

Helping Children Cope With Anxiety

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Origins of Fear/Anxiety

- ▶ *Normal, adaptive* human emotions



- ▶ Served a purpose— prepare and protect from danger
 - Billy vs. Bob example
- ▶ Fight or Flight

- ▶ Anxiety is the uneasiness or tension we experience when we perceive a threat to our safety.
- ▶ Typical anxiety is protective and manageable
 - ▶ Mild test or performance anxiety
 - ▶ Can go awry and apply to non-dangerous situations
 - ▶ Physiological sensation

DIFFICULTY ACCEPTING & TOLERATING UNCERTAINTY

Humans experience ambiguity itself as unpleasant.
If you struggle with anxiety, ambiguity can be
source of considerable suffering.

- Children with anxiety want reassurances that “bad” outcomes will not happen.
- Learning how to accept and live with uncertainty

Anxiety presents itself in many different ways...

The desire to control people and events



Difficulty getting to sleep



Feeling agitated or angry



Defiance and other challenging behaviors



Having high expectations for self, including school work & sports



Avoiding activities or events (including school)

Pain like stomachaches and headaches



Struggling to pay attention and focus



Intolerance of uncertainty



Crying and difficulty managing emotions



Over-planning for situations and events



Feeling worried about situations or events

More Signs of Problem Anxiety

- ▶ Age inappropriate worry
- ▶ What if ?s
- ▶ Constant reassurance seeking
- ▶ Perfectionism— excessively high standards, pressure on self
- ▶ Logic does not generally reassure
- ▶ Agitation and easily-triggered distress

- ▶ Recent study showed that anxiety disorders are most common mental health problem in adolescents
 - ▶ Average age of onset was 6 years old
- ▶ Grade school children:
 - ▶ Approx. 40% of grade school children have fears of separation from a parent
 - ▶ Approx. 20% have fear of heights, are shy in new situations, and are anxious about social acceptance
 - ▶ Approx. 33% worry about their competence and need a great deal of reassurance

Causes of Anxiety Disorders

- ▶ Anxiety can be treated whether we understand cause or not
- ▶ Possible genetic predisposition towards anxiety
- ▶ Sensitive temperament
- ▶ Complex interplay with environment
- ▶ Possible triggers— transitions, stressors in life, actual physical illness (PANDAS)

Factors That Maintain Anxiety

AVOIDANCE

- ▶ Powerful desire to avoid
- ▶ Reinforces belief that avoidance is only way to cope with anxiety
- ▶ Reinforces belief that the situation to be avoided is actually dangerous

Avoidance strengthens
and maintains anxiety

Parental responses may also maintain anxiety.

- ▶ Wide spectrum of parent reactions to a child's anxiety
 - ▶ Challenging to parent an anxious child
 - ▶ Facilitation of avoidance

How can we help?

- ▶ Psychoeducation

 - Ex. Fight/Flight, Anticipatory anxiety

- ▶ Teach kids to label/identify anxiety—
E.g., Identify physical sensations

 - ▶ Research

- ▶ Help them use skills to cope (CBT, Mindfulness, Problem-Solving, Facing Fear)

