



Identifying Typical vs. Problematic Stress and Anxiety

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Stress

- Normal part of living, helps us create strong brains.
- Stress isn't the problem – it is chronic stress with no recovery that is a problem

Emotions can feel like "fire" but they are more like "waves"

We are built to withstand emotional discomfort

Coping with stress: a menu of options

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Anxiety

- Fear is an emotional response to a real or perceived threat
- Anxiety is the anticipation of future threat
- On average, about 1 in 5 young people have anxiety.
- Anxiety doesn't define you. It's a feeling – it will come, but it will always go, and it's as human as having a heartbeat
- It is a natural part of being human – your anxious ancestors survived.

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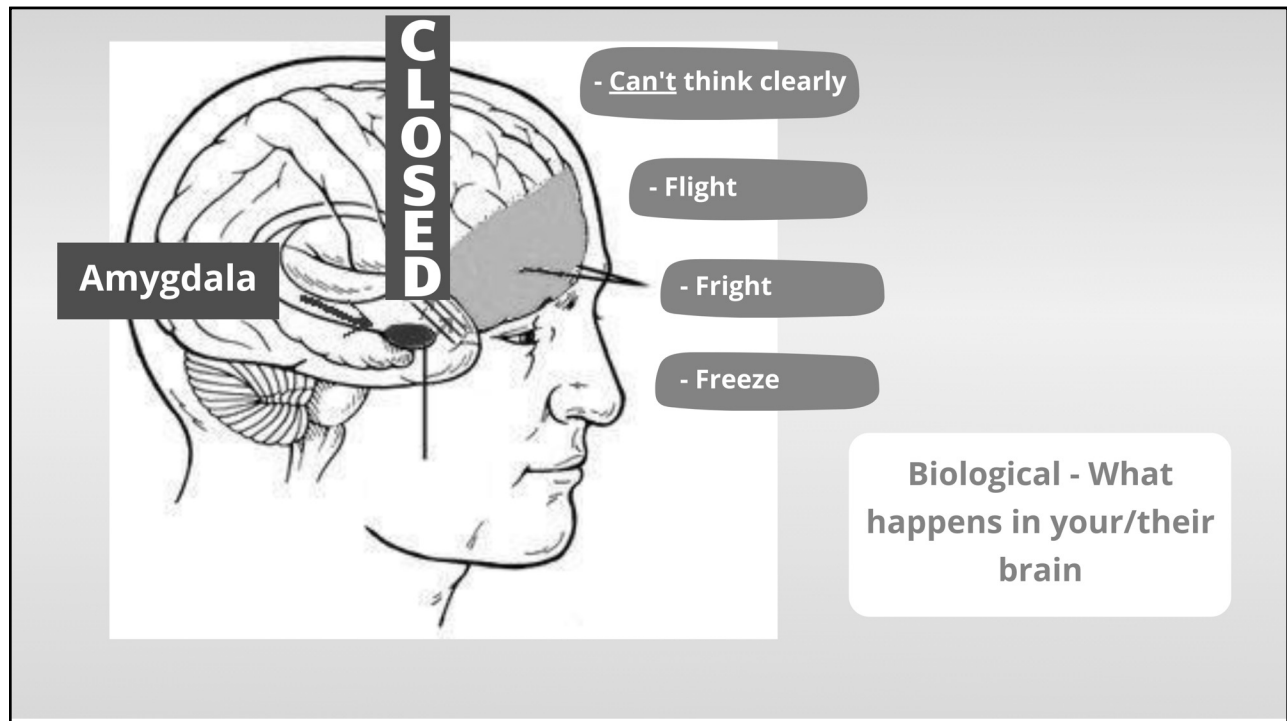
Anxiety

May look like fear, nervousness, hypervigilance - also may look like externalizing behavior

