

Recognizing and Responding to a Child's Stress and Anxiety



**Family and
Community
Engagement**

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board



**OTTAWA-CARLETON
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD**



Learning



Well-Being



Social Responsibility

**OCDSB Parent
Involvement
Committee**



Family Conference 2023

*Educate, Engage, Empower -
Enhancing Learning Together*

Land Acknowledgement

Ottawa is built on unceded Algonquin Anishinaabe territory. The people of the Algonquin Anishinaabe Nation have lived on this territory for millennia. Their culture and presence have nurtured and continue to nurture this place. We honour the people and land of the Algonquin Anishinaabe Nation.

Overview

What is stress?

What is fear?

What is anxiety?

Personal reflection

How to support your worried **child**

Parenting Can Be Tough!



What Is Stress?

Any situation that requires us to adjust or change

- can be either positive or negative



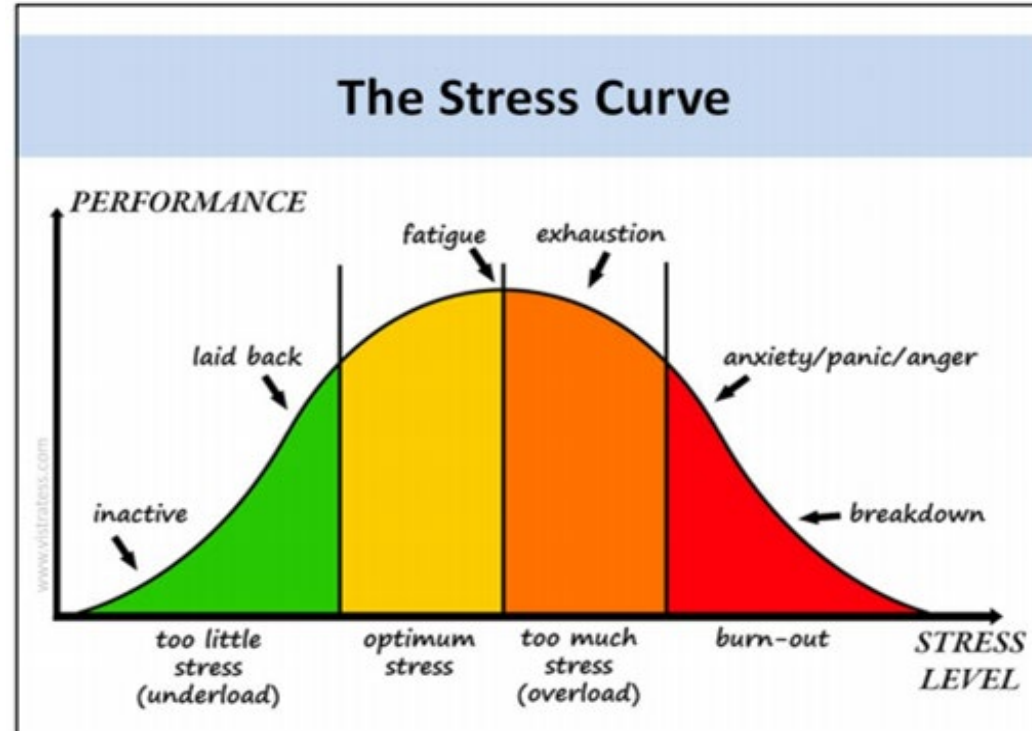
Types of Stress

- Acute Stress
- Episodic Acute Stress
- Chronic Stress



Mountain State Centre for
Independent Living

The Stress Curve



Stress Levels Compounded by the Covid-19 Pandemic

Uncertainty

Increased fear

Isolation

Avoidance



Lack of Positive Coping Activities

Sources of Child Stress

Social Stressors

- Social Dynamics and Social Media
- Bullying; Teasing
- Adult Content in the Media
- Academic Pressures
- Busy Schedules
- Family Disruption
- Parental Stress

Physical Stressors

- Sensory Sensitivities
- Lack of/Poor Quality Sleep
- Lack of Play/Rest/Movement
- Disconnection from Nature
- Video Games
- Super-stimulants
- Urbanization



What can excessive worrying look like?

- Irritability, anger
- Refusing to try new tasks
- Changes in school performance
- Changes in eating or sleep patterns
- Worry about past or future events
- Not participating in activities they used to enjoy
- Frequent reassurance-seeking (e.g., ...”what if?...”)
- Physical complaints (e.g., headaches, pain, nausea, gastro discomfort)
- Avoidance of school or other activities (e.g., crying; tantrums; etc.)
- Withdrawal (e.g., not talking in class or with others)

What Is Fear?