Strategies & Approaches

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL
INTERVENTIONS

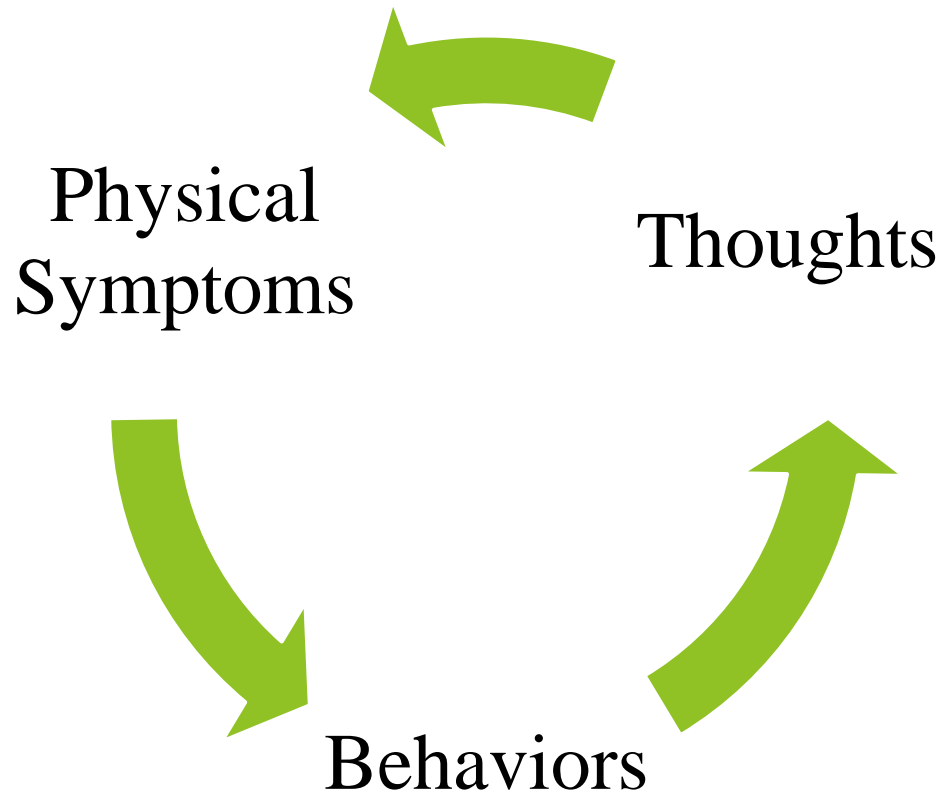
ACCEPTANCE & MINDFULNESS
INTERVENTIONS

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS

- ▶ Evidence-Based
- ▶ Especially beneficial for younger children
- ▶ Target the factors that maintain anxiety—
 - ▶ **Thoughts**
 - ▶ **Physical symptoms**
 - ▶ **Avoidance**
 - ▶ **Responses of environment**

Child learns to think more realistically about fears, face them, and to become less reactive to anxious sensations

Anxiety



Cognitive Strategies

- ▶ Help them accurately identify their anxiety
 - ▶ Label feeling accurately
- ▶ Help them understand the connection between thoughts and feelings
- ▶ Target anxious thoughts and self-talk
- ▶ Change anxious self-talk into realistic and helpful self-talk

<u>Situation</u>	<u>Thought(s)</u>	<u>Feeling(s)</u>
Noise at the window	A burglar	Scared
	Tree branch	Calm
	Pesky squirrel again	Annoyed

Realistic Thinking

SOCRATIC REASONING

- ▶ Using **logic** to change thoughts into realistic thinking (not necessarily positive)
- ▶ What is the evidence for the anxious thought?
 - ▶ How many times has it happened before? How many times has it not happened?
- ▶ Examining other possibilities
 - ▶ What else could happen?
- ▶ Estimating realistic probabilities
 - ▶ What are the real chances it could happen?
- ▶ Decatastrophizing
 - ▶ What's the worst thing that could happen? **
 - ▶ So what if it does happen?

Dealing with PANIC HEAD ON!

MY CHEST GETS TIGHT
WHEN I PANIC, BUT MY CHEST
ALSO GETS TIGHT WHEN I'M COLD.
IT FEELS A BIT STRANGE,
BUT THE FEELING WILL PASS.

I GET DIZZY WHEN I PANIC,
BUT I ALSO GET DIZZY ON
ROLLER COASTERS.
IT DOESN'T FEEL GREAT, BUT
I AM SAFE
AND THE FEELING WILL PASS.

MY HEART RACES
WHEN I PANIC,
BUT IT ALSO
RACES WHEN
I GO FOR A RUN.
IT FEELS
UNCOMFORTABLE,
BUT I'M NOT
IN DANGER.



MY THROAT GETS DRY
WHEN I PANIC, BUT
MY THROAT ALSO GETS
DRY AFTER A GOOD
NIGHT'S SLEEP. IT'S AN
UNCOMFORTABLE FEELING,
BUT I AM HEALTHY.

