



### Why Calming Down is Not Enough: Active Strategies to Help Anxious Kids and Parents

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### The Anxiety Disorders

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Social Anxiety
- Separation Anxiety
- Panic Disorder
- Specific Phobias
  
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

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### We want children that ...

- Feel connected socially to *someone (adults count!)*
- Tolerate (and even seek out) uncertainty and discomfort and see them as intrinsic to learning
- Handle physiological symptoms
- Are good problem solvers and decision makers
- Can talk to themselves and provide internal reassurance
- Are developing a sense of autonomy and mastery

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*THINK PREVENTION!*

Broad based SKILLS that are the opposite of the patterns we see with *worry, anxiety and depression*

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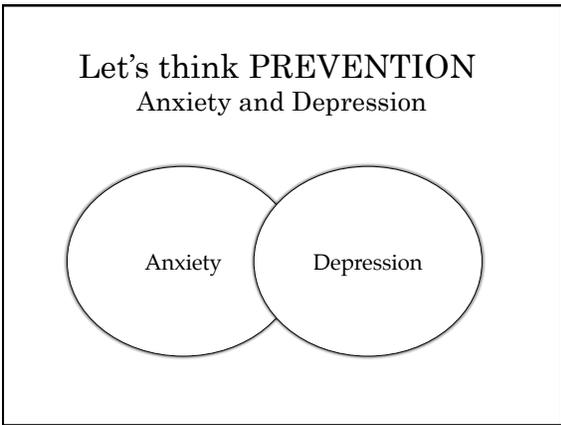
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- Critical Cognitive Skills:**
- *handle the uncertainty of life*
  - *be more flexible (malleability!)*
  - *problem solve (vs. ruminate)*
  - *tolerate (and normalize) discomfort*
  - *learn by doing, failing, & succeeding*

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### Overlapping Cognitive Patterns

- Global: *never, always, no one, everyone*
- Catastrophic: *worst case scenario*
- Permanent: *things won't change*  
**Your words matter!**

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### *The DANGER of PERMANENT* When people were told:

Your depression is  
biochemical and genetic



More pessimistic about  
recovery

Your brain's  
chemistry and  
genetic expression  
are malleable



Increased  
hopefulness and  
optimism

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Teaching skills to kids and  
parents based on an **umbrella**  
**process principle** that...



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...guides you *more than* the  
content and diagnostic  
categories

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How do we diminish the  
patterns that support  
anxiety & *depression*...

and what do we offer  
instead?

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The question I want you to ask yourself:

Are you as the clinician...

***DOING THE DISORDER?***

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Understanding anxiety...

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Anxiety has figured out how to be overwhelming

On the other hand, anxiety is not that complex

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*Anxiety Demands TWO Things:*

- *Certainty: "I have to know what's going to happen next... and I want to control it!"*
- *Comfort: "I want to feel safe and comfortable...or else I want out!"*

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**Avoidance of:**

- **social contact (depression risk)**
- new experiences
- possible failures
- negative affect
- physical arousal

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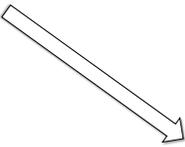
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We want to demote anxiety & worry...

- **CRISIS**



- Normal
- Part of many aspects of life
- Even annoying!

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David Yeager and colleagues asked and answered the question:

*How will high school students cope socially when they are told that people have the potential to change “socially relevant traits”?*

How to Improve Adolescent Stress Responses: Insights From Integrating Implicit Theories of Personality and Biopsychosocial Models  
Psychological Science August 2016 vol. 27 no. 8 1078-1091

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From the NYT article by Jan Hoffman entitled *Teaching Teenagers to Cope With Social Stress*

“At the beginning of the school year, students participated in a reading and writing exercise intended to instill a basic, almost banal message to help them manage tension: People can change.”

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From the NYT article by Jan Hoffman entitled *Teaching Teenagers to Cope With Social Stress*

“Adults played no significant part in the exercise, researchers said. Students essentially taught themselves this mental buffer, and when they were inevitably rattled by social stress, ***they had a reassuring interpretation ready to frame it..***” (Italics mine)

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*To make worry stronger...*

- Talk about the content of the worry
- Analyze and examine
- Search for and discuss the WHY
- Promote calmness as the prerequisite for moving forward

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“A therapist must be serious about the grim situation of his clientele while being free to change the framework of the situation in the spirit of play.”

Jay Haley

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Normal, Expected Strategies  
(that don't work very well long term)

- Accommodation
- External (versus Internal) Reassurance
- Preparation (talking, planning, if maybe-so-ing)
- Stepping in to fix the problem
- Avoidance
- Overprotection (step in quickly)
- Express worry and fear (safety chatter)
- Frustration

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The skills we teach must target  
3 areas...

- Physiological (those uncomfortable bodily reactions)
- Cognitive (those worried thoughts)
- Principles (beliefs)

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Critical Concepts as we face anxiety...

