

Targeted Treatment for Anxious Families: Immediate and Active



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The links between anxiety and
depression are robust...

**Untreated anxiety in children: leading
predictor of depression in teens and
young adults**

(Wagner, 2002)

Problems when addressing worry, anxiety, and depression:

- Too much focus on **content over process**, which maintains or increases anxiety over time
- The quest to **eliminate** symptoms
- **Overthinking** takes precedence over **ACTION**

OUR MISSION:

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

and what do we offer instead?

Anxiety is sustained by:

- An overestimation of risk
- An underestimation of resources
- Lousy problem solving skills
- Inability to tolerate uncertainty

Your immediate focus? ***MOMENTUM***

Fostering of a “state of belief” that
maximizes the powerful impact of
your words and interactions.

Kirsch 2000; Kirsch and Lynn 1997

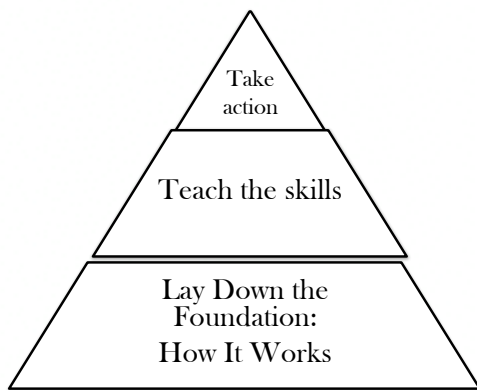
THE BIG PICTURE

Critical Skills:

- *Expect and manage thoughts/emotions*
- *Practice flexibility/malleability*
- *React differently to thoughts*
- *Tolerate the uncertainty of life*
- *Problem solve (vs. ruminate)*

The Four Questions

1. What resources does this child/family have and how will I use them?
2. Where is the gap/missing piece that sustains the symptom pattern?
3. How can create an experience that will offer a shift in the pattern?
4. **Am I (or is anyone else) doing the disorder?**



FIRST & CRITICAL!

EXPLAINING THE RATIONALE

FRONTLOADING

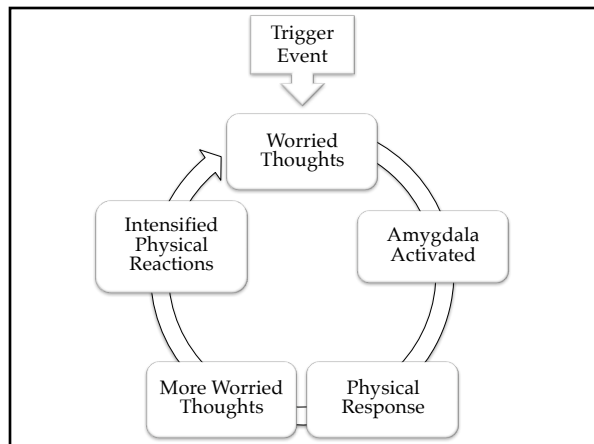
with
psycho-babble-free
psycho-education

Anxiety has figured out
how to be overwhelming

On the other hand,
anxiety is not that complex

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!”



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
- Playful CONNECTION is the opposite of what anxiety demands

Content versus Process

(This is where we get stuck...)

Content-Based Interventions versus Process-Based Interventions

Let's focus on
HOW WORRY OPERATES

- ↙ **CONTENT**
- What can we do about **THAT** worry?
 - How can we get rid of **THAT** worry?

VERSUS

- How does *worry operate*?
 - How are we going to interact with worry *when it arrives*?
- ↙ **PROCESS**

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 your worry pattern to me..."
- Prompt connection to internal reassurance & external problem solving

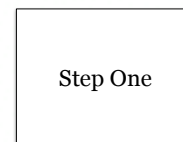
The Problem with Elimination

It's a paradox...

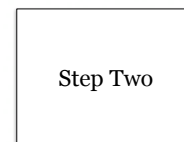
The more you try to get rid of a worried thought or symptom, the **STRONGER** it gets.

