

Engendering Bravery: Guidance for Supporting Anxious Toddlers and Anxious Parents

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Overview

1. Overview of child anxiety in young children
2. Introduction to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) principles
3. Applying CBT techniques when supporting parents

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What is Anxiety?

- **Anxiety is:**
 - A response to an anticipated threat
 - A natural emotion
 - An enjoyable emotion for many children (e.g., scary movies, stories)
- **Remember... children's fears are usually mild, transitory, adaptive, and very common**



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Anxiety and Fear: *What's the difference?*

- Anxiety = state of tension and apprehension that is a natural response to perceived threat
 - ✦ *Anticipated* threat
 - ✦ Anxious apprehension, future-oriented state
 - ✦ Sense of uncontrollability

- Fear = state of physiological response to present threat
 - ✦ Fight or flight mechanism
 - ✦ *Present* threat, situational

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Anxiety and Fear: *What's the difference?*

- Let's say you are going for a hike...



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Physiological Basis

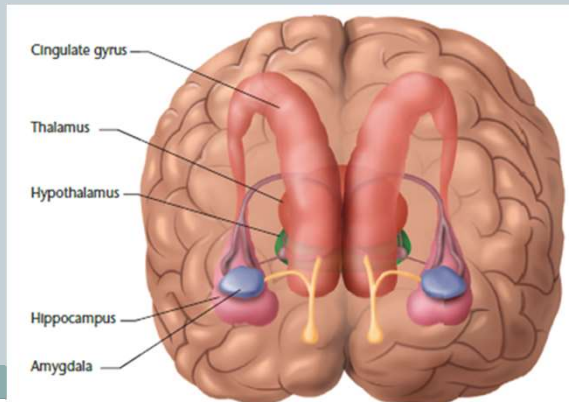
- Anxiety and fear are natural survival mechanisms
- Heightened awareness- avoidance of possible danger
- Autonomic Arousal: Preparing body for survival response
 - Fight/flight response
 - ✦ Light-headed, heartbeat increases, heavier breathing
 - ✦ dry mouth, perspiration, pupil dilation

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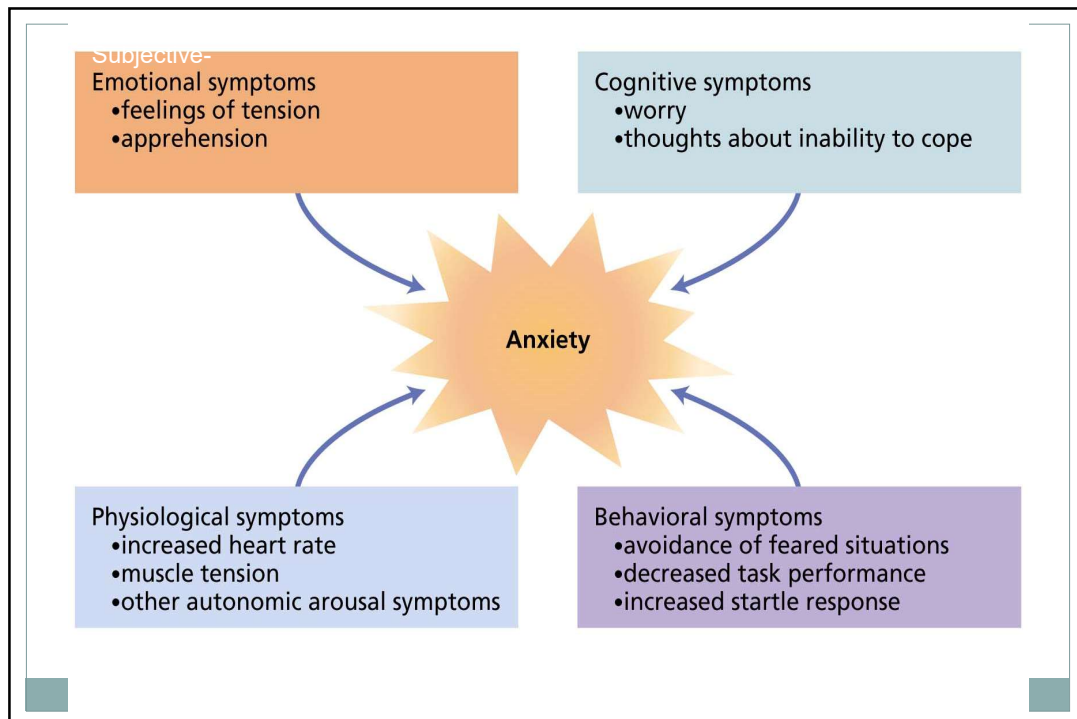
Physiological Basis

- **Autonomic Arousal**

- Limbic System: amygdala and hippocampus- emotional arousal and memory linked to fear acquisition



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When is anxiety a problem?