- CONTENT is far less important than PROCESS
- We are eliminating NOTHING
- We have to teach an OFFENSIVE rather than a DEFENSIVE position

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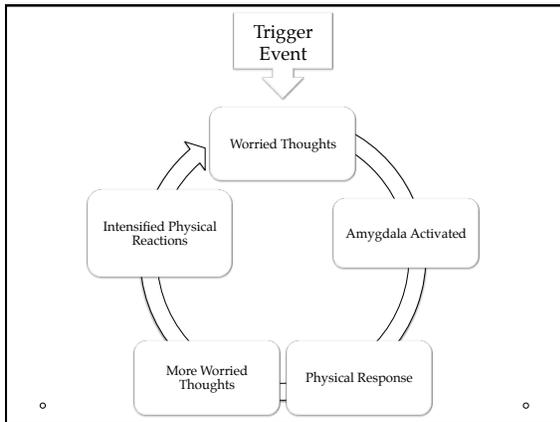
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Seven Puzzle Pieces

Each teaches a skill that helps kids & parents shift their response to anxious thoughts, sensations, & beliefs

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1. **Expect to worry**

- stop acting startled by each new occurrence of worry
- expect worry to appear in certain situations
- figure out
  - when to ignore those normal, expected worried thoughts
  - when to pay attention to them

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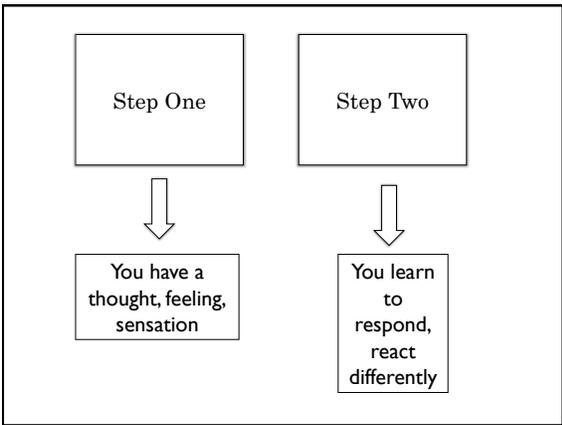
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2. **Talk to your worry**

- The Content Trap
  - focusing on particulars of each worry
  - content of worry is moving target
- 3 ways to talk to worry

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## The Content Trap

### Content (not good)

- Focus on & talk about how to fix SPECIFIC problem
- Reassure about that SPECIFIC problem
- Give data, stats, rational information
- Go over plans & specifics repeatedly

### Process (good!)

- Focus on HOW worry operates & what it's up to
- Cue "worry-managing" strategies
- Be general: "That sounds like worry to me..."
- Prompt independent, internal reassurance & problem solving

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### 3. Be unsure & uncomfortable on purpose

- Worry says STOP. Worry is not a big fan of moving forward.
- Worry fires off your alarm system, usually way too much
- Anxious kids & parents try to stay comfortable & certain
  - With certainty-seeking behaviors...

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We are NOT eliminating or avoiding physical symptoms

We are perceiving & managing them through a different lens



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CRITICAL ATTITUDINAL SHIFT!

If I'm uncomfortable or unsure or nervous as I'm learning something new, I'm on the right track...

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These are messages to try out

- "I'm willing to feel uncomfortable"
- "I'm willing to feel unsure & to not know what will happen"
- "I'm willing to grab onto my courage & do it"

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Step into unknown territory &...

- **Stop** saying, "I've GOT to know that everything will turn out just right"
- Start saying, "I'm WILLING to NOT KNOW how things are going to turn out"
- **Stop** saying, "I've got to feel comfortable"
- Start saying, "I'm WILLING to feel UNCOMFORTABLE"

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#### 4. Breathe!

- Simple, brief skills to help during the REBOOT
- Allows you to experiment with new activities
- Creates mastery & demonstrates the mind body connection

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But....  
physically-based  
interventions are a  
“re-boot”  
and not a treatment  
process.

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#### 5. Know what you want

Reaching a goal requires finding a  
“WANT-TO” & then figuring out steps  
that will get you there

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### How to get what you want

- Deliberately choose to do what's hard & uncomfortable
- Worry must show up if you are to learn a new way to manage it
- Trying new things is a good way to get worry to show up
- Pick goals that you really want to accomplish  
— you'll feel more motivated to face your worries

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### Important Points:

- Rewards are short term
- Rewards happen when they practice and “step in”
- WHY you are rewarding is clearly explained
- Never “in a row”

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I want \_\_\_\_\_

So I'm willing to \_\_\_\_\_

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### 6. Bridge back to your successes

- anxious people (kids, teens, adults) suffer from amnesia
- learn from new experiences & create pattern of remembering (reminder bridges)

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### Helping kids connect to their past successes:

- What can you do now (automatically) that you couldn't do a few years ago?
- Can you remember something that was *really* challenging when you first tried it but now seems simple?
- Make a list of accomplishments that make you proud.
  - Learned to ride a bike?
  - Mastered your times tables?
  - Went to sleep away camp (and had fun!)?

