



Interrupting the Worry Cycle:
Strategies for Parents and Children

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HERE WE GO!
I want families to:

- 1) understand how this thing works,
- 2) and know what to do when it shows up.

Problems when addressing
anxiety and its pal depression:

- Too much focus on eliminating symptoms
- Interventions that focus on **content over process**, which maintain or increase anxiety over time
- This results in...

...missed opportunities to

- ✓ **shift frameworks**
- ✓ **introduce new perspectives**
- ✓ **TEACH SKILLS**

OUR MISSION:

How do we diminish the patterns
that support anxiety
(& depression)...

and what do we offer instead?

THE BIG PICTURE Critical Cognitive Skills:

- *tolerate (and normalize) discomfort*
- *externalize/react differently to thoughts*
- *learn by doing, failing, & succeeding*
- *handle the uncertainty of life*
- *be more flexible (malleability!)*
- *problem solve (vs. ruminate)*

The Four Questions

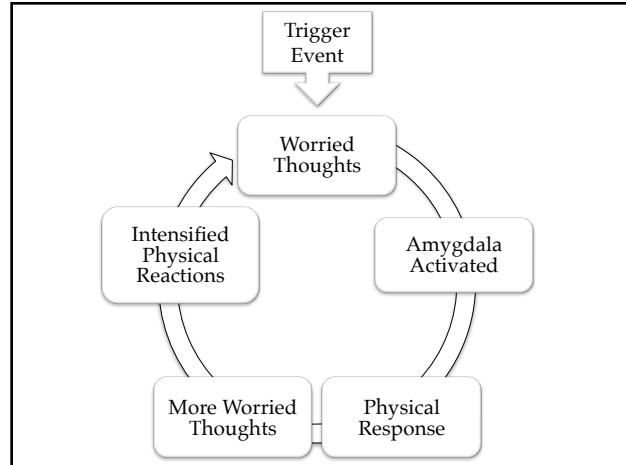
1. What resources does this child/family have and how will I use them?
2. Where is the gap/missing piece that sustains the symptom pattern?
3. How can create an experience that will offer a shift in the pattern?
4. **Am I (or is anyone else) *doing the disorder?***

Anxiety has figured out
how to be overwhelming

On the other hand,
anxiety is not that complex

Anxiety Demands TWO Things:

- ***Certainty: “I have to know what’s going to happen next...and I want to control it!”***
- ***Comfort: “I want to feel safe and comfortable...or else I want out!”***



Critical Concepts as we face anxiety...


- **CONTENT** is far less important than **PROCESS**
- We are eliminating **NOTHING**
- We have to teach an **OFFENSIVE** rather than a **DEFENSIVE** position
- Playful **CONNECTION** is the opposite of what anxiety demands

**Content vs.
Process?**

Content-Based Interventions
 versus
 Process-Based Interventions

Let's focus on
HOW WORRY OPERATES

HOW versus WHY

-  **CONTENT**
- What can we do about THAT worry?
 - How can we get rid of THAT worry?

VERSUS

- How does *worry operate*?
- How are we going to interact with worry *when it arrives*?

 **PROCESS**

The Content Trap

Content (not good)

- Focus on & talk about how to fix SPECIFIC problem
- Reassure about that SPECIFIC problem
- Give data, stats, rational information
- Go over plans & specifics repeatedly

Process (good!)

- Focus on HOW worry operates & what it's up to
- Cue "worry-managing" strategies
- Be general: "That sounds like worry to me..."
- Prompt independent, internal reassurance & problem solving



It's a paradox...

The more you try to get rid of a worried thought or symptom, the **STRONGER** it gets.

We are NOT eliminating or avoiding physical symptoms

We are perceiving & managing them through a different lens

Safety Crutches

- Reduce, mute or prevent anxiety symptoms
- Increase perception of personal control
- Child feels more secure
- Can serve useful functions & be developmentally appropriate

Excessive reliance

- Strengthens anxiety through avoidance behavior
- Limits range of functioning

Internal vs External Reassurance

We need an offense!

