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Dealing with Anxiety in Children: How to Calm & Strengthen an Anxious Brain

Posted by Hey Sigmund

Dealing with anxiety in children can be confusing for everyone. Anxiety doesn't always make sense because it doesn't always come with an obvious trigger. It is driven by a strong, healthy, determined brain, but one that is overprotective and quick to sense danger, even when there isn't any. As the trusted adult in your child's life, your response can have a powerful effect on calming an anxious brain and uncovering the brave behaviour that all kids with anxiety are wonderfully capable of.

During anxiety, certain parts of the brain become dominant and drive behaviour. This is evidence of a strong, healthy brain switching into survival mode, but when it happens too much or unnecessarily, it feels awful. Responses become rigid – the response to dangerous situations also becomes the response to situations that aren't dangerous at all.

Healthy living means being able to meet different situations with different responses, depending on what's needed. For this to happen, the different parts of the brain need to work well independently, but they also need to work well together.

When children (and adults) become overwhelmed with anxiety, certain parts of the brain have taken charge and have disconnected from other parts of the brain. In times where an immediate, strong response is needed (as in times of real danger), this is brilliant, and a sign of a brain doing exactly as it's meant to do. Sometimes there is just no time to think about the big picture. If there is a wild dog running towards you, the last thing you want to do is wonder if it's lost, angry, hungry or misunderstood, or imagine how cute it would be if it was sleeping. You just need to get out of there – fast.

To make this happen, the brain switches to auto-pilot and immediately initiates the fight or flight response. It hands the bulk of the workload to the more primitive, instinctive, impulsive parts of the brain and at the same time it organises for the parts that like to take more time planning, to sit out for a while.

Anxious brains have a mind of their own – but we can change that.

Everything we expose our children to and everything they do will alter the physical structure of their brains in some way. By understanding the way their brains work, you can provide the exact experience they need to strengthen the relevant connections to nurture their mental health.

As a parent, teacher, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or any important adult in a child's life, you can play a vital role in strengthening his or her brain against anxiety.

The brain during anxiety. What you need to know.

The brain can be thought of as different sections – left and right and front and back. The sections need to be able to work well on their own but they also need to work together. The stronger the connections between the parts of the brain, the greater the capacity to respond, relate, learn and grow.

Think about this like a sports team. Each person on the team can be a superstar, but if each person insists on scoring all of the points themselves, regardless of what the rest of the team needs from them, there will be chaos. A strong team needs everyone to participate. Sometimes that will mean working hard on the front line, and sometimes it will mean stepping back so others can work their magic. The better the team can work together, the more effective it will be. Brains work the same way.

One of the exciting developments in psychology is the discovery that the brain is always open to change. It's called experience-dependent neuroplasticity, and what it means for our children is that every experience we expose them to has the capacity to change and strengthen their brain. Understanding what happens in the brain during anxiety, will help to understand the ways we can make a difference.

When the left and the right separate.

The brain is made up of two hemispheres, the right and the left. The two sides are connected by a bundle of fibres called the corpus callosum. Communication between

the right and the left happens along these fibres, but sometimes, as in during anxiety, the messages don't flow smoothly.

Each side of the brain has a different way of dealing with things, and we need both for different reasons. Both sides are involved in everything we do, but at different times one side might be more dominant. During anxiety, it is likely that the right brain has temporarily taken over. The feelings are overwhelming, and without the full involvement of the left brain, the feelings won't necessarily make sense. The experience is likely to be one of, 'I feel scared and overwhelmed, but I don't understand why.'

The left brain loves logic and it uses language to describe experience in a concrete, logical way. It gives structure and order to our experiences, ('this happened, then this happened …'). The left brain loves factual details. It might describe an anxious trip to school as 'I got into the car and we drove out of the garage. It was raining. We drove down the road and turned left. My legs got wobbly, then my hands got sweaty and then we arrived at school. …'.

The right brain is more concerned with emotion and the bigger picture of what the experience means. While the left brain is more interested in 'this is what happened', the right brain is more interested in 'this is what it means for me'. It draws on memories, feelings, and images, and is heavily directed by sensations in the body and the messages from the lower brain, which is the major player in anxiety.