I SWEAT WHEN I PANIC,
BUT I ALSO SWEAT
WHEN I EXERCISE.
IT FEELS A BIT FUNNY,
BUT IT'S NOT DANGEROUS.

I GET BUTTERFLIES
WHEN I PANIC, BUT
I ALSO GET BUTTERFLIES
WHEN I'M EXCITED.
IT DOESN'T FEEL GREAT,
BUT I AM SAFE.

"I'M UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT I'M NOT IN DANGER.
THESE FEELINGS WILL PASS."

Positive Self-Talk

Replacing anxious self-talk with calm or positive self-talk.

“Positive Self-talk is when you keep saying the positive thought over and over again to yourself. When you use positive self-talk, you can say it out loud or just say it in your mind.”

- Can be specific- “I am going to pass this test”
- Can be general- “I can stay calm”, “I can get through this”

Goal is for child to be able to say it to themselves- more likely to believe it

- Study Example

Younger Children--Talking back to the “worry bully”

- “Worry bully” wants to trick you so they exaggerate and lie
- Have child visualize worry as a bully on their shoulder
- Generate self-talk
“I don’t believe you” “Leave me alone” “I don’t have to listen”

**More you talk back, the stronger you become
and weaker the worry bully becomes**

Relaxation Strategies

- ▶ Especially helpful at night before bed
- ▶ Require practice to benefit

- ▶ **3 Types:**
 - ▶ **Deep breathing**
 - ▶ **Muscle relaxation**
 - ▶ **Imagery**

Deep breathing

- ▶ Important and helpful skill
- ▶ Breathe in through nose and out through mouth
- ▶ Picture balloon
- ▶ Focus on breath
 - ▶ Ex. counting

Muscle Relaxation

- ▶ Passive or active progressive muscle relaxation
- ▶ Tense and relax different muscle groups
- ▶ Keep breathing
- ▶ Can also use yoga poses (e.g. Rock pose, child's pose)

Imagery

- ▶ Changing channel of mind, like a tv
- ▶ Picture relaxing scene or happy memory
- ▶ Remember and focus on details
- ▶ Use all your senses

