

# Recognizing and Responding to a Child's Stress and Anxiety



# 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

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What is stress?

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What is fear?

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What is anxiety?

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Personal reflection

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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



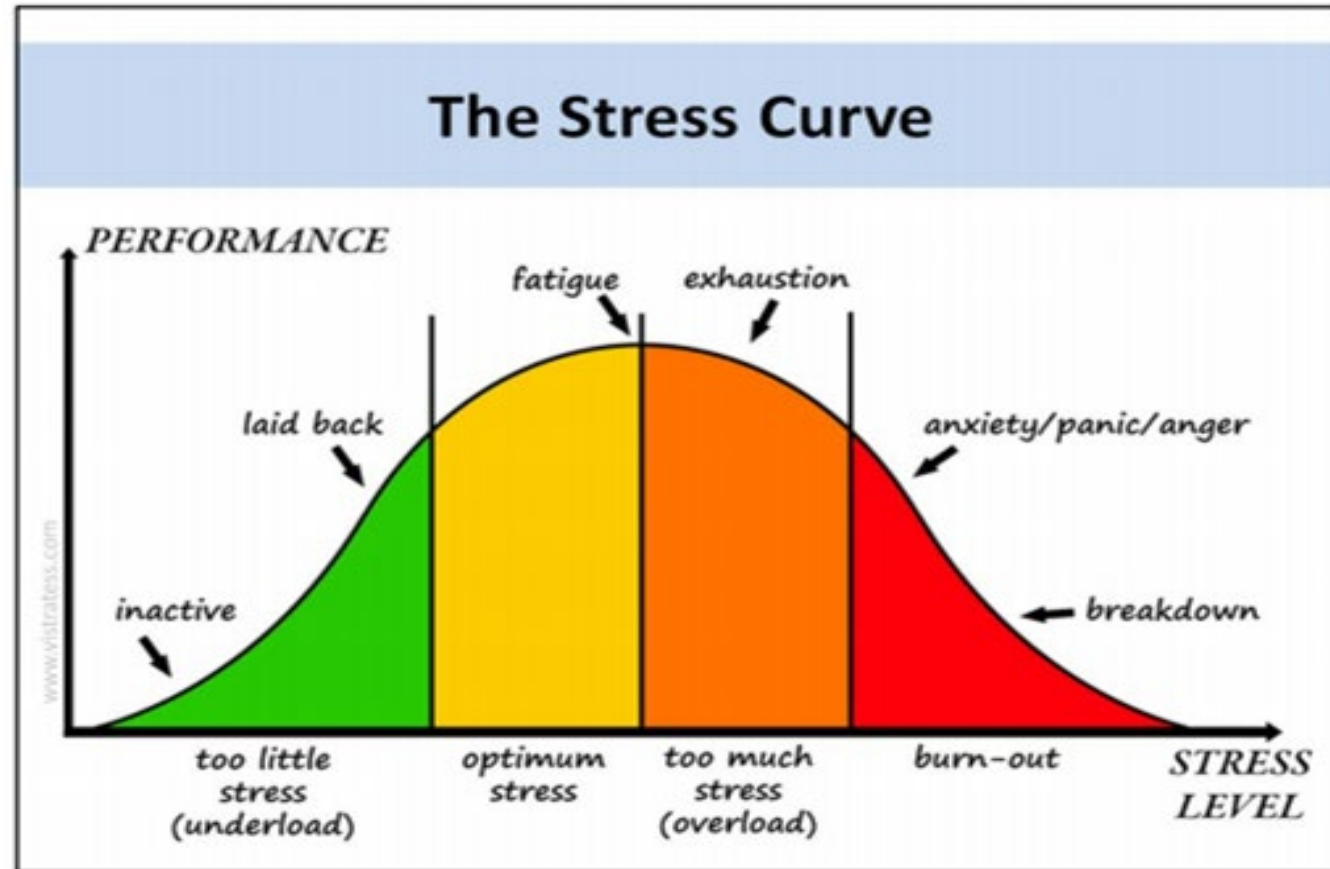


- Acute Stress
- Episodic Acute Stress
- Chronic Stress



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

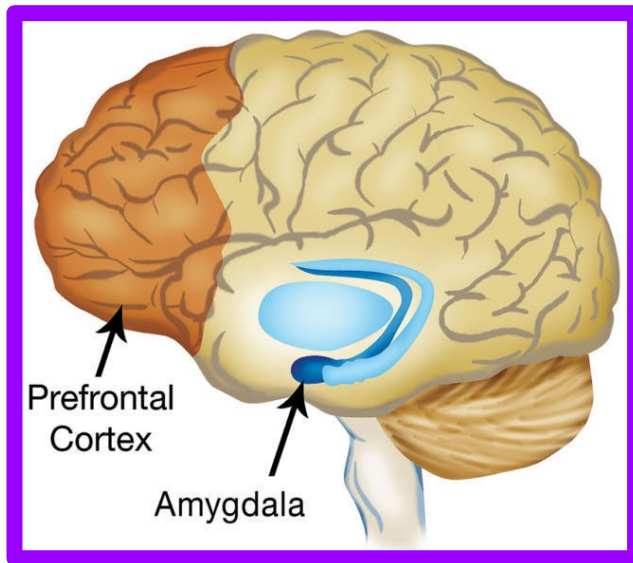
- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze

