



Understanding Anxiety

Is Anxiety Good or Bad?

A little anxiety can be a good thing. It can help an athlete get ready for the big game or a business person get ready for a big presentation. It helps all of us get out of the door to be on time for work or school. It is only when people become anxious at times

when there is no real danger – often called “false alarms” – that anxiety becomes a problem. For example, a student who usually earns good grades but panics during a test would be having a “false alarm.”

Anxiety is a problem only when a child becomes anxious in the absence of any real danger or trouble.

How Does Anxiety Work?

The main purpose of anxiety is to help us be alert to danger and therefore be able to avoid it. In the early stages of anxiety, when the threat is not too close, a person feels worried or tense, starts focusing more on the possible threat, and cuts back on activities like running or playing. One researcher refers to this stage of anxiety as “stop, look, and listen.” If a threat gets closer, the cautious feelings of “stop, look, and listen” will intensify, and the body will physically prepare to meet the danger. This is a natural response



and can be genuinely useful in the face of a real threat. At this point the body enters a second stage of anxiety, often called fear or panic. You might know this as the “fight or flight” response. Animals often demonstrate these behaviours. For example, you may have noticed that if you approach a bird, it will freeze and stare at you – stop, look, and listen. If you continue to walk toward it, it will panic, either flying away in a sudden flutter of energy or, if necessary, trying to defend itself. In this case, increased alertness and speed help the bird protect itself. Similarly, if a child who is walking to school

suddenly hears a dog bark, she might pause and think about what to do next – stop, look, and listen. If the dog becomes aggressive and starts running toward her, she will move on to stage two, experiencing increased heartbeat, faster breathing, changes in blood pressure, and a rush of chemicals, designed to help the body increase strength, speed, and alertness. Some of these chemicals, such as adrenaline, can also bring side effects such as shakiness or nausea. This natural response will help her respond to a real threat by fleeing from the dog or, if necessary, even fighting it.

Why Is My Child Anxious?

Anxiety in children and adolescents has many different causes, including biological (things in your body, including seizures), psychological factors (thoughts and feelings), and social factors (like school and friends). Most often, an anxiety disorder results from a combination of a child’s “sensitive personality” with other things that add up over time, particularly early feelings of being out of control and specific negative experiences.

Sensitive Personality

“Sensitive personality” means that some children tend to be more easily worried, frightened upset, or sad than others. They react more strongly to bad situations or to objects and information that seem threatening. A child with a sensitive personality has an increased risk of negative emotions throughout life, which can lead to anxiety disorders and sometimes depression. Anxiety is

more common in children with epilepsy than in children without epilepsy and this is probably due to differences in their brains.

Sense of Control

Children who have a sensitive personality and who feel they cannot control the things that happen in their lives are more likely to have a negative response to bad experiences. Some children with epilepsy may feel a loss of control around their seizures, which can happen unpredictably. This sense of things being out of the child's control can be aggravated by situations that limit a child's opportunities to experience the world, to master challenges, and to get help when necessary. Some parents may feel a need to protect their child, but a child needs to develop a sense that he or she has had some control over bad situations, either by

Anxious Thoughts

Children with anxiety problems tend to see the world more negatively than other children do. They are very good at imagining what can go wrong. This tendency shows up in three important ways: (1) the things they pay attention to, (2) the way they interpret situations. And (3) the "self-talk" they engage in.

Attention

Anxious children focus more on negative things. For example, when researchers show children pairs of words on a computer screen, anxious children are more likely to look at words that seem

making them go away or by learning skills to cope with them. We might not be able to take bad experiences like seizures away through therapy but there are strategies that we can use to help children learn to cope with them.

Bad Experiences

In a child with a sensitive personality, bad experiences can shape the child's anxiety in particular ways. For example, a sensitive child who is stung by a bee might develop a phobia of bees. If the child is teased by classmates, social anxiety might develop. If the child is treated harshly by a stranger, separation anxiety may result.

threatening, such as "storm" or crash." So anxious children tend to look for danger signals.

Interpretation

When presented with an unclear situation, anxious children are more likely to interpret it as dangerous. For example, when an anxious child is asked to imagine possible explanations for an unfamiliar noise, the child is more likely to offer negative answers such as "a burglar."

How other people respond

If people around a child are showing signs of fear and responding to these with avoidance, then a child (particularly a sensitive child who may be more likely to be on the look for a threat) is likely to learn that the particular object or situation presents a threat and that the best way to respond is by avoiding it. Equally, if carers are responding to a child's attempts at facing fear with particular concern and instead try to encourage the child to keep away from their fears, this will also give the child the message that there is something to fear or that they will be unable to cope.

Self-talk

Anxious children also generate more negative "self-talk" than non-anxious children. That is, they are more likely to tell themselves things like, "I'll never be able to do this" or "I don't know what I'm doing."

Anxious thoughts lead to anxious feelings - racing heart, sweaty palms, fast breathing - by creating "false alarms" when there is no real danger.

How Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Can Help

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is the most successful treatment approach for anxiety. It teaches children to tell the difference between real danger and a false alarm. When anxious children learn to identify which situations are safe, they can reduce or eliminate unnecessary tension, worry, fear and panic. Children develop these skills primarily

through practice exercises that teach them to use reasoning and experience to realise that many situations that may seem dangerous and scary are actually safe. Because anxious children tend to avoid the things they are afraid of, they tend to limit their

opportunities for these practice experiences. A therapist or parent can act as a guide who encourages and supports the child to engage in these difficult experiences and to learn to recognise safe situations. Most of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is about practice that will help your child view the world in a new way.