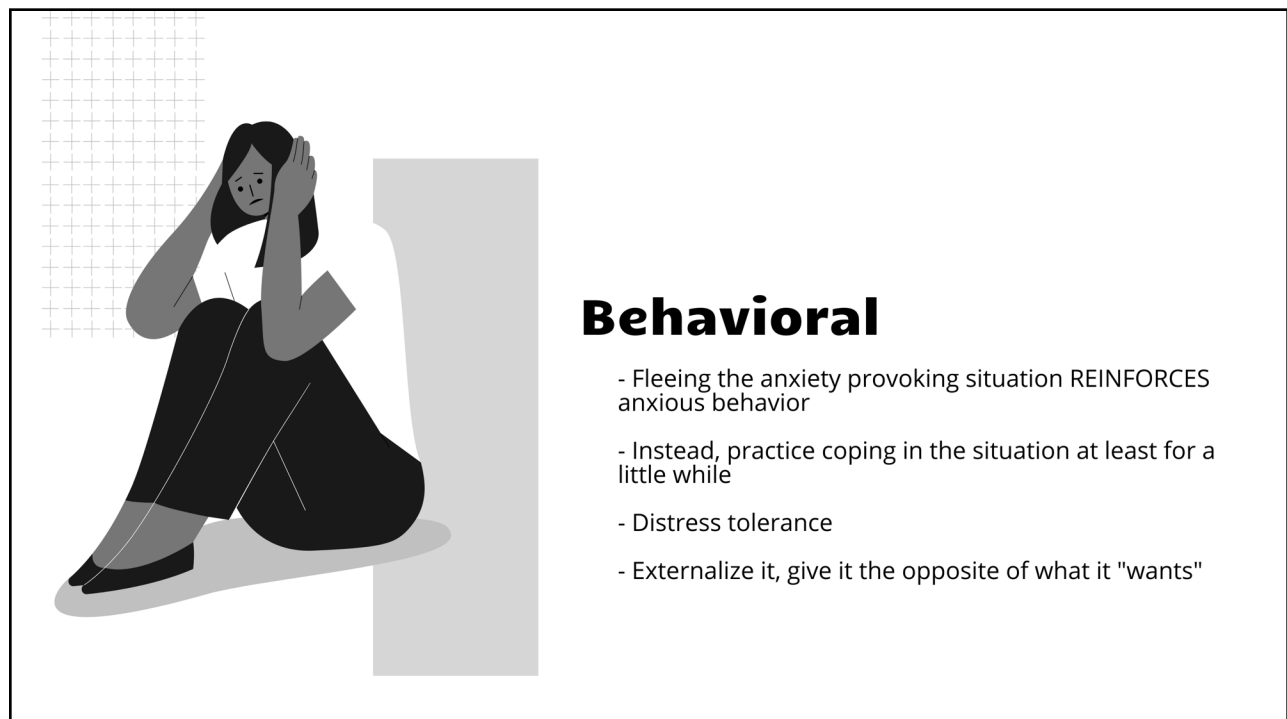


- Irritability**
- Refusal**
- Avoidance**
- Anger**
- Disrespect**
- Impulsiveness**
- Getting "stuck"**


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Start by thinking about it differently...

- Stress is the "heavy lifting" of cognitive resilience
 - Don't flee stress, develop a menu of stress relievers
- Anxiety is a result of your ancestor's survival
 - Let it be a "signal" that you need to "do" something
 - It is a biological function of an unhelpful brain reaction
 - No more serious than hiccups - and can be managed the same way!

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Strategies

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Stress is Not the Problem: Getting Stuck in Stress is the Problem

- When we experience a stressor (missed deadline, big mistake at work, fight with friend, money pressure, bad news, illness, failure) even if we solve or push off the problem, the effects of the stress stay in our body (hormones, cortisol, tense muscles)
- If we don't release the physical residuals of the stressor, we can get sick, burned out, anxious, depressed
- We must complete the "stress cycle"

SKILL: Completing the Stress Cycle: This is different for everybody, but usually involves movement, sweating, tears, quiet, reflection, grounding, creative pursuits, physical connection, emotional connection, quiet time, indulging in a healthy pleasure.

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What do we do to complete the stress cycle?

- Move your body (usually between 20-60 minutes/day) **
- Tensing muscles and releasing (approximately 20 seconds each muscle)
- Breathing (most effective when stress isn't super high)
- Positive social interaction (shows you the world is a safe place)
- Laughter (belly laughing, real, authentic laughter)
- Affection (deep connection with someone with a loving presence)
- A big cry
- Creative expression
- Help your kids create a stress-reduction menu

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Avoid "pathologizing" stress and anxiety

- How we respond makes a big difference
- Experts encourage us to avoid/flee/reassure. This makes things worse
- Skill: **Overcoming Rumination:** If our child seems to want to dwell on worries, especially at bedtime, we can make things worse by constant reassuring. Instead, ask "is there anything new?" If not, then say "we've talked enough. Time for sleep."

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Thought Stopping/Worry Scheduling: If you are waking in the night with unhelpful or scary thoughts, or worries that you can't address, say "STOP" out loud and then "No thank you, that is not helpful" then replace the thought with something more pleasant.

If you have re-current unhelpful thoughts or worries, actually putting them on your calendar "I will worry about this for 15 minutes on Wednesday at 1:30" and then do the worrying then. This will help your brain "let go" for awhile. Teach this to your children.

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Skill

Externalize, Identify, Plan:

When our children have low tolerance for things not going to plan, we can FEED those rigidities when we try to make everything perfect.