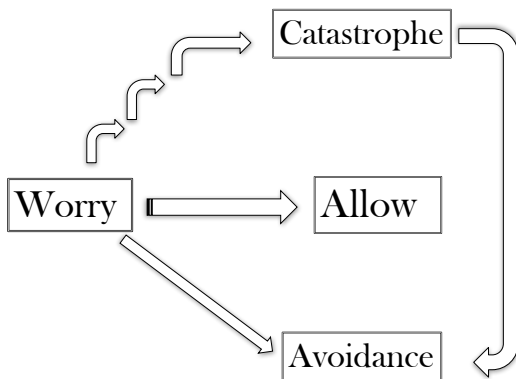
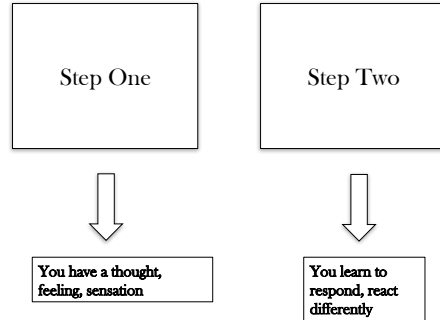
Action over Avoidance

- Worry says **STOP**. Worry is not a big fan of moving forward.
- Anxiety demands a defensive stance.
- **BUT**...we must learn to take action when we are worried...**BRING IT ON!**

If you will stop telling your alarm center that there's danger, it will learn on its own not to push that danger button

CRITICAL ATTITUDINAL SHIFT!

If I'm uncomfortable or unsure or nervous as
I'm learning something new,
I'm on the right track...



**Playful
Connection!**

Family/Adult CONNECTION MEANS:

- Openness: parents acknowledging their own patterns when possible
- Modeling of connection by other adults
- Humor
- Warmth
- Consistency

Social CONNECTION MEANS:

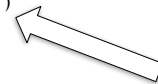
- Face to face interaction
- External focus
- Engagement in social causes or activities
- Building social skills through stepping in

Patterns that Make Sense ...& DON'T WORK

- Reassuring, rescuing & overprotecting
- Providing certainty
- Identifying child as “worrier” because it “runs in the family,” overplaying genetic card
- Requiring family members, friends, & schools to accommodate the anxiety (in the absence of skill-building)

CBT techniques that I don't use:

- What's the worst that could happen?
- Let's examine the likelihood of that happening...what are the odds?
- Scheduling or setting aside “worry time” (sometimes also known as “therapy”)



*We do this one with
kids a LOT!*

Helping kids connect to the **PROCESS** of *moving toward mastery:*

- What can you do now (automatically) that you couldn't do a few years ago?
- Can you remember something that was *really* challenging when you first tried it but now seems simple?
- Make a list of accomplishments that make you proud.
- What can you do now that you worried about....?

Experiential Ideas: Flexibility

- Wall of Flexibility
- Ten Good Things or What Went Well
- Family "Unexpected Things (or Mistakes) of the Day"

Experiential Ideas: Flexibility

- The Spaghetti Challenge
- The Opposite Game
- Closet and Photo Album Investigation

Experiential Ideas: Parts

- What I Know/What I Don't Know Game
- Drawing, Talking to, Directing the Parts
- Global language and the language of PARTS
- Finding Books that Support the Skill

Experiential Ideas: Action

- Reward Systems for taking action and being uncomfortable on purpose
- Boxes of stepping into the anxiety/worry
- Practicing and Role Playing
- Finding Books that Support the Skill

Parents, Outside Providers, and School...

...Everyone on the same page

Accommodation

Anything done in service of avoidance,
without any teaching or skill building

- adjusting family routines or schedules
- school accommodations with no “weaning” plan
- allowing “unacceptable” behavior & referring to it as “anxiety”
- medication with no therapy/skill building

Working in/with Schools and 504 Plans

- Is this plan accommodating the anxiety?
- Does this plan address the teaching of skills that reduce anxiety?
- Is there a weaning-off component to the plan?
- What role will visits to the nurse have?
- What is the role of the nurse in the plan?
- Does the plan specifically address physical symptoms?

