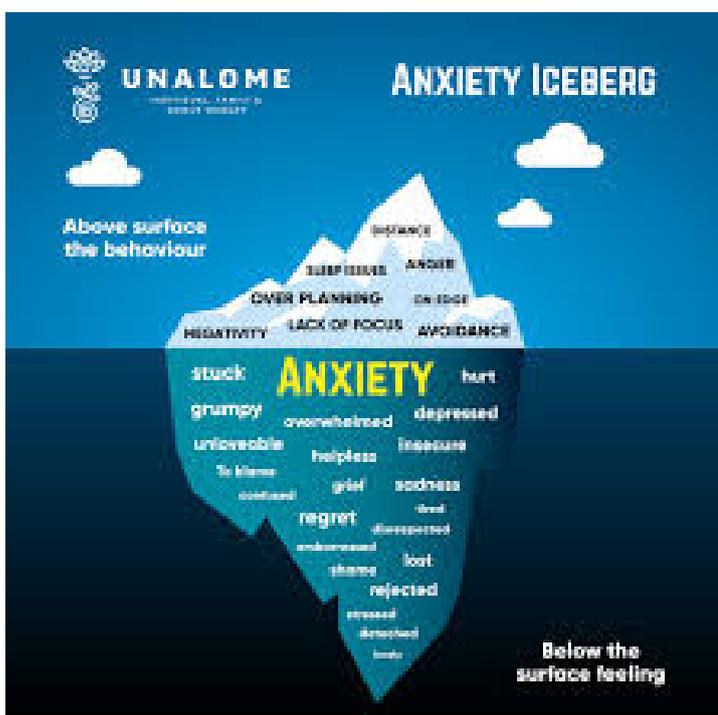
We want to flip the worry cycle to a resilience cycle and create a positive spin.

We want to address the child's feelings and the situation and help them understand if their thoughts and beliefs are true and appropriate.

Again, we need to remember that we build on the strategies of past experiences.

Which cycle are we choosing when we have anxiety? Are we rescuing or empowering.

This is a question for us all to answer when we are going through an anxious period. And remember that everything shall pass.



Common fears in children

There are many common sources of anxiety; separation anxiety, thunder and lightning, fire, water, the dark, nightmares.

From about **18 months to 3 years**, fears often arise from dependence on the parents and lack of knowledge which is normal. To reduce fear and anxiety we need to let them know that when we leave we will return to them, and teach them about things they find scary in order to demystify their fears so they don't seem so unpredictable or unknown.

Common fears by age

3+ Death and dead people. Over 3 they are asking questions more concerned need to be honest with them. Only answer the question they ask.

5+ Monsters, germs, balloons, illness and poor performance
Fear of germs: coronavirus. I was asking a 7 year old the other day what she was getting for Christmas. She said she didn't want any presents. I was intrigued and asked her why she said she just wanted Santa to help get rid of the Coronavirus. These fears are real for a child. So beautiful.

12+ Rejection from peers. According to the national institute of health 1 in 3 of all adolescents aged 13-18 will experience an anxiety disorder. The numbers have been rising steadily; between 2007 and 2012 anxiety disorders went up by 20%.

The interesting thing is that when a child has anxiety it doesn't mean that they avoid the situation that they are most anxious about it's often the thing they are most attracted to. For example adolescents anxious about being rejected by peers they also seek them out. Your 4 year old want to talk about death and dying.

Tips

- Try not to leave without saying goodbye.
- Acknowledge when things are scary, loud, or uncomfortable.
- Use the opportunity to teach and demystify
- Use a tone of voice that is calm and reassuring
- Stay close and use language that is comforting eg 'You are safe', 'I am here', any toy or blanket they might have for comfort.

9 Helpful Strategies

1. Slow Down:

Encourage your child to take some slow, deep breaths, squeeze your muscles tightly and then let go. Lots of physical exercise. Get down to eye level. Listen to what they have to say. And repeat it back to them. Do not over schedule your child. Tired children get overwhelmed more easily.

2. Make time to worry:

Setting aside some designated time to deal with worries can stop anxious thoughts from taking over. Set aside about 15 minutes for 'worry time' Get down to eye level.

Listen to what they have to say. And repeat it back to them. Listen to their worries with no interruptions or distractions (no phones, TV, siblings etc) and even encourage them to draw or write down whatever is bothering them.

You can make the activity a bit more fun by decorating a 'worry box' or building a 'worry wall' out of post-its. When the time is up – after 10 to 15 minutes – shut the worries up in the box or tear them off the wall and say goodbye to them for the day.

There is the one rule with worry time. No thinking or talking about worries unless it is worry time. If a worry pops into their head and it's not worry time, they can imagine drawing or writing the worry and placing it into the worry box and imagine locking it shut. Remind them that they can think about the worry during worry time but for now we will leave it in the box. Do not discuss the worry until worry time.