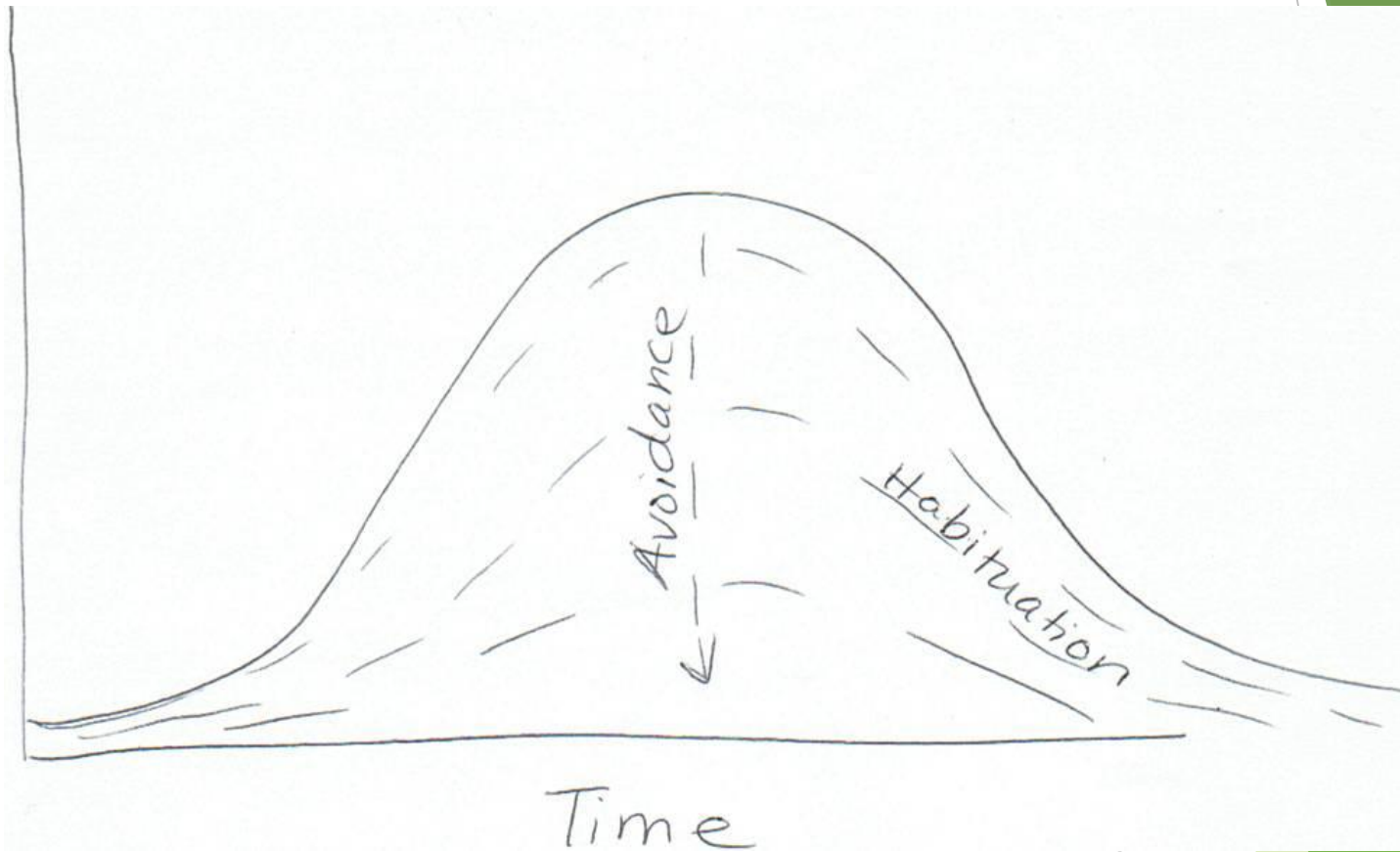
Distraction

- ▶ Use in addition to previous skills
- ▶ More you focus on anxiety, bigger it grows
- ▶ Not denying anxiety—
 - ▶ First, acknowledging presence of anxiety
 - ▶ Second, practicing a skill
 - ▶ Third, distract if necessary
 - ▶ Trying hard to not think about anxiety typically backfires (avoidance strengthens the anxiety)

Facing Fears

- ▶ Exposure— facing fears to test their reality
- ▶ Avoid avoiding
- ▶ Habituation
 - ▶ Ex. Pool, dark room

