

## **Anxiety: Friend or Foe? Part 2 - Treatment**

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In this article I'll explain how I treat anxiety when I'm working with children, youth and parents.

### **Relaxation and Mindfulness**

Relaxation training is essential because anxiety and relaxation cannot be in the same body at the same time!

Relaxation training comes in two categories – physiological relaxation and mindfulness.

Techniques of physiological relaxation are deep breathing with awareness of proper technique and using counting during inhales and exhales; and another technique is progressive relaxation in which kids are coached on tensing and releasing each muscle group in their bodies.

Techniques of mindfulness include: focusing exercises that demonstrate the ability of the mind to be in charge of the brain; sitting breath meditation; and body scan meditations. I spend some time demystifying meditation for kids because all it really is is setting one's intention to focus attention on one body-based sensation, followed by the brain's natural tendency to be distracted, and the mind calling the brain back into a state of focused attention. Brain studies have proven that this act of calling the brain back into focused attention builds neuronal connections in the mid-prefrontal cortex. This part of the brain is helpful for emotional self-regulation – a fancy term for calming oneself down.

I give the kids these tools and resources and then ask them to practice using the skills at home, with one or both parents doing the exercises with them or coaching them along.

### **Cognitive Challenging**

Once kids can relax their own nervous system, they also manage to create some space between their feelings (brain/body) and their mind. This allows them to be in a more observational role. In other words, they can start thinking about their own thinking and how their thoughts affect their feelings.

Using stories, I help kids understand the link between thinking, feeling and behaving. This helps them rehearse other ways to perceive various situations. They start create better, more helpful thoughts that bring different meanings to various situations. For example, if a youth is constantly feeling anxious about the weather, it is likely due to his self-talk – often starting with “what-if...” and imagining a worse-case scenario. Once kids learn to do cognitive challenges, they become more aware of their thinking and start bossing-back what they hear the anxiety saying to them, or they decide to drive a different feeling by having different thoughts. Ultimately, kids need to learn how to use their own logic, understand that they have options for actions given any situation, and give themselves reassurance, rather than seeking it from others.

## **Exposure Trials**

We can desensitize the fight/flight/freeze response and its strong feeling of anxiety by learning what triggers anxiety and then create a hierarchical exposure plan. The simplest way of explaining this is to look at how we get kids used to water when they are little. We never push them in the deep end, but rather get them used to the water in the shallow end while teaching them tools to keep themselves safe in the water. It isn't until children are comfortable in the shallow waters and know the safety skills that they decide that they can go into the deeper areas.

In exposure trials it is essential that the kids outline each step in the process, that they get used to each level before moving on, and that they are the ones who decide when they feel safe enough to move on to the next level.

In the next article in this series, we will explore some thoughts about what are some possible causes for anxiety in modern life.