Austin Resilience Development Inc., 2016



# 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?”



Austin Resilience Development Inc, 2016; Ritchie, 2017

# When To Be Concerned

## Disruption:

- A high level of interference with daily activities and well-being

## Duration:

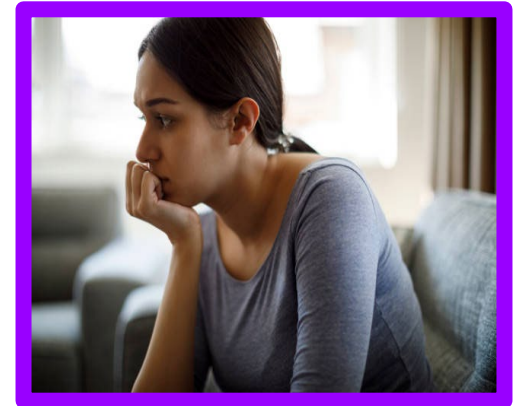
- The distress does not disappear over time, as expected

## Disproportion:

- The intensity and frequency of anxiety is elevated

## Distress:

- An unexpected level of upset





# When To Be Concerned

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- ✓ Duration: The distress does not disappear over time, as expected
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- ✓ Distress: An unexpected level of upset



# 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

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Model calm

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Normalize & expect worries

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Coach yourself and your child

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Be kind and compassionate

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Externalize the worry, talk back to it

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Know when to push through and when to pull back

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Focus on the process, not the content

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Celebrate success and brave behavior



# Common Missteps

Rescuing, reassuring, and overprotecting

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Providing certainty

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

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

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Modeling with your own anxious behavior

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Pushing too hard or becoming explosive or angry

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Lynn Lyons, 2013

# 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

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

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

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"Tell me what you need now."

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

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



HealthLink BC, 2021



# 5 x 5 x 5 Breathing

Breathing Strategies Can  
Help Regulate the Central  
Nervous System

*Just Breathe*



# Visualization Exercises



# Grounding Techniques

## SIX WAYS TO PRACTICE GROUNDING

with anxiety + intense emotions

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

THE GROWLERY @thegrowlery

# Progressive Muscle Relaxation





# After the Fact

## Helpful

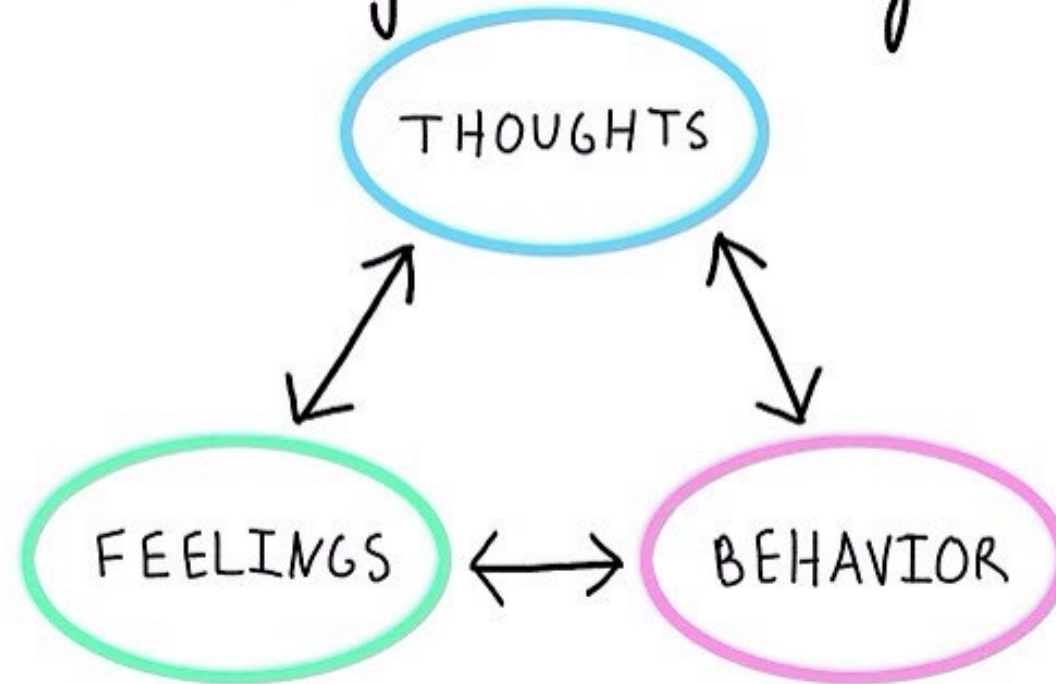
- Validating their fears and anxieties
- Supporting youth to explore and reframe their anxious thoughts
- Reframing thoughts tends to be much easier after the fact
- Support youth to identify **triggers** for anxiety and prepare for them ahead of time
- Practice, practice, practice!
- Encourage healthy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

The Cognitive Triangle



# 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



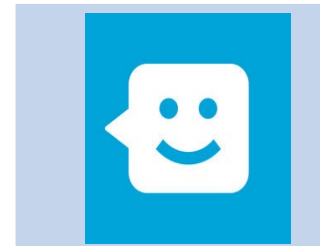
Headspace



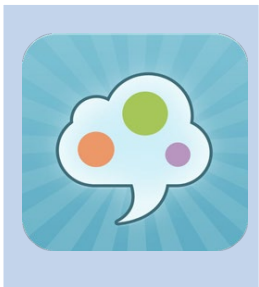
MindShift



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

# COMMUNITY RESOURCES



# 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.