Without anxiety, little would be accomplished. The performance of athletes, entertainers, executives, artisans, and students would suffer; creativity would diminish; crops might not be planted. And we would all achieve that idyllic state long sought after in our fast-paced society of whiling away our lives under a shade tree. This would be as deadly for the species as nuclear war.”  

(Barlow, 1988)

Anxiety is...

- Natural
  - All children and adults experience anxiety
- Necessary
  - A justified emotion when a threat to one’s life, health, or well-being exists.
  - Anxiety is adaptive—moderate levels of anxiety help performance
- Harmless
  - Feels uncomfortable, but is not dangerous

Anxiety, Fear, Phobias & Panic

- Anxiety
  - Future-oriented mood state, which may occur in absence of realistic danger
  - Adaptive nature of anxiety
- Fear
  - Present-oriented emotional reaction to current danger, characterized by alarm and strong escape tendencies
- Phobias
  - exaggerated fears or fears that are more persistent and disturbing manifesting in avoidance behavior that is disproportionate to the demands of the situation
- Panic
  - sudden and unexpected fight/flight response (can be in absence of obvious danger or threat)

Anxiety becomes a problem when it affects one’s ability to learn, to make friends, and to have fun

Anxiety is marked by avoidance of the feared object, event, or situation.

Avoiding the feared stimulus decreases anxiety, creating a cycle where not facing your fear is rewarded.
Distinguishing Normal vs. Clinical Anxiety

- Anxiety becomes a problem when it affects one’s ability to learn, to make friends, and to have fun
- Intensity
- The degree to which distress is experienced
- Impairment
- Does the distress interfere with the child’s daily life?
- Lack of Flexibility
  - Can the child recover from distress when the event is not present?
- Avoiding the feared stimulus decreases anxiety, creating a cycle where not facing your fear is rewarded.

Prevalence of Clinical Anxiety

- The most prevalent mental health problem in children
- Affects about 18% of the population
- Developmental progression of normal fears
  - Preschool: Imaginary, objects/situations
  - Grade School: Health/harm, scrutiny/competence
  - Adolescence: Social adequacy and performance
- Developmental progression of anxiety
  - Increased risk of later depressive disorders
  - Evidence for some anxiety disorders remaining stable through adulthood

Anxiety Disorders

**DSM 5**

- Social Phobia
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Separation Anxiety
- Simple Phobia
- Selective Mutism

Anxiety in Children

- Parents of anxious children are more likely to:
  - Encourage avoidant behavior
  - Provide excessive reassurance
- Teachers tend to recognize externalizing problems more often than internalizing problems

Why do children develop an anxiety disorder?

- Biological variables
  - Heritability, temperament, brain structure and function
- Shared environment
  - Family factors (overprotection and/or criticism), modeling of anxiety
- Non-shared environment
  - Specific, negative experiences with feared object or situation

"Now, your mother and I think that you are very old enough to get your own hand of tobacco."
Course of Anxiety Disorders

- Experience and expression of fear is related to cognitive development
- Presentation of anxiety may change as child grows older
- The prevalence of anxiety disorders appears similar in males and females until puberty, after which the prevalence of female cases nearly doubles that of males.
- Fears generally more present in females (gender biases in reporting and referrals)
- While some children may go through normal, fleeting phases of anxiety, once it reaches the level of disorder it rarely goes away on its own – children do not just “grow out of it.”

What are the different pieces of anxiety?

- Physiological Cues (Bodily Sensations)
  - Tension in chest/ increased heart rate
  - Butterflies in stomach/ nausea
- Cognitions (Thoughts)
  - Assumptions, worry thoughts
- Actions (Approach/Avoidance)
  - Staying away from the situation or task

3 component model of anxiety

- Feelings in My Body
  - Sweaty, hot, shaking
- What I Think
  - I don’t feel good, I want to go home
- What I Do
  - Plead with her to stay

Physiological Cues

- Relaxation
- Training
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Diaphragmatic breathing
Thoughts

**Automatic Thoughts**
- We all have them
- Identify "worry" thoughts

**Examples:**
- "I'm not as smart as other kids."
- "I can't do this."
- "I need my mom to make me feel better."
- "I'll be embarrassed."
- "What if I do something stupid?"

