

# Anxiety in Children What it is and What we can Do Presented by Katherine Jarrell MSW, RSW Clinical Consultant, Healthy Minds Healthy Children Program, Alberta Health Services January 25, 2018

**Understanding Anxiety** = The response to perceived danger

Our senses pick up a danger signal, alerting the thalamus and the amygdala. The body releases hormones preparing the body to:

Fight

Flee

Freeze

**Cognitive Impact:** Blood moves to the primitive areas of the brain, leaving the frontal lobes unable to function properly, resulting in:

- inability to concentrate
- indecisiveness
- memory loss
- increased number of mistakes
- difficulty doing things usually found easy

#### After the 'danger' passes

- When the danger is past, the body can return to a relaxed state, but the memory of the danger (neural pathway) will remain (fear and anger)
- Related situations can trigger the fight, flee or freeze response
- Imagining future events where danger may occur triggers these responses



#### The False Alarm

- Anxiety becomes a problem when one's body reacts as if in danger in the absence of real danger. This creates a "false alarm" (the body does not know the difference)
- Chronic anxiety can result when the nervous system is consistently triggered or never completely resets
- Anxiety can be managed successfully by learning how to temper this "false alarm"

### Key to remember:

Children who are prone to anxiety are often sensitive, intelligent and imaginative... all positive traits!!

**Anxiety is very treatable!!** 

#### How do you see the anxiety show up?

Avoidant behaviour but can also be oppositional behaviour!

#### **Anxiety Disorders**

When the level of anxiety and/or physical symptoms impair functioning (school, home and/or social) and/or cause clinically significant distress.

Multiple and complex origins:

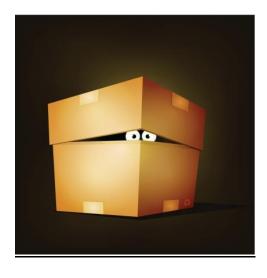
- Genetics
- Brain biochemistry
- Overactive fight/flee/freeze response
- Learned behaviour
- Stressful circumstances/environments
- Trauma
- Our non-stop wired, buzzing world!

#### Physical causes need to be considered and ruled out!

#### The "Don't Do's":

#### Do Not:

- Focus on the <u>content</u> of the worry
- · Excessively respond to your child's anxiousness and excessive reassurance-seeking
- Punish anxious behaviour
- Encourage avoidance
- Minimize or invalidate the child's anxiety
- Try to reason or problem-solve while a child is in a heightened state of anxiety



# Helpful Strategies: Educate!

- > Anxiety is normal and adaptive and everyone gets anxious
- > Teach about the brain
- Teach helpful practical strategies
- Attend to health basics-sleeping, eating, and exercise!
- Normalize that worry happens
- Note the Self Talk
  - Global, Catastrophizing, Permanent?
  - Instead, challenge the worry!
    - o Is this a signal or noise?
- Go on offense!
  - > Be uncomfortable on purpose!
  - "Fake it 'til you make it"!
- Foster a growth mindset versus fixed mindset
- Exposure! Taming the worry monster
- Aim for Goals "Progress not perfection"
  - > Have KIDS practice problem solving
- Breathe!
  - Mindfulness, yoga, playful movement

## When to Refer: Helpful Resources

\*Lynn Lyons: <u>www.lynnlyonsnh.com</u> \*AnxietyBC: <u>www.anxietybc.com</u>

\*Teen Mental Health: <a href="http://teenmentalhealth.org">http://teenmentalhealth.org</a>

\*Community Education Service: <a href="http://community.hmhc.ca">http://community.hmhc.ca</a>

\*Carol Dweck Growth mindset info: http://mindsetonline.com/

\*Infographic Comparing Growth Mindset versus Fixed Mindset: <a href="https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/29/carol-dweck-mindset">https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/29/carol-dweck-mindset</a>

\*Cheng, Mi. (2009). Overcoming anxiety: A guide for families. www.drcheng.ca/resources/Articles/anxiety info for families.doc