- **Anxiety is:**
 - Our body's alarm system
 - But we can have false alarms...



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Normal Fears & Worries vs. Anxiety Disorders

- **Anxiety Disorder:**
 - Fears or worries that persist
 - Symptoms are out of proportion to actual threat
 - Interfere with daily functioning
 - *The feared situation is avoided or endured with distress*



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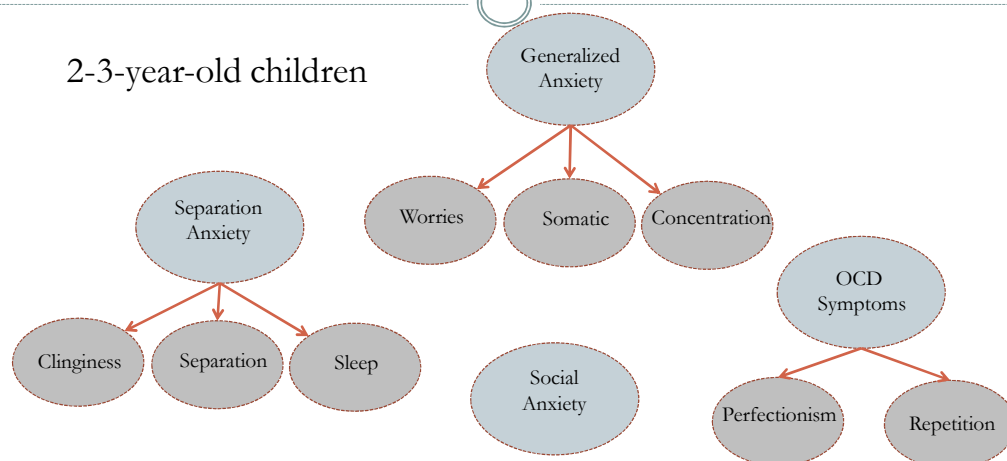
Can anxiety be a problem in very young children?

- Yes!
- From my own research:
 - Anxiety can be reliably measured in 2–3-year-old children
 - Anxiety differentiates according to diagnostic profiles
 - Around 10% of children under 5 will have an anxiety disorder



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Developmental Phenomenology: Differentiation of Anxiety Symptoms



Mian, N. D., Godoy, L., Briggs-Gowan, M. J. & Carter, A. S. (2012). Patterns of anxiety symptoms in toddlers and preschool-age children: Evidence of early differentiation. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 26(1), 102-110.

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What children are at risk?

- **Common risk indicators:**
 - Elevated parent anxiety
 - Elevated child anxiety symptoms as a toddler
 - Exposure to potentially traumatic event
- **In a study on 1-5-year-olds in an urban setting, 40% met at least one of these risk criteria.**

Mian, N. D., Eisenhower, A. S., & Carter, A. S. (2015). Targeted prevention of childhood anxiety: Engaging parents in an underserved community. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55(1-2), 58-69. DOI: 10.1007/s10464-014-9696-5

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Normal Fears & Worries vs. Anxiety Disorders

- Lessons from training pediatric residents:
 - Frequency- how often does it happen?
 - Duration- how long has it been going on?
 - Distress- how much discomfort is caused?
 - Interference- how much does it get in the way?
- (FDDI for short)

Mian, N. D., Carpenter, A. L., Pincus, D. B., Bair-Merritt, M. H., Perrin, E. C. (2019). Training residents in the early identification of anxiety disorders: Feasibility and preliminary efficacy of a novel training program. *Clinical Pediatrics*, 58(7), 761-769.



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Normal Fears & Worries vs. Anxiety Disorders



Video Vignette group exercise: Is there evidence of...

- Frequency
- Duration
- Distress
- Interference



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Normal Fears & Worries vs. Anxiety Disorders



- Video embedded here

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Normal Fears & Worries vs. Anxiety Disorders

Video Vignette group exercise: Is there evidence of...

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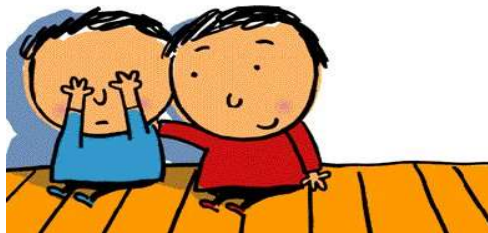
What do ALL Anxiety Disorders have in common?

1. A trigger leads to emotional arousal
2. Causes distress/impairment
3. Leads to efforts to avoid
4. Avoidance makes the symptoms worse



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Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: Techniques that Work!



