## The Worry Monster

How to help your kids cope with anxiety

### Anxiety

- Anxiety is an emotion that all of us experience at times.
- It can actually be productive and helpful.
- If it interferes with their ability to go to school, enjoy their usual activities or sleep, then you need to intervene and help your child to manage it differently.



Questions are welcome!
Kindly remember this is a general discussion about mental health and each child's situation is unique.

### Case example 1: Jenny

- Jenny is 8 years old.
- Always has found separation from parents difficult cried at daycare drop off, continued through kindergarten.
- Very emotionally sensitive, cries often and easily.
- She can only fall asleep if parents stay with her in bed. If she wakes at night, she needs them to come lie down with her until she gets back to sleep.
- When they raise their voice or show frustration she gets more anxious and takes longer to fall asleep.

### Case example 2: Henry

- Henry is a 10 year old boy who is very fearful of insects. This has become increasingly difficult and now that it is summer, he is barely going outside to play.
- He refuses to go to his soccer games, doesn't want to join the neighbourhood kids to play outside and won't eat dinner with family in the backyard for fear or mosquitos or bees bothering him.
- When his parents push him to do the above activities, it can result in yelling, tantrums and challenging behaviour, so they have mostly stopped arguing with him.

### Case Example 3: Leah

- Leah is 11 years old. She has a shy personality and has always found it stressful to perform in front of others.
- At school, the Grade 6 students have to do speeches.

  Leah is terrified of speaking in front of all the students and is begging her parents to ask the teacher if she can be exempted.
- When Leah's parents try to help her practice the speech, she cries and says she feels sick to her stomach. She hasn't told her parents yet, but she plans to say she is sick and stay home the day of her speech.

### Why are kids so anxious?

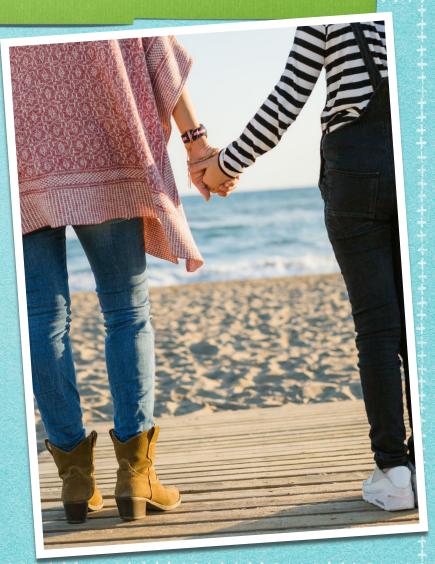
- There have always been anxious children researchers estimate about 10% of all children have "sensitive traits".
- Of those children, many will go on to learn ways to cope and will function well. Some, however, will develop significant struggles with anxiety.
- Concerns exist that the current generation of children and teens are experiencing higher levels of anxiety than previous generations. Why?

### Who so much anxiety?

- Genetic factors play a role.
- Environment, including modelling from adults, also has an impact.
- Societal factors: busy, hectic, stressful schedules compared to past generations.
- Impact of technology constant barrage of stimulation, an easy escape from thoughts and worries when needed and replacement for other activities that are necessary and healthy.

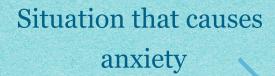
# What builds emotional resilience?

- Secure relationships with trusted adults
- Time in nature
- Free play and exercise
- Exploring creativity
- Meaningful connections to family and community that are face-to-face



# What's the problem with escaping worries?

- Avoidance is a key part of anxiety.
- The more we avoid being in situations that make us worry and the more we escape doing something that provokes anxiety, the more our anxiety grows and becomes problematic.
- We experience the "fight or flight" response and if we choose "flight", we are still faced with the source of anxiety later.
- Example: Joanne and public speaking!!