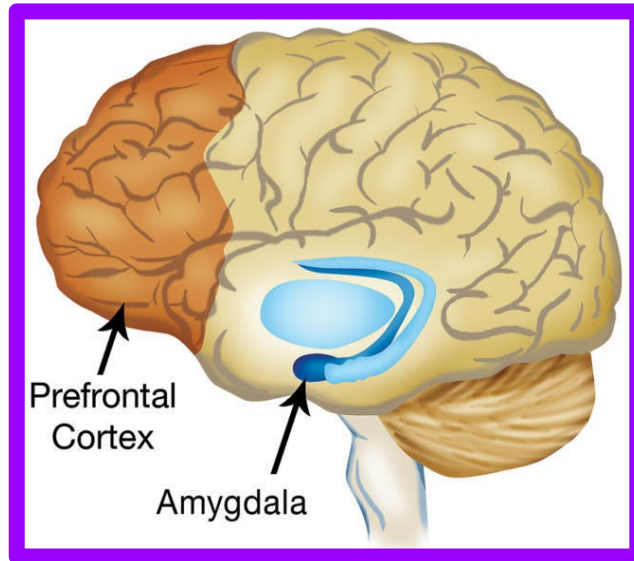


An instinctive response to a clear and present danger or threat

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze

The Amygdala

- The amygdala is like a security guard
- It scans for threats and keeps us safe



Fear Is Important!



Survival Strategies



Developmentally Typical Fears and Worries

Age 4-5:

- Auditory/visual stimuli (noises, etc.)
- Darkness
- Animals
- Parents leaving/separation
- Imaginary creatures
- Burglars/personal harm/harm to others

Age 6-8

- Most of above
- Natural disasters
- Dying/death of others
- Failure/criticism
- Frightening dreams/movies

Age 9-12

- Failure & criticism (school evaluation)
- Rejection
- Peer bullying/teasing
- Kidnapping
- Illness

Age 13-18

- Social alienation
- Failure
- Embarrassment/humiliation
- Injury/serious illness
- Natural/human made disasters

What is Anxiety?

A state of apprehension or worry about a danger or threat that **might** occur

“A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome”

The anticipation of uncertain or catastrophic events

Future-oriented; “what if?”



When To Be Concerned

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Personal Reflection



Our Job is Not to Stop Worries or Stress!

Anxiety is an emotional state that **we all experience**

Anxiety in mild to moderate levels can:

- keep us alert
- is a powerful motivator
- can improve memory
- can prevent excessive risk-taking
- can keep us from entering into unsafe situations
- can help us perform optimally eg. tests, sports and presentations

Our goal is **NOT** to eliminate anxiety

Our Role is to be our child's Coach/Guide

Model calm

Normalize & expect worries

Coach yourself and your child

Be kind and compassionate

Externalize the worry, talk back to it

Know when to push through and when to pull back

Focus on the process, not the content

Celebrate success and brave behavior



Common Missteps

Rescuing, reassuring, and overprotecting

Providing certainty

Lynn Lyons, 2013

Identifying a child as a “worrier” as it runs in the family

Requiring family members, friends, and schools to accommodate the worry

Allowing externalizing behavior (yelling, swearing, hitting, etc) because it’s “part of the anxiety”

Modeling with your own anxious behavior

Pushing too hard or becoming explosive or angry

How to Help in the Moment

Responding to your worried, stressed or anxious child

Regulate First, Then Reason

- We must let the fear response run its course before talking about logic and reasoning
- We can do this by connecting with children empathically



In the Moment

Helpful

- Speaking in a calm voice
- Validate their feelings
- Supporting youth to slow their breathing
- Mindfulness activities to bring them back to the present moment
- Coach them and tell them that **they can manage their anxiety**
- Phrasing is important!

Unhelpful

- Raising voice/losing patience
- Telling youth to “calm down”
- Telling them that they are overreacting
- Telling them that they are embarrassing you or making a scene, etc.
- Saying that they have no reason to be anxious

Helpful Things to Say in the Moment

"This is hard. I see that. I am here"

"Your brain is really trying to convince you that you are in danger, what can we say to it?"

"Tell me what you need now."

"Concentrate on your breathing. Stay in the present."

"What you are feeling is scary, remember you are safe."