We are NOT eliminating or avoiding thoughts, feelings, or physical symptoms

We are perceiving & managing them through a different lens



You have a thought, feeling, sensation



You learn to respond, react differently

This includes...

- Distraction
- Thought stopping
- Calming and breathing exercises (*when emphasis is on elimination*)

Distraction and Avoidance?

Catherine Stroud, Ph.D.

Taking an OFFENSIVE stance

(Because anxiety wants us on defense!)

Action over Avoidance

- Worry says STOP. Worry is not a big fan of moving forward.
- Anxiety demands a defensive stance.
- **BUT**...we must learn to take action when we are worried...BRING IT ON!

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"

CRITICAL ATTITUDINAL SHIFT!
**IF I'M UNCOMFORTABLE OR UNSURE
OR NERVOUS AS I'M STEPPING
FORWARD INTO EXPERIENCES, I'M ON
THE RIGHT TRACK...**

OVERTHINKING... Rumination versus Problem Solving

Ruminating and the Trouble with *WHY?*

"Although such questions are reasonable and may be useful in many circumstances, people who are frequent ruminators may have difficulty settling on satisfying answers to these questions either because of circumstances in their lives or **because they desire an excessive level of certainty before settling on an answer to such questions.**"

Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, The role of rumination in depressive disorders and mixed anxiety/depressive symptoms, 2000

NARS
Negative Anxiety Response Styles

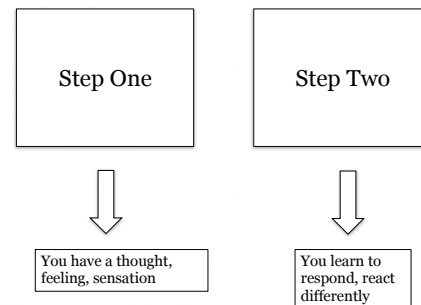
*A response to anxiety symptoms
with ruminative and hopeless
cognitions*

Anxiety Sensitivity

*A heightened response to
physical anxiety symptoms in
the body*

“NARS could transform the experience of anxiety symptoms from a relatively innocuous occurrence into an acutely painful event that damages self-esteem and instills negative future expectations.”

Starr, Stroud, & I Li, 2015



*Changing the reaction to
the anxiety....*

- **Expect:** *When does worry show up? What does worry say? What is the consistent theme?*
- **Externalize:** *Create distance from your worried thoughts and observe them*
- **Experiment:** *Take action, shift your focus, change your reactions....do the OPPOSITE and be on OFFENSE*

**Or said another way...
When worry arrives...**

- **ALLOW**
- **ACKNOWLEDGE**
- **PIVOT**

It ALL hinges on CONNECTION

Family/Adult CONNECTION
MEANS:

- Openness: parents acknowledging their own patterns when possible
- Modeling of connection by other adults
- Humor
- Warmth
- Consistency

Social CONNECTION MEANS:

- Face to face interaction
- External focus
- Engagement in social causes or activities
- Building social skills through stepping in

Targeting SIX common patterns

Interventions/Homework:
*shake up the existing frame and
create new experiences*

Rigid
Global
Catastrophic
Permanent
Internal
Avoidant

Rigid, demanding certainty

VERSUS

Flexible, able to tolerate uncertainty

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!”*

What does it sound / look like?

Rigid

- It has to be this way
- I need to KNOW!
- Nothing is going to change
- Ya, but...
- I’m afraid to do it differently
- My way or the highway

Flexible

- I can adapt
- I can’t know
- I’ll get used to this
- Change is tricky at first
- I’ll see what happens
- I can see your perspective

Promoting Flexibility

- Might and Maybes
- Family “Unexpected Things (or Mistakes) of the Day”
- Uncooked Spaghetti
- **DOING THE DISORDER:** providing certainty, overvaluing routine, modeling rigidity, overly critical and overprotective

Social Comparison Theory and the quest to eliminate social doubt



**Global, all or nothing,
black and white thinking**

VERSUS

Parts, differentiation

What does it sound/look like?