The right side of the brain is more emotional and intuitive. The right brain might describe the same anxious trip to school as, 'I always feel sick on the way to school and whenever I even think about school I always feel as though something bad is going to happen. My legs always feel wobbly and my hands get sweaty and I worry that everyone can tell. It feels awful and I hate school.'

We need both sides of the brain to work well together. If the right brain was in charge, without the steady, logical influence of the left side, we would be overwhelmed with physical sensations and emotions. Images and memories would flood us constantly and we would be emotional, chaotic and irrational. Coming at life from the left side also has its downside. If we were to be completely steered by logic without any input from our emotional experiences, we would be cold and emotionally disconnected from

the world, ourselves and the people around us. Life would be logical, but it would also be without soul.

When the front and the back disconnect.

The lower brain, at the back of the brain, is primitive, impulsive and instinctive. One of its main jobs is to keep us alive by initiating the fight or flight response when it senses danger. It does this superbly, but sometimes it will do it unnecessarily. This is how anxiety happens.

The front brain is the more sophisticated, adult part of the brain. It brings order to the instinctive, impulsive behaviour of the lower brain. It helps us to plan, consider consequences, problem solve, make decisions, exercise self-control, feel empathy, act morally, imagine and think.

When there is a strong connection between the front and back of the brain, messages will travel freely between the two. The lower brain will let us know when something doesn't feel right, but the front brain will make sure the response is warranted and that things (and people) don't get out of control.

When the sensations of fear or anxiety are strong, the rational, logical, calming front brain is overwhelmed. The surging of fight or flight neurochemicals sends it offline. When this happens, it isn't able to establish whether or not there actually is danger, and it also isn't available to help calm big feelings or plan a better response, as in one that isn't driven by high emotion.

This is why anxiety isn't something you can reason away. Telling someone who is experiencing anxiety that 'there's nothing to worry about,' will often fall flat because the part of the brain that is receptive to that kind of logical information (the front brain) is offline. This is where you come in.

Dealing with anxiety in children – what adults can do to strengthen an anxious brain.

To thrive, we need to help our kids strengthen the connections horizontally – with the logical left brain and the emotional right brain working together, and vertically – with the rational front brain and the instinctive lower brain working together.

An important part of dealing with anxiety means not avoiding the things that feel overwhelming, but this will happen more easily when the entire brain is working together. This will mean easing the anxiety first, so the brain is more receptive to trying something new or unfamiliar. Now for the how.

1. Don't show resistance – yet.

Any resistance you show to your child when their anxiety is at full volume will only make the resolve of the lower brain stronger. Remember, it deals with things through fight or flight – no negotiation, no compromise, no stretching. This doesn't mean always letting anxiety drive behaviour. Sometimes it will be important for your child to be brave and do the things that they are anxious about, but this will be easier if you pick your moment. Re-establish the connection between the front and back of the brain, then, once the front of the brain is back online and the left and right brain are working together, you will be in a better position to encourage different behaviour.

2. Be calm, soothing supportive – whatever their behaviour. (This will calm the protective, anxious lower brain.)

During anxiety, behaviour might take different shapes – aggression, tantrums, avoidance, clinginess – but it is all driven by a brain in fight or flight. What your child needs more than anything in that moment is to feel safe. Your tone, volume, and physically positioning yourself on their level will all help to communicate this. Be as calm, soothing and supportive as you can be. Responding any other way will inflame a brain that is already feeling vulnerable. There will be time to deal with behavioural issues later.

3. Name what you see. (This will also calm the lower brain.)

Name the feeling or fear that you see. This will send the message to the lower brain that you understand and that you're there to help. It will let the protective lower brain know that it has done its job and found support. Try, 'You look scared. Is that what you're feeling right now?' or 'I can see that you're worried about going to the party. Is that what's happening for you?' Feelings always exist to meet a need. With anxiety, the need is to feel safe, even if there is no obvious threat. When you name the feeling and offer what's needed (assurance, warmth, security) the need behind the feeling will ease, and the feeling will start to calm. As Marc Bracket from the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence describes, 'Labelling your emotions is key. If you can name it, you can tame it.'

4. Get them talking (To strengthen the connection between right and left.)

Recruit the left brain by encouraging your child to put their own words to their experience. Ask your child to talk to you about what he or she is feeling and what has happened up to now. You might need to help them by encouraging the detail, 'and then what?' or 'what happened before that?'. This kind of storytelling will help to connect the right and left brain help to make sense of the experience.