Anxiety

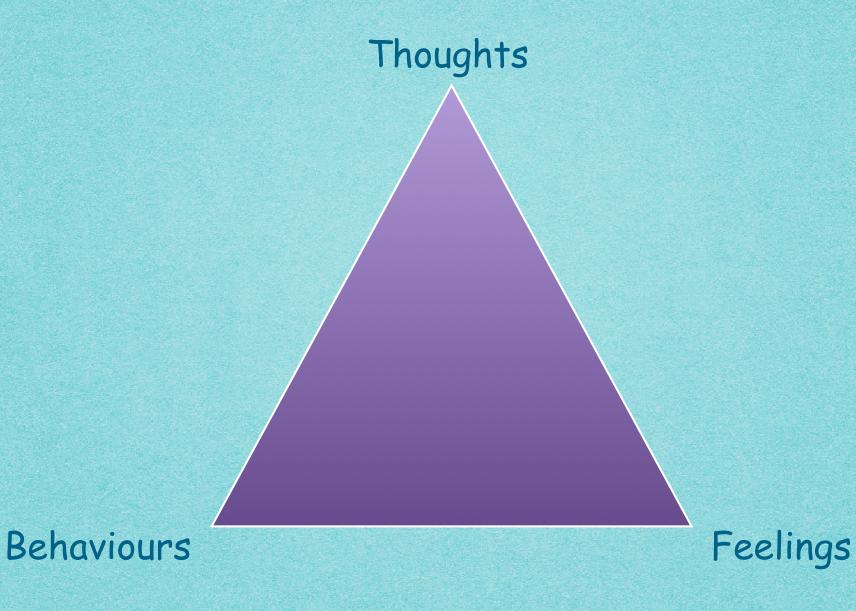
Long-term:
more worry,
less confidence in
ability to cope

Avoidance

Short-term: relief

- Think about Henry ....
- The more he avoids being around insects such as bees or mosquitos, the more his fear grows.
- Each time he chooses to avoid being exposed to them, he actually becomes more fearful.
- Avoidance reinforces Henry's overestimation of how disastrous a run-in with an insect would be, and an underestimation of his ability to cope with it effectively.

### Interventions



- Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours are all connected.
- For example, Leah:
  - Thought: "What if I make a mistake and the other kids laugh at me?"
  - Feelings: shaky, sweaty, heart beating faster, dry mouth, stomach upset. Anxious.
  - <u>Behaviours</u>: Think about ways to get out of it, speak quietly or too quickly, avoid eye contact.

# Step 1: Calm breathing

### Technique

- Sit comfortably in chair, hands on belly.
- Breathe in through the nose, to count of 4
- Exhale slowly through mouth, to count of 4
- Feel the belly rise as you breathe in, and air go out as you exhale.
- Slow and steady think of how we breathe when sleeping.
- Practice first when relaxed, on a daily basis.

### Candle-Flower Deep Breathing

Imagine you are holding a beautiful flower in one hand and a candle in the other.

Slowly sniff the flower, to the count of one, two, three, four.

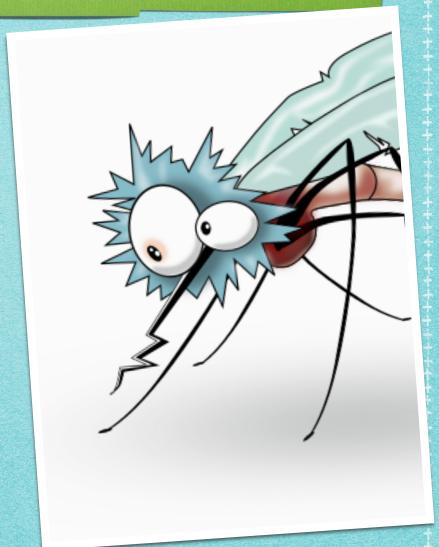
Now, gently blow out the candle, to the count of one, two, three, four.



## Step 2: Establish "Worry Time"

# Role Play: Typical parental response

- Henry, our friend who is fearful of insects, is refusing to eat outside with his family.
- How do these conversations usually go?



### Worry Time

- Goal: Provide safe place to talk about feelings, but also learn to contain the worries by waiting for this time to share them, and stopping at 15 minutes.
- The more we pay attention to anxiety, the more anxious we become.
- It's crucial to allow children to express the worries, but also teach them to limit it and then distract themselves with other activities.

#### **Guidelines:**

- A parent sets aside 15 minutes with the child alone.
- Child can share any worry or fear and parents just listen and support.
- No distractions, no multi-tasking, no screens for kids or parents. Give undivided attention.
- Use good listening skills, provide feedback that you understand their concerns and empathize with them.
- The child is only to discuss the worries, even if that means they have to repeat the same concern.
- After the time is up, the child must engage in another activity and move on from discussing worries.