Instead, talk about this part of them. “You seem to have a part of you that gets upset when others don’t follow the rules. In life, sometimes people don’t follow the rules and we have to be ok with that. Let’s think of your “rule follower” inside as **Rebecca Ruley**.

Rebecca shows up when rules aren’t followed and she gets bigger and louder when we make sure that people follow rules. Let’s acknowledge her by where she shows up (physical manifestation).

Then, have a plan to address that physical feeling. That makes Rebecca smaller and quieter and less likely to show up next time.

Strategies

- Anxiety grows when you “give it what it seeks”
 - Perfectionism
 - Low distress tolerance
 - Low frustration tolerance
 - Fairness
 - Rule following
 - Rigidity

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Talking About “IT”

- Sunshine is the best disinfectant
- If you don’t know how to talk about it, get help
- Normalize talking about our mental health

Windshield Time: Particularly in adolescence, it can be difficult to get our kids to talk with us about their emotional life. They do this best when they don’t have to look at us or even say things out loud. The car can be a great place for these conversations.

Shared Diary: Another option is to have a diary that you share with your tween. The rule is the you will never bring up (in person) anything they write, unless it is a matter of health or safety. They are allowed to express their true selves in writing, and we can respond with encouragement, unconditional love, appreciation for their bravery, also in writing. They lead and we respond. Don’t make a pest of yourself by trying to get them to use it more often.

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We Co-Regulate with Our Kids

- Our children (especially littles) can sense our underlying emotional state.
- Best to get help for any issues we have OURSELVES first
- They also make mistakes about what our state is – especially in adolescence. They read concern as anger

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PARENTING DURING TIMES OF STRESS

- Lead with empathy
- They need warmth and structure –GROWN UP IN THE ROOM
- During conflict, no learning occurs
- Be the same loving parent when they are at their best as when they are at their worst
- Careful to not “over-save” them
- Have an “emotional safety plan”
- “Parent Later”

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How to Take Care of Ourselves

The great challenge for parents is how to manage your own emotions.

- Parenting is so deeply personal.
- The very nature of child development will raise a parent's own volcano of emotions.
- Parents need to unpack what they're feeling.
- "You're going to get emotional. Let's plan for it so you're ready."

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When is it too much?

- When it affects sleeping, eating, functional activities
- When it goes on for 2 weeks or more for most of each day (4 weeks for dx)
- Thoughts of harming yourself or others that persist, and intrude into your mind
- When there is a big change in sleeping, eating, socializing, engaging in things you used to enjoy that persists for 2 weeks or more (4 weeks for dx)
- For a diagnosis, the symptoms impair daily functioning. For kids, that is school, friends, family relationships

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When to Seek Help

- If it is accompanied by panic attacks
- If it significantly interrupts normal interests/pleasures
- If it keeps you from daily functioning
- If you can't sleep/eat/work or are doing those all the time

Get Help from a Professional

Anxiety is treatable – you don't have to suffer

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Peace†
of **MIND**

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Thank you

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Resources

C. Jewell, A. Wittkowski, D. Pratt. The impact of parent-only interventions on child anxiety: A systematic review and meta-analysis, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Volume 309, 2022, Pages 324-349, ISSN 0165-0327, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.04.082>, (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032722004207>)

Eli R. Lebowitz, Haim Omer, Holly Hermes, Lawrence Scahill, Parent Training for Childhood Anxiety Disorders: The SPACE Program, *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, Volume 21, Issue 4, 2014, Pages 456-469, ISSN 1077-7229, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2013.10.004>, (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1077722913000977>)

The Stress Response <https://psychcentral.com/stress/the-stress-response-cycle>

Parenting Intervention <https://www.spacetreatment.net/>

Books:

Emotional First Aid: Practical Strategies for Treating Failure, Rejection, Guilt, and Other Everyday Psychological Injuries – Guy Winch
 Under Pressure – Lisa Damour
 Untangled – Lisa Damour
 Decoding Boys – Cara Natterson
 Connections over Compliance – Lori De Sautels
 Tenacity in Children – Same Goldstein
 Fourteen Talks by Age 14 – Michelle Icard
 How to Raise an Adult – Julie Lythcott-Haims
 Building Resilience in Children and Teens _ Kenneth Ginsburg
 Rewire your Anxious Brain – Catherine Pittman
 Maybe You Should Talk to Someone – Lori Gottlieb
 Middle School Matters – Phyllis Fagell

Podcasts:

Lynn Lyons – Cluster Flux
 Lisa Damour – Ask Lisa
 Dr. Aliza – Raising Good Humans
 Family 360
 Practically Perfect Parenting