**Develop Challenge thoughts**
- Help child recognize their worry thoughts and dispute them with realistic evidence (become a detective)
- Develop coping thoughts and self-talk

**Examples:**
- "I can do this."
- "I've never failed a test before."
- "Most dogs are friendly."
- "People fly on airplanes every day."
- "What is the worst that can happen?"
- "Am I 100% sure that ____ will happen?"

Actions

**Exposure and facing the feared stimulus in a gradual progression**
- Create fear hierarchy
- Use fear thermometer to gauge child's distress
- Reward the child for facing the scary situation

**Sample Fear Hierarchy for Social Phobia**
- Call friend from school to "chat" (3)
- Order food from pizza shop near apartment (3)
- Order food from new pizza place (5)
- Order food at Deli (6)
- Initiate conversation with acquaintance at school (7)
- Raise hand to answer question in class (7)
- Go to a school dance (9)
- Give speech/presentation in class (10)
- Invite acquaintance to get together (10)

**Strategies to Help Children Manage Anxiety**
- Communicate your empathy
- Help the child feel listened to by labeling the emotion and validating his/her experience
- Be sensitive to child's anxiety without allowing for an "easy out"
- Reward coping or brave behavior
- Define the child's "brave" behavior
- Reward the child's completion of brave behavior
- Reward for effort, not outcome

**Strategies to Help Children Manage Anxiety**
- Decrease attention for anxious behavior
- Use active ignoring
- Prompt the use of problem solving
- Help the child come up with their own solutions
- Model brave, coping behavior
- Children learn from adults
- Show them how to cope in anxious situation
Example—“Coping Card”

- Index card with list of “coping thoughts” child can review when at school and feeling worried about being away from parent
  - “I’ve made it through the day before”
  - “It’s fun to be with my friends.”
  - “My teachers are very nice.”
  - “This can be fun!”
  - “My mom always picks me up on time.”

Example—“Other Things I Can Do”

- Index card with list of activities child can review when feeling worried
  - Talk to a teacher
  - Draw a picture for my mom
  - Play with a friend
  - Sing at circle time

Social Anxiety Disorder

- Marked and persistent fear in social or performance situations due to fears of rejection or embarrassment
- Fear of social situations where child might be exposed to unfamiliar people or possible evaluation; fears of embarrassment or humiliation
- The situations are avoided or endured with distress
- Interference in functioning in social situations

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

- Excessive and uncontrollable anxiety about multiple events
- Checking in about safety, things done correctly, behavior of other kids
- Excessive need for reassurance
- Future oriented worry: upcoming vacations, social and school events, family members’ health, doctors appts, family finances, competence in sports and school

What teachers can do to help

- Use Classroom Rules
  - Specific, clear and concise
  - Refer to them often
- Manage Transitions
  - Communicate expectations clearly
  - Utilize a schedule
- Utilize Positive Reinforcement
  - A rewarding consequence which increases the likelihood that the desired behavior will reoccur
- Be the parents’ eyes and ears
  - Kids may be different in school than at home
  - Better able to make comparisons

Treatment of young children with anxiety

- When to refer
  - If the strategies that you have tried are not effective or require excessive time and energy
  - If a change for the worse is noted
- What treatment entails
  - Typically work with parents alone or parents and child together
  - Teach skills and strategies
  - Cognitive Behavior Therapy
- How you can help
  - Work with therapist to develop and/or maintain behavior plan at school
  - Keep lines of communication open with therapist
Resources

- You and Your Anxious Child: Free Your Child from Fears and Worries and Create a Joyful Family Life (Anne Marie Albano)
- Helping your anxious child (Ronald Rapee, et al)
- Freeing your Child from Anxiety (Tamar Chansky)
- www.aboutourkids.org
- www.adaa.org
- www.freedomfromfear.com

Thank you!

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