9 Helpful Strategies (cont'd)

3. Climb the ladder:

Instead of skirting the scary situation, try a technique called 'laddering' – breaking down worries into manageable chunks and gradually working towards a goal. The child may go up four steps and the next day go back 3 steps, consistency and patience is the key. For example, let's say your child is afraid of water and swimming. Instead of avoiding the pool, create some mini-goals to build their confidence. Start out by just sitting and watching other kids swimming. As they feel more comfortable, get them to try dangling their legs in the water, then standing in the shallow end, and so on.

4. Encourage positive thinking:

Kids with anxiety often get stuck on the worst-case scenario or 'what ifs' in any situation. You can help them shift these thinking patterns by

- reminding them of times they've dealt with similar issues in the past
- helping them to challenge the scary thought with facts and evidence. For example, we know that crocodiles can't survive under our bed.
- make a plan for how they'll respond if things don't go as they'd like.

5. Have a go:

Anxious kids often worry about making mistakes or not having things perfect. This can lead to them avoiding situations or activities – they'd rather sit out than get it wrong. Emphasise giving new things a try and having fun over whether something's a success or failure.

6. Model helpful coping:

This is one of the most important things to do to support your child. Don't just tell your child how to overcome emotions – show them. When you get anxious or stressed, verbalise how you're coping with the situation: "This looks a bit scary for me, but I'll give it a go."

7. Help your child to take charge:

Think about what you can do to make your child feel like they have some control over the scary situation. For example, if your child gets anxious about intruders, make shutting and locking their bedroom window part of their night-time responsibilities.

8. Be upfront about scary stuff:

Lots of kids have worries about death, war, the corona virus or things they see on the news. This is all really normal. Talk through their fears and answer any questions truthfully. Don't sugar-coat the facts – try and explain what's happening in a way that puts their fears in perspective. We must remember the impact the news has on us and our children - so should they be exposed to it?

9. Check on your own behaviour:

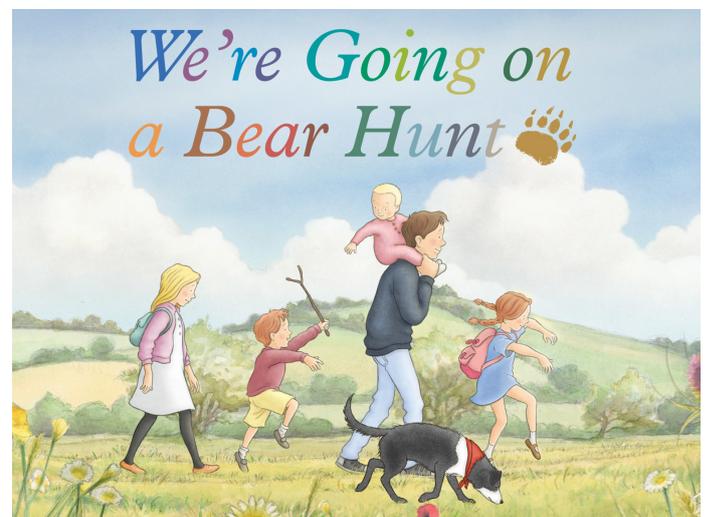
Kids pick up all sorts of signals from the adults in their lives, so have a think about the messages you're sending.

Parents come with their own anxieties. Over-protective family members can inadvertently reinforce children's fears that the world is a dangerous place. Similarly, parents who 'over-help' are subconsciously telling their kids that they can't do anything without adult support. If you're prone to 'helicoptering', try taking a step back and wait next time before you jump in.

It can be hard seeing your child distressed, but figuring things out for themselves is an important step in building resilience.

Add to this list. You and your child can come up with different and creative ways of managing anxieties in your family. What works for you?

When your child is feeling anxious or scared it is important to remember that this is a cycle. What is important is that we support the child to get through the cycle in a positive way. So they can then build on positive future experiences. This is what builds resilience.



I have always loved this book as it's a great reminder that to build resilience we must go through uncomfortable feelings and situations.

Where to get help

- GP
- Paediatrician
- Psychologist
- Allied Health Providers - Occupational Therapists, Speech Pathologist, Physiotherapist
- Cool kids - Macquarie University
- Groups: social skills, yoga and mindfulness are offered to support skill development.
- Grow Your Mind
- Games; Socially speaking
- Be BRAVE: Check out BRAVE – a free online program to help kids cope with worries and anxiety. There's a tailored version for younger kids (eight-12), one for teens (12-17) and an accompanying program for parents.

LIFELINE: 13 11 14

KIDS HELPLINE: 1800 551 800 or webchat

BEYOND BLUE: 1300 22 4636

PARENTLINE AUSTRALIA: 1300 301 300