

# Parenting an Anxious Child: Practical Strategies and Specific Skills

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# Why this is so important

## Children and Adolescents

- Median age of onset 11 – earliest of all forms of psychopathology
- 8 % of children between ages 13 and 18 currently have an anxiety disorder
- 31.9% will have an anxiety disorder between the ages of 13 and 18
- 8.3% will have “severe” anxiety disorder
- Only 18 % of these teens receive treatment

# Adolescents Girls

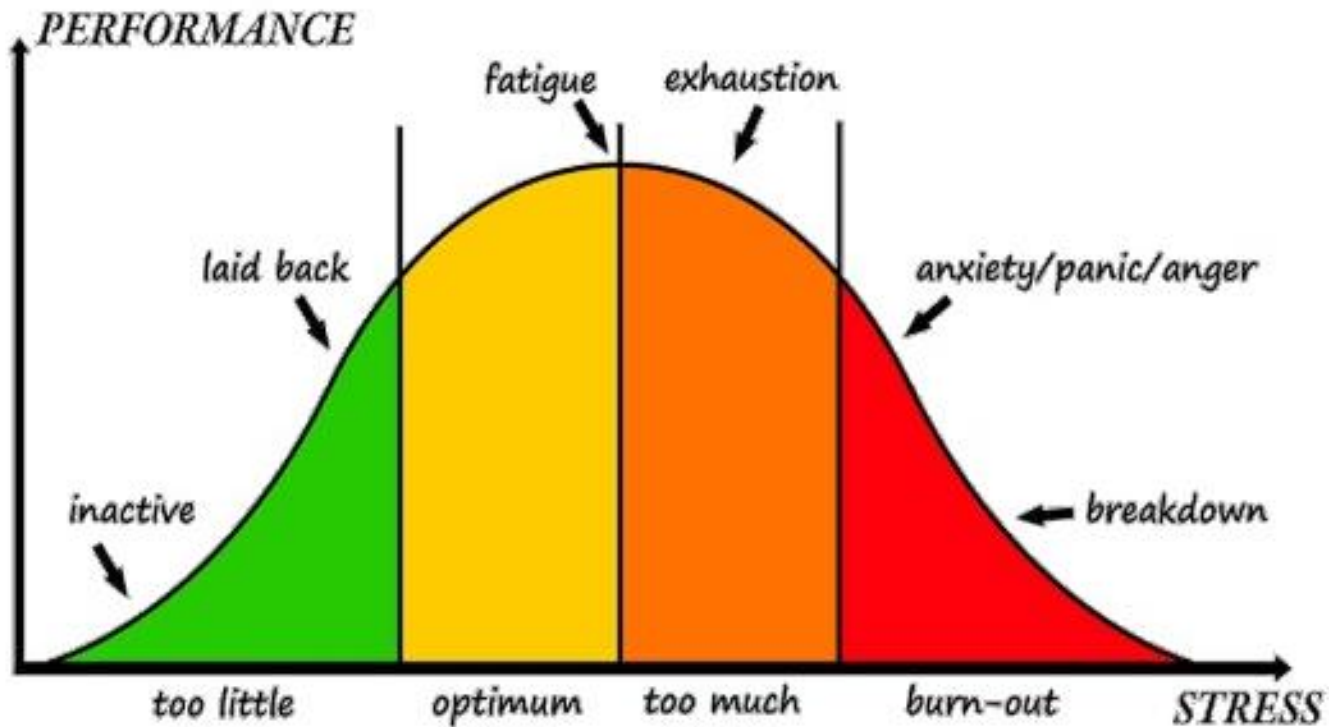
- 38% of girls will have at least one anxiety disorder between the ages of 13 and 18, (compared with 26.1% for boys)
- Compared with 4.2% of girls will have ADHD, 10.2% will have a substance abuse disorder, 3.8% will have an eating disorder

# What is Stress?

- Emotional strain when the perceived demands exceed one's perceived ability to meet them
- Often the result of confusing “needs” and “wants”

# Stress can be Beneficial

## The Stress – Performance Curve



# Adaptive Anxiety vs. Disordered Anxiety

## **Adaptive Anxiety**

- Keeps us safe
- A response to real danger
- Prevents the repeating of mistakes

## **Disordered Anxiety**

- Results in functional impairment
- Equivalent to a “false alarm”
- Leads to unnecessary avoidance

# Inadequacy of now

“I need something I don’t currently have”

- Inherently stressful
  - Triggered by immediate threats: starvation, physical threats
  - Focuses motivation to obtain life sustaining resources

It was this...