Habituation



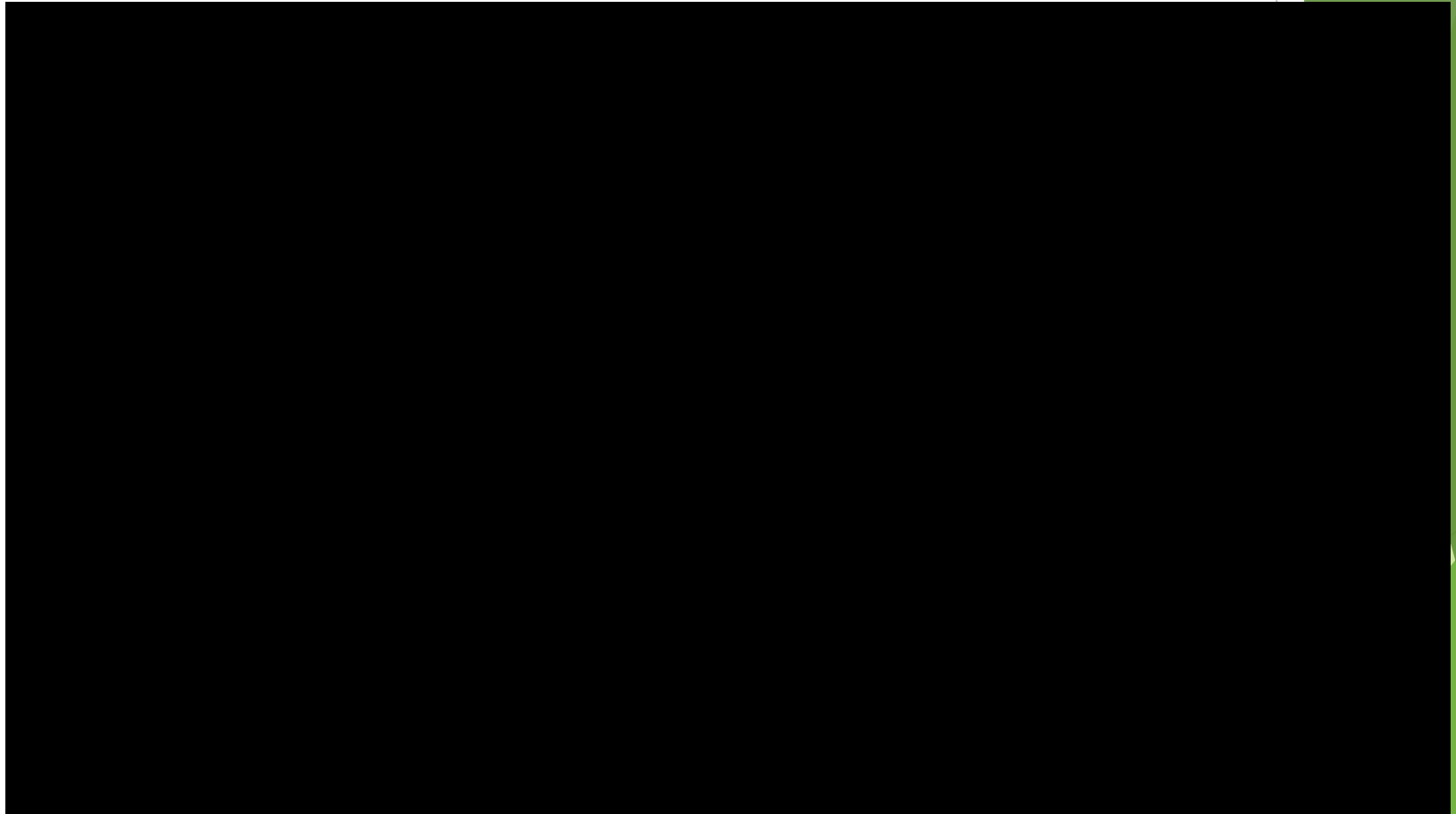
WHAT IF ANXIETY
ISN'T THE PROBLEM
IT IS MADE OUT TO
BE?

The problem isn't really anxiety, the problem is the struggle against it.



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Struggle Switch



ACCEPTANCE & MINDFULNESS STRATEGIES

Interventions based upon acceptance of anxiety & being present in the moment

- ▶ Increase acceptance of unwanted private experiences which are outside of personal control
- ▶ Tolerating emotions
- ▶ Mindfulness
- ▶ Getting unstuck from thoughts



ACCEPTANCE

- ▶ Learning how to accept and live with uncertainty
- ▶ Acceptance of the feeling of anxiety

COMFORTABLE &
UNCOMFORTABLE
FEELINGS

VS.

POSITIVE &
NEGATIVE FEELINGS



SEAWEED EXERCISE

REASONS TO ALLOW/ACCEPT FEELINGS

1. Research suggests avoidance (opposite of allowing) doesn't work to get rid of feeling and often makes things worse (& actually harder)
2. Benefit of allowing is that it expands person's ability to respond & act in meaningful/valued ways

e.g., Can only work to succeed if willing to allow fear of failure; Can only build close relationships if willing to allow feelings of vulnerability

MINDFULNESS

FOCUSING
ON
THE
PRESENT
MOMENT
WITHOUT JUDGMENT

WHY MINDFULNESS??

