

Winning the Worry War

A common referral to the Psychology office is one that relates to anxiety or worry. There are a range of different worries that lead children to my office. Some anxiety is situational, and often will end after an event ends. One example of this would be the anxiety some children felt during the weeks and moments leading up to state testing. Another common worry that children have expressed to me is the fear that someone will break into their house at night. Often this type of fear is triggered by learning about a neighborhood break in. Yet other anxiety does not seem to be related to anything specific. Some children seem to feel anxious from the moment they wake up. Whether or not your child's worry is realistic and makes sense to you does not make the situation better. The worry is real to the person feeling it. Many parents of anxious children tell me how they spend much of their time reassuring, coaxing, accommodating, and doing whatever else they can think of to make their child feel less nervous. In this posting, we'll examine unsuccessful and successful strategies to help your child feel less anxious and more relaxed.

The first thing to note that does not work well is allowing your child to avoid feared situations. This may help the child avoid the worry initially, but will create even more distress the next time the child is faced with the same situation. As I'm sure you all have discovered, telling an anxious child not to worry doesn't help at all either. This type of conversation usually just leads to frustration for the person trying to alleviate the fear as well as the anxious individual. Continuous reassurance is usually a problem. If you find yourself reassuring over and over again about the same particular worry, you're actually reinforcing the worry just by giving it continued attention. In my room, we say that if you give a worry continuous attention, it is like watering a plant and the worry will continue to grow. When you stop "watering the worry plant", the worry will eventually die out.

Using logic that kids can understand is sometimes helpful. In the most general sense, teach your child to remind themselves that bad things don't happen very often. Help them develop an overall positive outlook so they will feel that even if something bad does happen, they can always get through it. In my office we use the saying, "there are no big problems, just big solutions". Once a child believes they can conquer a situation, they will be more likely to make a plan to deal with the feared situation. For example, for a feared social party, reviewing what might happen at the party and role playing different scenarios is often helpful. Being prepared often helps children relax. Gathering information and facts may also help to alleviate some fears. For example, with a feared house break in, it is often helpful to go through all the safety procedures that are put in place in your home (e.g. show the child alarm systems and how they work, or show the child how every night the doors and windows are locked, etc.). For situations that children have heard about on the news, it is often helpful to explain to children that things that happen in the news do not happen very often, otherwise they wouldn't be in the news. Help them to understand that the likelihood of these things ever happening to them is very low.

For children who seem continually anxious, one useful strategy is to set up a “worry time”. This is the time that the child is allowed to talk about any worries as much as they want. However, if a worry pops into the child’s head at any other time of the day, they are not allowed to think about it or worry about. It’s helpful to have children imagine a locked box to store a “worry thought” that pops into their head if it is not “worry time”. For those that need something more tangible, you can actually have the child decorate a “worry box” and if a worry pops into their head, they can write it down and keep it in the box, thus freeing their mind from worry at the present moment. What I have noticed is that oftentimes, when the child is allowed to “open the worry box” during “worry time”, so much time has passed that many of the worries have already dissipated. For children who get direct counseling services, this “worry time” may take place in my office. However, worry time can easily be set up with children at home.

Teaching children to talk back to their worries is very important for “winning the worry war”. Teach children to get mad at the anxious thought and think of it as something outside themselves that is trying to bully them into being scared. Give them language to talk back to an anxious thought when it occurs such as, “leave me alone...scram...I don’t believe you”. Have your child tell the worry to “go away” and that they are “not going to listen to it anymore”. Distraction immediately after talking back to the worry is the key. I often use the expression of “changing the station”, or “changing the channel” on their thoughts. Have your child become involved in something else like watching TV, playing with a toy, or helping around the house.

Visualization of a calming or positive memory is another great way to help children relax in the midst of tension or general feelings of anxiety. I like to call it the child’s “happy place”. Have your child choose a special memory of a happy time or place. Children have come up with all sorts of calming memories in my office such as playing a sport, a relaxation vacation, or one of my favorites, the visualization of a fish tank. Once the child has chosen their relaxing picture, they should practice visualizing every detail of the experience – the sight, smell, sound, etc. I find that for some children drawing their “picture” helps to make their visualization clearer. The practice of visualizing the picture should take place at a time that they are not worrying. That way after much practice, they can close their eyes in the midst of anxiety, and relax by thinking of the happy or serene picture that they have created.

A person can not physically be relaxed and anxious at the same time. This is called the principle of competing demands. So it is important to have children first recognize their own body signs of stress (e.g. heart racing, butterflies in the stomach, headaches, etc). Once they have an awareness of their own body signs, they are ready to address them with relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. For deep breathing, have your child breathe in and out slowly at least five times (in through the nose and out through the mouth). The general premise for progressive muscle relaxation is to practice tensing and relaxing the different muscles of the body starting at the feet and working their way up or vice versa. Feel free to visit the website www.innerhealthstudio.com for free scripts to use to assist you with some deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation techniques that you can do at home.

Since there is often a genetic component to anxiety, parents of anxious children may be anxious themselves. If you are one of these people, your child's anxieties may even be exacerbating yours. If this is the case, you may find it helpful to practice these strategies along with your child. The basic principles work as well with adults as they do with children. Some of you may be overwhelmed just reading this posting. If you are reading this and are already feeling overwhelmed and/or anxious about your child's anxieties or your ability to implement any of these strategies, it is probably a sign that you need to seek professional assistance. Feel free to call the office at any time 203-3600 ext. 5286 for further guidance on "winning the worry war".

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