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### 7. Take Action on Your Plan

- pieces of puzzle are assembled
- a written, step-by-step plan
- emphasis is on problem solving
- movement away from CONTENT of each worry & focus on PROCESS

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**A Really Clever Guide to  
Winning over Worries**

- Know what you want to accomplish
- Remember past successes that can help you
- Expect worry to show up
- Talk to your worries so they can't run the show
- Make a plan & step into that new situation
- Be willing to feel unsure & uncomfortable along the way
- Let your breathing skills support you

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**A reminder...**

Are you as the clinician...

***DOING THE DISORDER?***

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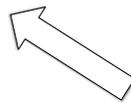
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**CBT techniques that I don't use:**

- What's the worst that could happen?
- Let's examine the likelihood of that happening...what are the odds?
- Scheduling or setting aside "worry time" (sometimes also known as "therapy")

 *We do this one  
with kids a LOT!*

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Behavioral (504) Plans:  
Creating Plans that Work

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Parents, Therapist, and  
School...

*...Everyone on the same page*



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What percent of children living with an  
anxious parent meet the criteria for an  
anxiety disorder?

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Lead researcher Golda Ginsburg reports data showing that the children of parents diagnosed with an anxiety disorder are up to seven times more likely to develop an anxiety disorder themselves, and up to **65 percent of children living with an anxious parent meet criteria for an anxiety disorder.**

*Ginsburg, et al., The Child Anxiety Prevention Study: Intervention Model and Primary Outcomes. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 77(3), June 2009, 580-587.*

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**And check this out...**

From a 2015 children-of-twins study on the transmission of anxiety...

For both anxiety and neuroticism, the models provide support for **significant direct environmental transmission** from parents to their adolescent offspring. In contrast, there **was no evidence of significant genetic transmission.**

Direct environmental transmission is in line with developmental theories of anxiety **suggesting that children and adolescents learn anxious behaviors from their parents through a number of pathways such as modeling.**

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**FRONTLOADING**  
is **CRITICAL**

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### Working with parents

- Must have an agreed upon goal
- Parents benefit greatly from psycho-education
- Parents dealing with anxious children are most likely anxious, or worn out, or both.
- They are learning the same skills that their child is learning
- Parents and school need to be using same language

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### Creating Effective Behavioral Plans

- Is this plan accommodating the anxiety?
- Does this plan address the teaching of skills that reduce anxiety?
- Is there a weaning-off component to the plan?
- What role will visits to the nurse/guidance have?
- Does the plan specifically address physical symptoms?
- How aligned are parents, student, and school?

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### Teachers, Counselors & Parents

- Emphasize use of skills **IN** the classroom
- When student needs to leave classroom, have plans for use of skills in order to return quickly
- School staff & parents should be “speaking the same language” to student
- Keeping student engaged in school is essential

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**Traps to watch out for...**

- Accommodations with no weaning off plan
- Creating “escapes” that are warm, safe, & cozy... and support avoidance
- Diminishing anxiety by creating certainty (giving student schedules & warnings of change throughout the day)

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**How do we teach and cue a different response?**

- Expectations and normalizing
- Externalization and talking back
- Moving toward rather than backing out
- TRAPS:
  - Accommodation
  - Reassurance
  - Certainty
  - Avoidance

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**Let’s widen our perspective....  
What is the BIGGER frame?**

- Skill-based *versus* avoidance-based
- Action *over* accommodation

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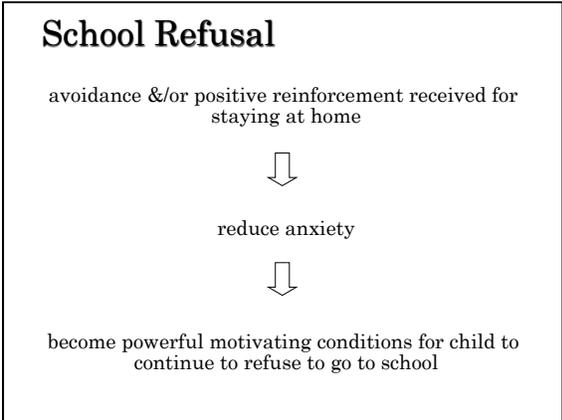
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Kids avoid school when they feel (and sometimes truly are) ill-equipped to handle the demands. So we must...

- Target the patterns that reinforce this belief
- Teach the skills that are needed to handle the challenges

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**Critical Cognitive Skills:**

- *handle the uncertainty of life*
- *be more flexible (malleability!)*
- *problem solve (vs. ruminate)*
- *tolerate (and normalize) discomfort*
- *learn by doing, failing, & succeeding*

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## Normalize and Activate



- This is what I'm experiencing.
- I don't like it, but I can handle it.
- I can figure out what to do next.
- And I'm going to DO something.

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## Information Stuff

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- Facebook: Lynn Lyons Psychotherapist, Anxiety and Children
- To get my newsletter: Go to FB page and click on EMAIL SIGN UP, or email me and ask.

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