- ▶ 2 decades of research suggest mindfulness may be one of most important skills we can teach young people
- ▶ Mindfulness skills are associated with higher levels of self-control, well-being, etc.
- ▶ However, if practice mindfulness with goal of getting rid of anxiety, will fail

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

- ▶ Young Children—
 - ▶ Sitting Still Like a Frog
 - ▶ Mindfulness Jar

- ▶ Adolescents—
 - ▶ Mints
 - ▶ Apps
 - ▶ H

EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES TO PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

- ▶ Breathing
- ▶ Eating
- ▶ Listening to Music
- ▶ Playing sports
- ▶ Yoga
- ▶ Nature Walk

THOUGHT FUSION

"Don't believe everything you think. Anxious thoughts are notoriously inaccurate." ~Renee Jain



THOUGHTS NEVER STOP--

All you can do is stop interacting with them in the way you have been and believing everything they tell you

Unhooking/Defusion

- ▶ Banana example to illustrate thought fusion
- ▶ I'm having the thought that....
- ▶ Singing the thought (to the tune of Happy Birthday or another song)
- ▶ Thank your mind

PROBLEM
SPECIFIC
SUGGESTIONS
AND
STRATEGIES

SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER

- ▶ Typically starts between 8 & 15 years old
- ▶ Worry so much about how you appear to others that you stop doing things you need and want to do for fear of embarrassing yourself
- ▶ Not shy– Shy you gradually warm up to new people/situations; SAD, you don't
- ▶ TERRIFIED of being judged negatively

STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL ANXIETY

- ▶ Discuss “Spotlight Effect”
- ▶ Self-talk
- ▶ Stay in present moment
- ▶ Encourage pushing self gradually outside of comfort zone—
 - ▶ Set practice goals

Separation Anxiety Disorder

- ▶ Extreme distress regarding separating from loved ones
- ▶ Unwillingness to leave home, attend school, or go on outings
- ▶ Unrealistic worry about harm to self or loved ones
- ▶ Reluctance to be alone, especially at night
- ▶ Lasts for at least 4 weeks

STRATEGIES FOR SEPARATION ANXIETY

- ▶ Psychoeducation
- ▶ Self-talk
- ▶ Gradual exposure
- ▶ Parent support
- ▶ Transitional object

PANIC SYMPTOMS

- ▶ Sudden episode of intense fear
- ▶ Can be internally or externally triggered
- ▶ Typically include:
 - ▶ Physiological symptoms
 - ▶ Sense of danger
 - ▶ Fear of having another

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH PANIC

- ▶ Psychoeducation
- ▶ Deep breathing
- ▶ 5-4-3-2-1 Method
 - ▶ 5— See
 - ▶ 4—Touch
 - ▶ 3—Hear
 - ▶ 2—Smell
 - ▶ 1--Taste

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

- ▶ Obsessions— intrusive, uncontrollable, senseless thoughts
- ▶ Compulsions— repeated, excessive actions to relieve anxiety
- ▶ Interference with daily life
- ▶ Distressing to child
- ▶ Endless doubt and need for certainty
- ▶ Intensity, frequency, or excessiveness of an otherwise normal behavior
- ▶ Slowness and tardiness spent on routine daily tasks

"School Phobia"

- ▶ School refusal is more accurate term
- ▶ Reluctance to attend school can be driven by a number of different reasons, not all anxiety
- ▶ Often somatic complaints are present (e.g. stomach aches)
- ▶ Rarely is a child actually afraid of school itself
- ▶ Just because child doesn't appear anxious at school, does not mean anxiety is not present