... and now



# What Triggers the Stress?

- Doing well in school.....43%
- Family finances.....31%
- Getting into good college.....29%
- The way I look/weights.....26%
- Managing extracurriculars....12%
- Friends.....11%
- Family conflict.....7%

# “Anxiety is the Baskin Robbins of mental disorders”

- Panic Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Social Phobia
- Specific Phobia
- Selective Mutism
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder \*

“If it made sense, it wouldn’t be a disorder”

- Almost 1000 ways to have a panic attack (4 of 12 symptoms are required)
- A student may show behavior incongruent with an anxiety disorder in various situations
- Safety behaviors

“One can be destroyed and the house next door is not touched.”



# Treatment Works!

“Ultimately we know deeply that on the other side of every fear is freedom” – Marilyn Ferguson

- Treatment success rates for anxiety disorders with CBT (exposure therapy) range from 60% to 90%
- Tragically low utilization rates (18% compared with 79% for ADHD)

# Dealing with Stress and Anxiety

- Emotion-Focused
  - Tolerating uncertainty
  - Accurate thinking
  - Mindfulness
  - Self-coaching
  - “Optimalism”
- Problem-Focused
  - Classic problem-solving
  - What can I do to address the problem
  - Importance of creativity

“You have a Ferrari nervous system. You won the lottery, but you need some special training to be able to drive it.”





# Three Pillars of Anxiety

- Uncertainty
- Lack of control
- Perception of threat

# Anxiety Acquisition

- Classical Conditioning
- Modeling
- Information Transfer

# Avoidance and Fear are Teammates



The way to respond to anxiety is just as counterintuitive as diving into the wave that's about to hit you.”



# Anxiety Reduction

- Education
- Cognitive Reframing
- Behavior Change

# Cognitive Reappraisal of Anxious Arousal

“Don’t believe everything you think!”

- Body is doing the right thing at the wrong time
- Perspective of “curious observer”
- “In this moment...”
- Metaphor of fire alarm

# Coping Cards

“Just because I’m scared...”

- I am stronger than my fear
- Scary thoughts can never hurt me
- I know I can do this because...
- Just because I’m scared doesn’t mean I can’t do it
- It’s ok to be scared
- Just do it anyway
- Anxiety is temporary and harmless

# Fire alarm at the top of the Empire State Building





“Stop swatting the butterflies.”



# How Anxiety Affects the Learning Process

- Working memory has a limited capacity
- Intrusive thoughts compete for limited resources
- Threat cues are prioritized in cognition
- Fatigue occurs more quickly

“Imagine trying to learn calculus  
right now”



# Self-Oriented Perfectionism

- Very different from appropriately high standards
- Risk factor for eating disorders, depression, suicide
- Self-worth derived from achievement and productivity
- Tend to function well in low stress environment

“The perfect igloo can kill you.”



# Teaching “Optimalism”

- Optimal – “Best or most effective”
- Failure as feedback
- Adaptable and flexible
- Accepts natural variation
- Balance as goal
- Success is not linear

# Flexibility is Strength



“It can be hard to let go of what you know.”





# Signs and Symptoms



# Signs and Symptoms

-cont-

- Expert chameleons
- Can appear oppositional and out of character
- Perfectionism “Needing A’s”
- Fatigue from “two full-time jobs”
- Irritability
- Increased Absenteeism

# Accommodating vs. Enabling



# “The Protection Trap”

Anxiety is Temporary and Harmless; Avoidance can  
Ruin Lives

- 40% of parents of children with anxiety disorders have also had an anxiety disorder, increasing their motivation to reduce the suffering of the child
- Good parents are motivated to reduce a child's distress. This desire may lead them to become complicit with student's avoidant behavior

# Ways to Reduce Problematic Behaviors

- Punishment
  - Usually has a higher correlation with the mood of parent than behavior of child
- Extinction
  - Necessary but rarely sufficient
- Reinforcement of incompatible positive behaviors (positive opposites)
  - Foundation of most successful behavior plans

“I’ve given you the steak. Now don’t beg for it next time!”



“No good caregiver would just give their child the answer. They need to learn how to solve it.”



“Model what you want the child to feel.”





“Water the seeds, not the weeds.”



# Ray Charles

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