5 x 5 x 5 Breathing

Breathing Strategies Can Help Regulate the Central Nervous System



Visualization Exercises



SIX WAYS TO PRACTICE GROUNDING

with anxiety + intense emotions

 <p>body</p> <p>lay on the ground, press your toes into the floor, squeeze playdough</p>	 <p>5 senses</p> <p>wear your favorite sweatshirt, use essential oils, make a cup of tea</p>	 <p>self-soothe</p> <p>take a shower or bath, find a grounding object, light a candle, feel something soft</p>
 <p>observe</p> <p>describe an object in detail: color, texture, shadow, light, shapes, size, weight</p>	 <p>breathe</p> <p>practice 4-7-8 breathing: inhale to 4, hold for 7, exhale to 8</p>	 <p>distract</p> <p>find all the square or green objects in the room, count by 7s, say the date</p>

 THE GROWLERY
 @tothegrowlery

Grounding Techniques

Progressive Muscle Relaxation



After the Fact

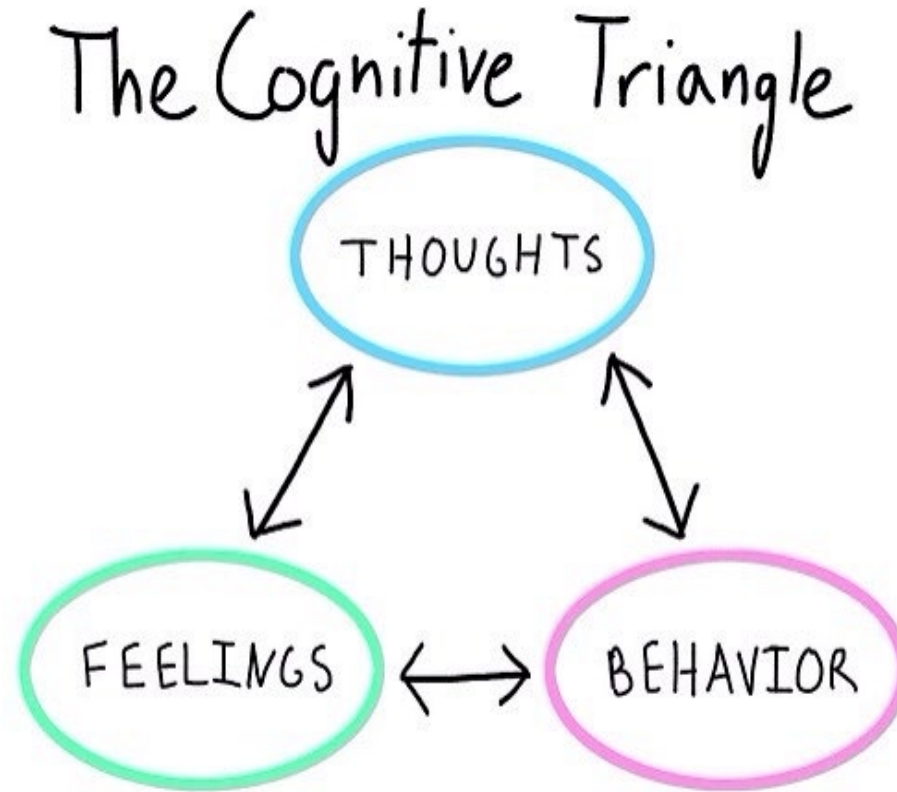
Helpful

- Validating their fears and anxieties
- Supporting youth to explore and reframe their anxious thoughts
- Reframing thoughts tends to be much easier after the fact
- Support youth to identify **triggers** for anxiety and prepare for them ahead of time
- Practice, practice, practice!
- Encourage healthy habits that positively influence well-being

Unhelpful

Raising voice/losing patience
Telling them to “calm down”
Telling them that they are overreacting
Telling them that they are embarrassed
you or themselves
Saying that they have no reason to be anxious and nothing to fear about the situation that made them nervous
Ignoring the situation

Shifting Thought Patterns



Strengthen Their Skills

- Normalize worry
- Externalize the worry
- Reflect on the pace of life of your family
- Be unsure and uncomfortable on purpose (e.g., modeling)
- Distinguish between **helpful** and **unhelpful** thoughts
- Set goals and break things into smaller steps
- Develop autonomy
- Celebrate successes



Helpful Apps

Headspace



MindShift



Healthy Minds



Always There



SAM



Calm



Community Resources

[Parents Lifeline of Eastern Ontario](#)

613-321-3211

[1Call 1 Click](#)

613-260-2360

[Counselling Connect](#)

[Youth Services Bureau](#)

613-562-3004



Taking Care of You

Find time to recharge

Go back to the basics

Ensure you have a support network

Tell people what you need

Model self acceptance



Find moments for fun and laughter

Resources

[Anxiety Canada](#)

[CHEO Book List on Anxiety & Stress](#)

Lafrance, Adele (2020). What to say to kids when nothing seems to work.

Lyons, Lynn (2013). Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents.

Russell, A. & Falconer, T. (2012). Drop the Worry Ball.

Wilson, R. & Lyons, L. (2014). Playing with Anxiety. Casey's Guide for
childs and Kids.