Reluctance to attend school Strategies

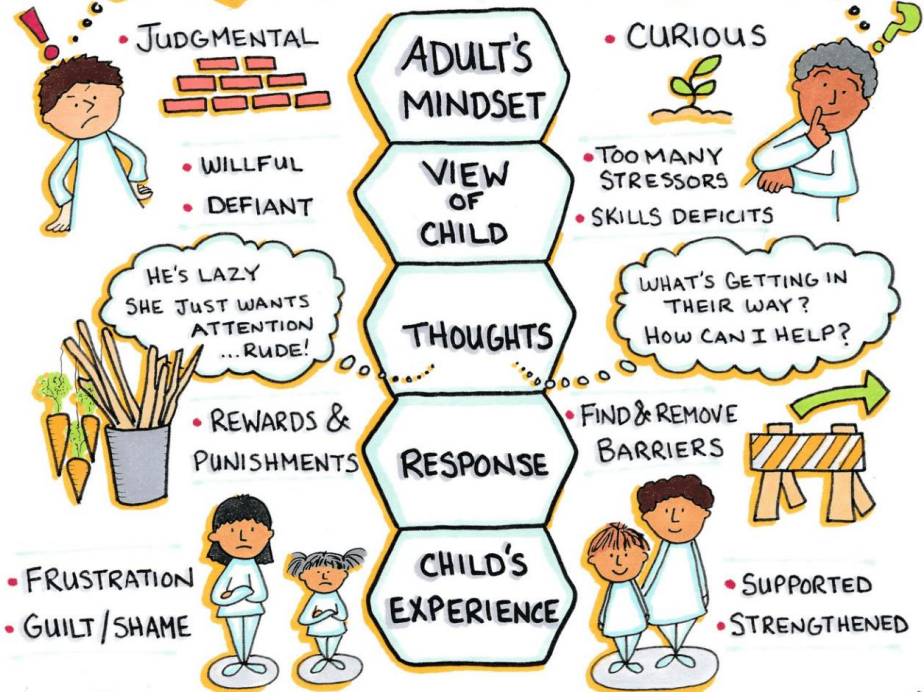
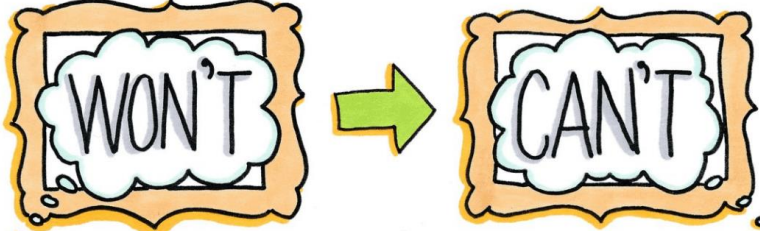
- ▶ EMPATHY for child and parent
- ▶ Understand child's reluctance to attend is rarely about school itself– try to understand if there are specific reasons
 - ▶ Bullying? Difficulty of schoolwork? Social anxiety? Separation anxiety? Depression? Very possible child doesn't know why– might be feeling anxious with no understanding of where feeling is coming from

Kids do well if they
can.

-Ross Greene

REFRAME THE BEHAVIOUR

"KIDS DO WELL IF THEY CAN"
~ROSS GREENE



“SEE A CHILD DIFFERENTLY, YOU SEE A DIFFERENT CHILD”
~Dr. Stuart Shanker

When kids exhibit challenging behaviour we can be “STRESS DETECTIVES”...finding and removing barriers.