### Benefits of Worry Time

- Relationship-strengthening.
- Helps children learn to delay and limit the time they spend on their worries.
- Reduces anxiety the power of expressing thoughts and feelings.
- They may find they get bored of talking about it!
- Once worries decrease, it can become "Talk time" and be used to chat about other topics.



# Step 3: Using helpful thoughts

Strong connection between:

Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours

- Our thoughts are not always realistic or true
- Need to help kids to challenge their "unhelpful thoughts", which make them feel worried or fearful.
- Teach them to replace with "helpful thoughts" that make them feel happy and calm.

- Ex: Jenny who is scared to be alone at night, wakes up in the middle of the night.
- Thought: "A zombie is hiding in the closet and will get me!!!!!"
- Feelings: Scared. Heart is racing, she is tense.
- <u>Behaviours</u>: run to parents' room and jump into their bed, cry and insist she can't be alone.

### Helpful Thoughts

With support, at a time she is calm, we could explore with Jenny other brave ways to think about her safety when alone at night:

- My house is safe, nobody can hurt me.
- Zombies are not real, they are just in the movies.
- My parents are close by and won't let anything bad happen to me.
- I am brave and can stay here, using my calm breathing.

### Next steps

- Help children to practice using these thoughts to stay calm and fight back against the worries.
- Parents can model this by sharing their own helpful thoughts in anxiety-provoking situations.
- Ex: A parent who has a challenging day ahead of them can mention this in the morning: "I have some big meetings today and feel kind of nervous. But I know I can do this if I focus and work hard."

### Thought Challengers

Questions to encourage your child to use to challenge the "unhelpful" thoughts:

- Is that really true?
- Is there another, braver way of thinking about this?
- Can I really expect myself to be perfect all the time?
- Am I ignoring the positive?

### Helpful Thoughts

- This is hard but I can do it!
- I can try my best
- It's OK to make mistakes
- Nobody is perfect
- This makes me feel worried but I am safe
- Even though this is challenging, I can handle it

## Step 4: Changing Behaviours

### Poing things differently

- Foster a culture of **courage** in your family
- Praise your children for their willingness to be uncomfortable and face situations that are anxiety-provoking
- Reward children for challenging themselves and confronting their fears. (Use rewards "that money can't buy")
- Try not to reinforce the anxiety by allowing children to avoid situations long-term that make them anxious.
- Be aware of "crutches" that actually reinforce anxiety.

### Gradual exposure

- When children are facing anxiety, establish a clear goal.
- Anxious kids need support, encouragement and to build up gradually to their goal, by taking smaller steps to build confidence.
- Example: Leah's parents help her to accomplish the goal of doing her speech at school.

### What would this look like?

- Think of some smaller, easier steps for Leah:
  - 1. Practice her speech on her own, using calm breathing before she starts and speaking slowly.
  - 2. Do her speech for her family at home.
  - 3. Invite a few friends over and practice for them.
  - 4. Present the speech to her teacher and a friend during recess, in the school environment.
  - 5. Present her speech in front of her class! (Goal accomplished!)

- Involve children in the planning of these steps and keep reminding them of how you are proud of their courage.
- Explore any "Unhelpful" thoughts and use "Thought Challengers" and "Helpful Thoughts"
- Help Jenny think of ways to cope with each step, by thinking helpful thoughts and using calm breathing.
- Jenny can choose a reward in advance for accomplishing each step (ex: special one-on-one time with a parent or getting to choose a favourite meal for dinner). This teaches self-care and builds resiliency.

### When to get more support

- These strategies can all be used by parents at home. Books in resource list provide more ideas and information.
- If child does not want to participate and you are still really stuck, it can helpful to get professional support.
- For highly anxious children, therapy can be very helpful and may be needed, to help the child and family learn these strategies.

### References

- Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous and Independent Children, by Reid Wilson and Lynn Lyons.
- Creative CBT Interventions for Children with Anxiety, by Lianna Lowenstein.
- FRIENDS for Life Activity Book for Children, by Dr. Paula Barrett.
- Keys to Parenting your Anxious Child (Third Edition), by Katharina Manassis.
- What to do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety, by Dawn Huebner.



# Thank you!

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