Global

- Nothing ever goes my way
- This is who I am
- I am my diagnosis
- No matter what I do, things don't change
- I can't get anything done
- People don't like me

Parts

- I can accept the good with the bad
- I'm struggling with this part of the project
- You can't please everyone
- Let me just get this part done; take it a step at a time

The Value of Parts: EXTERNALIZATION

- Personify your anxiety and/or your depression...and start listening to what it says
- What are the parts of you that you value?
- What parts of you give you the most trouble?

Where is the gap that sustains the pattern...?

- What's the story your anxiety tells?
- If your anxiety/depression wrote a book, what would be the title?
- What your anxiety shows up, how do you respond?
- What do you need to learn?

Catastrophic

VERSUS

Problem solving, strength-based

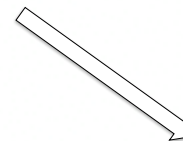
Anxiety is strengthened by 2 internal processes

- Rigid perfectionism ("It has to be done this way!")
- An imagination that focuses on worst possible outcomes ("I know I'm going to fail that test!")

DEPRESSION TOO!

We want to demote anxiety & worry...

• CRISIS



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

Catastrophic Parenting



“One-quarter to one-third of children with significant fears relate onset or intensification of their fears to things they heard.”

http://www.mdedge.com/pediatricnews/article/109231/mental-health/dont-touch-youll-get-hurt-fear-childhood/page/0/1?utm_source=TrendMD&utm_medium=TrendMD&utm_campaign=TrendMD_1_Pediatric_News

“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.**”

Eley TC, McAdams TA, Rijdsdijk FV, et al: The intergenerational transmission of anxiety: a children-of-twins study. *Am J Psychiatry* 2015; 172:630–637

“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.**”

Eley TC, McAdams TA, Rijdsdijk FV, et al: The intergenerational transmission of anxiety: a children-of-twins study. *Am J Psychiatry* 2015; 172:630–637

Patterns that Make Sense ...& DON'T WORK

- Reassuring, rescuing & overprotecting
- Providing or creating certainty
- Identifying child as a “worrier” because it “runs in the family,” overplaying genetic card
- Requiring family members, friends, & schools to accommodate the anxiety

Permanent

VERSUS

Temporal, malleable,
with positive expectancy

(closely related to rigid)

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

Positive Expectancy...

Teaching Malleability

When I ____, I feel worse...

When I ____, I feel better...

Avoidant, Defensive

VERSUS

Active, Autonomous, on OFFENSE

What does it sound/look like?

Avoidant/Defense Active/Offense

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| • I don't want to feel uncomfortable | • Of course... |
| • I need to know everything | • I'm willing to not know |
| • I can't move forward until I have calm confidence | • I can experiment |
| • Why bother? | • How can I step in |
| | • I'm retraining my brain |

Internally focused (on feelings, thoughts)

VERSUS

External focus

Just because you think it,
doesn't make it so...

AIM HIGH...
AND HAVE A
GOAL IN MIND



1. Expect to worry

- Expect worry to appear in certain situations
- Employ your new information about worry and anxiety
- Downgrade anxiety from CRISIS to annoying

2. Externalize your worry

- What will worry say when it arrives?
- Create a different response to worry/anxiety
(Beware the CONTENT trap)
- The focus is on the predictable PROCESS

3. Experiment with worry

- Create assignments that:
 - Shift a pattern
 - Demonstrate/practice the skill
- Emphasis on gathering data
- Exposure with the brakes OFF

Information Stuff

- Websites:
 - lynnlyonsnh.com
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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.

References

Stroud, C. B. & Fitts, J.* (in press). Rumination in Early Adolescent Girls: Interactive Contributions of Mother-Adolescent Relationship Quality and Maternal Coping Suggestions. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*.

Starr, Lisa & Stroud, Catherine & Li, Yihan. (2015). Predicting the Transition from Anxiety to Depressive Symptoms in Early Adolescence: Negative Anxiety Response Style as a Moderator of Sequential Comorbidity. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. 190. 10.1016/j.jad.2015.10.065.

