



School Counsellor Newsletter

Edition 35

Anxiety: Challenging unhelpful thoughts

Anxiety is normal, anxiety helps to keep us safe and in small amounts anxiety is useful in our lives. When a child worries a lot of the time, avoids fun activities and perhaps does not want to go out because he feels so anxious or worried, anxiety becomes a problem. A useful analogy in this respect is to think of anxiety as being like fog; it seems to cover everything, makes it hard to see ahead, stops you from doing what you want to do and generally becomes a problem. This newsletter, the second in a series on anxiety, provides some ways parents can support their child by challenging unhelpful thoughts. I have collated suggestions from various sources on managing anxiety. Some of these suggestions may be difficult to carry out due to the worries your child may have, so please do make contact if it would be helpful to discuss this further.

Our brains receive billions of bits of data every second! Whilst we cannot control this and what we think about, we can control what we pay attention to. For a child who has a bit of a 'worry brain', his brain is tricking him into paying attention to worries that are not really that bad. His alarm system reacts as though it is a real threat, for example going into fight, flight or freeze mode, because that is what his brain is telling his body to do. This does not mean that he has done anything wrong, it is simply that his wiring has got a little muddled up. This may well have become a learned habit and so, as parents, it is important to help rewire your child's brain with a better habit. This is likely to take time, courage and persistence - for both child and parent. Rewiring a 'worry brain' includes helping your child to face his worries. Even though he may want to escape them, and as parents we may not wish to see our child upset, not learning the skills or having the chance to practise facing his worries can make the problem

even bigger. It could be very helpful to sit down and make a plan for how you can work together to challenge his unhelpful thoughts.

In your plan you could talk about doing the following:

- Let your child know that you will always acknowledge his worry and that it is real to him. You don't need to have the same worry or believe in the worry personally to do this. You can do this by saying, "I can see that you are very upset about this" or "I can tell from the way you are fidgeting that this is worrying you."
- Talk with your child about what his worries are and how his brain and body react when he is worried. This is likely to be different to your worries and reactions so it is important that you and your child recognise his triggers and signs. For example, if your child worries about making mistakes, he may not like tests or putting up his hand in class, and he may notice that he has sweaty palms and finds it hard to stay focused when doing tasks.
- When you or your child notice a trigger or sign, challenge what his 'worry brain' may be saying. For example, rather than thinking he will get a question wrong, encourage your child to think of some of the following possible phrases: "I can get this question right", "I have done my homework and prepared for this test", "I can give my best effort and that is enough", "I have answered questions correctly before", "Sometimes I get questions wrong and it's okay because that is how I learn." As you plan with your child you may come up with other possible phrases to use. You might like to name the thoughts so that you and your child can say, "Go away My Worry, I am not listening to you!"
- Let your child know that you will limit the amount of time you will talk about this worry with him. This is not because you do not care about him and his worries. It is because if you talk about the worry a lot it can make it bigger and if we give it lots of attention then it becomes even harder to manage.
- Gently support your child to face his worries by creating opportunities for him to develop his confidence. For example, if your child does not like being in places with lots of people, you could plan a short trip to a mall for morning tea or to his favourite store, so that your child can experience a busy place in a positive way. Or if your child is wary of dogs, visit a friend with a dog so he can have a calm experience with one dog and learn more about dogs and how they can be friendly.

I hope that some of these ideas are helpful if you have a child with a 'worry brain' so that you can support him to rewire his brain and develop more helpful thoughts and habits. It can also be helpful for adults to rewire their brains as required! I often share with my children when I have had to challenge my own unhelpful thinking.



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Jenelle is a Registered Provisional Member with NZAC (New Zealand Association of Counsellors).

If you wish to discuss the services the School Counsellor can provide, please see your son's homeroom teacher or Amos Pilgrim:

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