- FIND STRESSORS → REDUCE THEM
- FIND UNMET NEEDS → MEET THEM
- FIND SKILLS DEFICITS → TEACH THEM

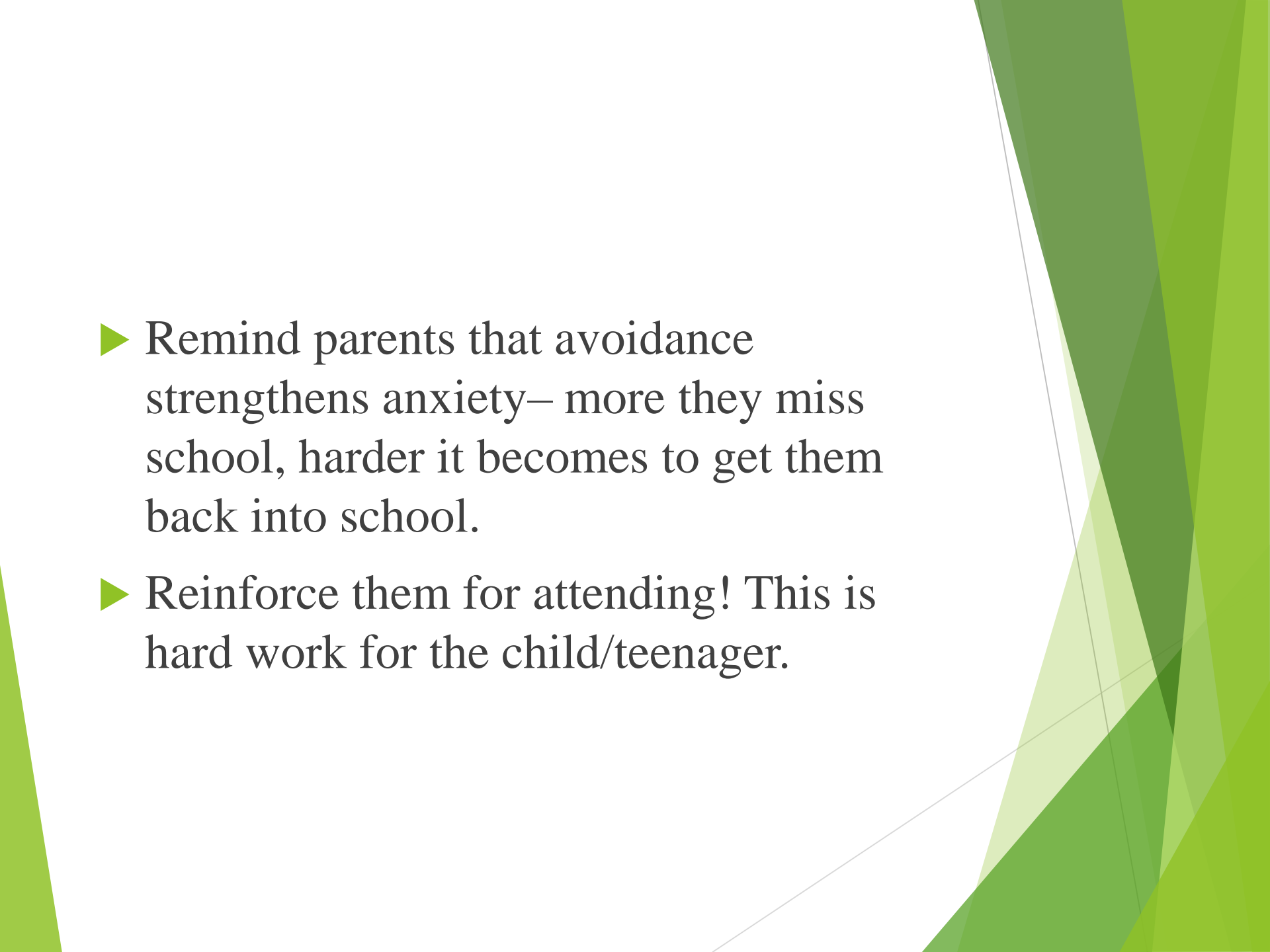
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Parent of An Anxious Child Who is Avoiding/Resisting Attending School



Advice you can give parents:

- Help parents & young person understand the fight or flight response (normalize)
- Have parents acknowledge child's feelings, but remain committed to getting them to school. (It's a both/and situation)
- Parents should minimize discussion of somatic complaints and avoid asking too many questions like "How are you feeling this morning?"

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- ▶ Remind parents that avoidance strengthens anxiety— more they miss school, harder it becomes to get them back into school.
 - ▶ Reinforce them for attending! This is hard work for the child/teenager.

Resources

YOUNG CHILDREN:

Worried No More. Aureen Wagner, Ph.D.

What to Do When You Worry Too Much. Dawn Huebner, Ph.D. (ages 6-12)

Sitting Still Like A Frog. Eline Snel. (ages 6-10)

ADOLESCENTS:

- ▶ Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life. Ciarrochi, Hayes, & Bailey. (ages 12-16)
- ▶ The Thriving Adolescent, Hayes & Ciarrochi.

The Happiness Trap, Harris, R.

Things Might Go Terribly, Horribly Wrong, Wilson & Dufrene.