Traps to watch out for...

- Accommodations with no weaning off plan
- Creating “escapes” that are warm, safe, & cozy... and support avoidance
- Diminishing anxiety by creating certainty (giving child schedules & warnings of change throughout the day)

Here's the Symptom Pattern...

R igid	R eally
G lobal	G ood
C atastrophic	C oping
P ermanent	P atterns
I nternal	I n
A voidant	A ction

Seven Patterns

- **Rigid**, demanding certainty
 - Flexible, able to tolerate uncertainty
- **Global**, with black and white thinking
 - Parts, differentiation, connection/disconnection
- **Catastrophic**
 - Problem solving, strength-based
- **Permanent**
 - Temporal, malleable, with positive expectancy
- **Internally** focused (on feelings, thoughts)
 - External focus
- **Avoidant**
 - Active, on offense

Rigid, demanding certainty

VERSUS

Flexible, able to tolerate uncertainty

Anxiety Demands TWO Things:

- *Certainty: “I have to know what’s going to happen next...and I want to control it!”*
- *Comfort: “I want to feel safe and comfortable...or else I want out!”*

Anxiety is strengthened by 2 internal processes

- Rigid perfectionism (“It has to be done this way!”)
- An imagination that focuses on worst possible outcomes (“I know I’m going to fail that test!”)

What does it sound/look like?

Rigid

- It has to be this way
- I need to KNOW!
- Nothing is going to change
- Ya, but...
- I’m afraid to do it differently
- My way or the highway

Flexible

- I can adapt
- I can’t know
- I’ll get used to this
- Change is tricky at first
- I’ll see what happens
- I can see your perspective

Global, all or nothing,
black and white thinking

VERSUS

Parts, differentiation

What does it sound/look like?

Global

- Nothing ever goes my way
- This is who I am
- I am my diagnosis
- No matter what I do, things don't change
- I can't get anything done
- People don't like me

Parts

- I can accept the good with the bad
- I'm struggling with this part of the project
- You can't please everyone
- Let me just get this part done; take it a step at a time

The Value of Parts: EXTERNALIZATION

- Personify your anxiety and/or your depression...and start listening to what it says
- What are the parts of you that you value?
- What parts of you give you the most trouble?

Catastrophic

VERSUS

Problem solving, strength-based

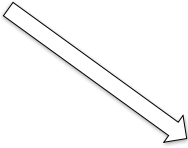
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DEPRESSION TOO!

We want to demote anxiety & worry...

- **CRISIS**



- **Normal**
- **Part of many aspects of life**
- **Even annoying!**

Permanent

VERSUS

Temporal, malleable,
with positive expectancy

(closely related to rigid)

Positive Expectancy...

Avoidant, Defensive

VERSUS

Active, Autonomous, on OFFENSE

What does it sound/look like?

Avoidant/Defense

- I don't want to feel uncomfortable
- I need to know everything
- I can't move forward until I have calm confidence
- Why bother?

Active/Offense

- Of course...
- I'm willing to not know
- I can experiment
- How can I step in
- I'm retraining my brain

Internally focused (on feelings, thoughts)

VERSUS

External focus

Ruminating and the Trouble with WHY?

“Although such questions are reasonable and may be useful in many circumstances, people who are frequent ruminators may have difficulty settling on satisfying answers to these questions either because of circumstances in their lives or because they desire an excessive level of certainty before settling on an answer to such questions.”

Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, The role of rumination in depressive disorders and mixed anxiety/depressive symptoms, 2000

Just because you think it, doesn't make it so...

Changing the reaction to the anxiety....

- **Expect:** *When does worry show up? What does worry say? What is the consistent theme?*
- **Externalize:** *Create distance from your worried thoughts and observe them*
- **Experiment:** *Take action, shift your focus, change your reactions...do the OPPOSITE and be on OFFENSE*

The ultimate goal... Psychological Autonomy

Normal movement toward physical & psychological independence

Adults → shift from overprotecting to promoting competency = decrease in childhood anxiety

Don't remove hurdle...
teach them to jump over it!

Information Stuff

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