

Anxiety: Friend or Foe? Part 3 – Anxiety in Modern Life

Written by John A. Downes, MC, RCC, child and youth counsellor at The Kelowna Family Centre / November 2016

What sets us up for Anxiety and Environmental Factors

Temperament – there are nine characteristics of temperament that we are born with, one of which is level of reactivity. This basically means that our nervous systems may be “wired” to be sensitive to our environment, or not. If sensitive, we may react to stimulation with alarm. If not sensitive, we may be difficult to arouse and seem more calm and laid-back.

Trauma – can take so many forms, but no matter what the form is, the effects can be long-lasting in our bodies and lead to an undercurrent of anxiety whereby our sympathetic nervous system is always on guard and rarely relaxes into a sense of safety. (Accidents, medical procedures, witnessing violence, any time one feels in danger and not in control or safe)

Insecure attachment to primary care-givers – multiple causes including parental grief, depression, parental mental illness, poor parenting skills, etc. In these situations the child may live in a chaotic family setting where he or she rarely feels safe, seen, heard, or loved.

The trappings of modern life: advertising in our commercialized world; technology use and the demands of being constantly connected; exposure to anxiety-provoking media (news, TV shows, movies), lack of face-to-face relationships, lack of time outdoors, poor nutrition, poor sleep habits, stress in family relationships, financial strain on the family, marital breakdown and divorce, lack of support from extended family.

You can imagine that I need to see the big picture of a child’s life and living situation so that I address their anxiety not only through teaching them skills, but also by advocating for positive changes within the family system that will help support them.

Experiential exercise

If you or your child experiences anxiety on a regular basis, I encourage you to explore the following websites:

A meditation break from the Kelty mental health website:

www.keltymentalhealth.ca/mindfulness-recordings

An excellent information and resource website:

www.anxietybc.com

Anxiety as a Gift

I believe that all emotions are meant to help us understand what we need, and when our needs are being met or unmet. Although my training in CBT tells me that all negative emotions can be regulated, managed and understood (an internal process) I also think that has to be in balance with understanding that sometimes strong feelings (such as anxiety) implore us to make a healthy change in our external world in order to meet our needs.

I wonder if the preponderance of modern anxiety as experienced by parents and their children is a wake-up call. Is anxiety telling us that we are out of alignment with our values and what truly makes us human and makes life worth living?

How would levels of anxiety be lowered if we stopped chasing the almighty dollar and social prestige? How would anxiety levels be affected if we renewed our commitments to attachment relationships with our kids and each other? What about if we used the media and technology more judiciously? What if we got out into nature more often and spent more time with friends and family? What if we looked into each other's eyes more often with a sense of caring, rather than caring about the latest TV show, Hollywood star, video game, or Facebook post?

Anxiety is characterized by "what-if" thoughts, and so is the creative imagination. I choose to imagine a "what-if" world where we are back into relationship with ourselves, each other, and with mother earth. I think if we were, problematic anxiety would decrease remarkably.