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Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is...

- Skills-focused
- Focused on current and future functioning
- Generally short-term
- Facilitated by treatment manuals
- Adaptable for young children (under 6 years)
- Supported by research
 - Fisak, B., Penna, A., Mian, N. D., Lamoli, L., Margaris, A., & Dela Cruz, S. (2023) The effectiveness of anxiety interventions for young children: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, online ahead of print.
- *We can use the principles of CBT to make recommendations to parents!*

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Educating Parents about Anxiety

- Fear is...
 - Natural
 - Necessary
 - Harmless
- Fear is designed to...
 - Draw our attention to an immediate threat
 - Keep us safe by activating our fight-or-flight system
- False alarm/true alarm
 - Car alarm or smoke detector analogy



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Educating Parents about Anxiety: Avoidance

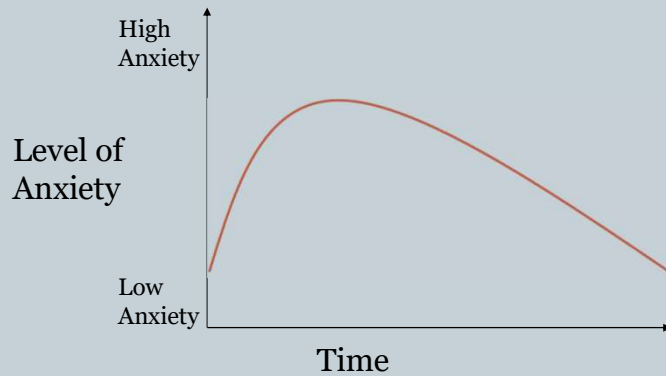
- Anxiety usually leads to avoidance
- Avoidance → safety or relief
- When we avoid, what do we learn?
 - That avoidance is helpful
- But in the long run...
 - Avoidance makes it more scary
- When we avoid, what do we learn over time?
 - That we can't handle it!



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Educating Parents about Anxiety: Habituation

- “Riding the Wave” of Anxiety



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Educating Parents about Anxiety: Bravery

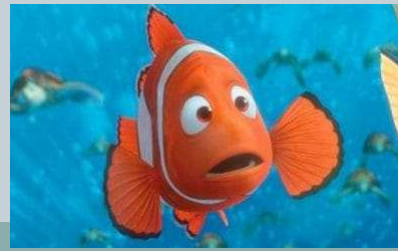
- Encourage using the phrase “Being Brave”
- Why “bravery”?
 - For kids, being brave is the opposite of avoiding
 - Less threatening than phrases like “face your fears”
 - Less shaming than phrases like “don’t be a scaredy cat”
 - When you reward a child for being brave, you are rewarding the target behavior you want



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How Else Can We Help Parents?

- Is the parent encouraging avoidance? Are they being overprotective?
 - Inquire and discuss it
 - “What is the worst that could happen?”
 - “How likely is that?”
 - “Why would that be so bad?”



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What's wrong with this picture?



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How Else Can We Help Parents? Being Brave

- **Help parents identify the child's avoidant behavior and reduce it**
 - Identify what it would look like to "be brave" in that situation
 - What is a reasonable amount of bravery to start with?
 - Kids can be brave in small steps (that are likely to be successful)
- **Remember that when children face their fears...**
 - It is hard! But...
 - The anxiety is temporary
 - They learn that they can handle it
 - They are building coping skills and resilience

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How Else Can We Help Parents? Parental Anxiety

- **Is the parent themselves anxious?**
 - Allowing the child to struggle is helpful, even *necessary* for them to face their fears and overcome them
 - Requires tolerance of one's own anxiety
 - Sometimes parents will need their own therapy to address anxiety

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How Can We Help Parents? Selective Attention

Encourage them to use Selective Attention

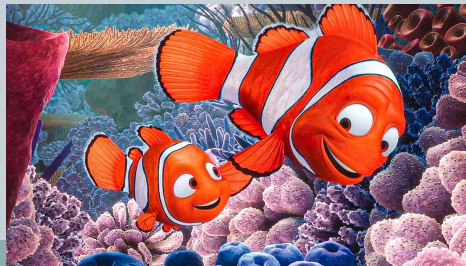
- Avoid giving child too much attention when upset
- Wait patiently while child expresses fear
- Answer repeated questions only once
- When the child does the brave behavior, *shower* with attention



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In Summary

- Anxiety and fear are common in young children
- We can help parents understand what anxiety is
- We can encourage parents to avoid avoidance!
- We can help parents plan ways for children to be brave gradually



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THANK YOU!!!



New Hampshire
Association for
Infant Mental Health