When children use words to talk about their emotions, they are connecting the emotion and memories of their right brain with the language and logic of the left. This will strengthen the connection between the right and the left brain, and smooth the flow of information between the two. Think of it as building a bridge between the right and the left sides of the brain. When your child feels anxious and needs to make sense of the experience, he or she can use the bridge to access the words and logic that will give meaning to the experience. The more you are able to engage the left brain (by using words and describing the experience in a linear, concrete way), the stronger the bridge will be. Be patient – this will take time. Strong, beautiful bridges aren't built in moments.

5. Shhh. Let them sleep. (To strengthen the connection between right and left)

Sleep is a beautiful thing for all of us, and it's especially important that kids with anxiety get enough of it. Research has shown that during sleep, the connections between the right and left hemispheres of a child's brain are strengthened by up to 20%. New connections are formed and a fatty protective layer of insulation called myelin forms around the nerve fibres. Myelin is important because it speeds up the transfer of information across nerve cells. The greater the myelination, the stronger the connection.

6. When they are relaxed, give them a logical explanation of anxiety. (To strengthen the connection between right and left.)

When your child is calm, explain what anxiety is in a logical, linear way. (**Here you go – a child-friendly explanation.**) Every time you talk about this, you will be adding more and more structure to the bridge between the left and the right. Helping them understand why their anxiety feels the way it does is powerful. We all need to make sense of our experiences, and if a child is left to make sense of the physical sense of anxiety, their own version won't feel as friendly. Anxiety feels out of control and frightening. It can be so convincing and when it takes hold, there's often a feeling of certainty that there is something to be scared or, or that something more serious is driving the symptoms.

There is a level of safety, security and comfort that comes with awareness. Think of this like noises in the night. If you know that the noises in the next room are from the television, all is good. But if there is no television in the room next door and no other explanation for the noises you're hearing, it's going to feel terrifying. Images of robbers or intruders will fill your head. It's the same for anxiety. If your child understands where their feelings coming from and what's causing them, they will eventually feel less threatened by the experience.

7. Encourage them to practice strong breathing. (To re-engage the front brain easier and to strengthen the connection between the front and back).

Strong, deep breathing initiates the relaxation response, which was discovered by Herbert Benson, Associate Professor of Medicine at the Harvard Medical School. The relaxation response neutralises the fight or flight neurochemicals. Remember, it is the surging of these neurochemicals that swamp the front brain and send it offline. Once the neurochemicals begin to neutralise, the front brain is free to re-engage and send some loving calm to the back brain. Just like the fight or flight response, the relaxation response is hardwired into us but it does have to be actively engaged. In the midst of anxiety, the brain is too busy to concentrate on slow deep breathing, but with practice, this can become more automatic. Each day, when your child is relaxed, have them practice breathing in for three, hold for one and out for three. Do this about 5 to 10 times. The idea is to do it so much that is can be called up as easily as any habit.

8. Mindfulness (To strengthen the connection between the front and the back.)

Research has repeatedly shown that mindfulness can change the function and structure of the brain. One of the ways it does this is by strengthening the connection between the reactive back of the brain and the rational, calming front of the brain. Here are some fun ways to start a mindfulness practice with kids.

9. Talk about a plan. (This will strengthen the connection between front and back).

The prefrontal cortex will be strengthened any time your child engages it, not just when it's engaged during anxiety. The pre-frontal cortex loves planning, so when your child is relaxed, involve them in coming up with a plan for if the feel anxious again. Ownership is a powerful thing – your child will much more likely to stay on board with the plan if they have been involved in coming up with it. Ask what might help to make the experience easier next time. There

will be more chance of doing this when they are relaxed, because the lower brain will also be relaxed and more willing to surrender control.

And finally …

A more strongly connected brain will be a more effective brain in all sorts of ways, not just against anxiety. It will drive healthier relationships, a greater capacity to learn and deal with challenges, and richer way of responding to the world. Everything our kids need to be vital, healthy and happy is in them. Our job as the important adults in their lives is to help them strengthen those qualities. By supporting them when they need it, and exposing them to the right experiences, we can change and strengthen their brains in ways that will see them thrive.