

## **Counterintuitive but Practical Strategies to help Anxious Children-Dr. Jonathan Dalton, Center for Anxiety & Behavioral Change**

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The informative talk by Dr. Dalton sought to provide an overview of 1) the state of affairs in the landscape of adolescent mental health 2) the difference between health anxiety and unhealthy anxiety and how to differentiate between the two 3) provide parents with a counterintuitive evidence based tool box to help children who are dealing with anxiety and related difficulties on a day-to-day basis. The more compassionate the parents are the more likely they are to get it wrong, inadvertently doing things that prolong the distress of the child.

Dr. Dalton has 20 years of experience working with families and children, has front row seats to watch parents, adults and kids doing things they never thought they could do and he has learnt so much more from parents and kids than they have learnt from him.

Kids who have come to Dr. Dalton feel broken, hopeless and less than. If you have a child who is smart, creative and compassionate, the universe will throw in anxiety for free, it is a package deal. Creativity and anxiety ask the same question in very different ways-‘what if’? Neuroscience tells us that the same brain circuitry responsible for anxiety light up for empathy as well, anxiety is the shadow cast by these great virtues. A kid who has gone through anxiety and has learnt to come out of it with counter intuitive tools is better off having gone through it than never experiencing anxiety. If your kids are going through anxiety, they are extra alive, it is not an indication of a flaw or weakness. It is important that parents have a better understanding of what our kids are going through so they can be informed observer.

The great news is that anxiety is treatable, it is the most treatable category of mental health disorders. If it is treated effectively kids are better off having gone through it, than never having experienced it in the first place. These Kids have learnt to overcome fear as a decision- making tool, they have learn to pursue values rather than comfort and to pursue things they find meaningful and purposeful, the virtues of creativity, intelligence and compassion remain intact and they have new skills that they can use to have a different relationship with anxiety and their own distress.

“Having an anxiety disorder is like being stuck in that moment when you realize that you have leaned too far back in your chair, but have not yet fallen”. These are the first few lines in the essay for college application by a former teenage patient of Dr. Dalton. This captures the internal experience that the kids experiencing anxiety are going through.

A 12 year old patient of Dr. Dalton who had depression mentioned that his life felt like a stick of chewing gum that had lost its flavor. The opposite of depression is not happiness but

vitality, of feeling really alive and leaning forward into life. This is such a raw and authentic explanation of what is going on in the lives of children experiencing anxiety.

## **Difference between Anxiety and Anxiety disorders**

**“You can’t tell if you burnt your toast or if your curtains are on fire based on how loud the alarm sounds”**

Anxiety and pain are very similar processes. Pain tells us not to do something as it **will** damage our body, anxiety tells us not to do something as it **may** damage our body. It keeps us safe and stops us from making repetitive mistakes. Anxiety is very important for the protection of our species, it prevents us from doing dumb things, it helps us learn from our experiences.

Anxiety in itself is not a disorder, it is a positive thing, it means that we are alive, living and healthy. Anxiety is something that evolution wants us to experience, designed to keep us safe, to be aware of potential threats, orient us to problem solving skills towards things that causing us that distress, helps us not to repeat mistakes. Like when you have food poisoning you will avoid the food item. If you have experienced anything that makes scared, hurt or sick, you won’t do it ever again, we need only one time to learn that lesson, this is known as one trial learning, the power of conditioning experience. Anxiety keeps us safe, not to repeat mistakes we made previously, **anxiety tells us to avoid**. If you are in a very dangerous situation, you should be anxious, it helps us concentrate and not get distracted.

Anxiety disorder is defined not by the amount or intensity of anxiety you are experiencing but the accuracy in the appraisal of danger, the goodness of the fit to the situation. The fire alarm sounds the same whether you have burnt a toast or your curtains are on fire, you can’t tell by the sound the alarm whether it is a true alarm or a false alarm. The fear is very real, but what is not is accuracy of our perception of danger, so we experience unnecessary avoidance. Same thing is true in our experience of anxiety. We avoid and escape, we fire the very best teacher we will have in our lifetime, our own experience that would have taught us while the fear was real the danger wasn’t.

If something is making us anxious it doesn’t mean we have a disorder. There are many times when anxiety is a very appropriate response to a dangerous situation but because we can’t tell the difference by the sound of the alarm, our natural urge to respond is the same, we don’t know if it is a valid dangerous situation or a misperception, the urge to avoid remains profoundly impactful.

When we avoid things that are not dangerous, it prevents us from getting corrective feedback about whether the threat was real or not. **Therapists don’t treat anxiety disorders, they**

**treat avoidance. Anxiety is temporary and anxiety is harmless. The avoidance of anxiety is the cause of suffering, never anxiety itself.** When a kid is scared to raise his hands in class, going to school, or is scared to attend a party, they are avoiding the emotions they expected to feel of doing the thing or thinking of doing that thing, this is **experiential avoidance**, trying not to feel a certain way. Paradoxically the more we as parent try to help our kids avoid the situation, the more vulnerable they will become to the experience of anxiety. We as parents need to teach our kids to persist in the presence of distress, we need to teach them to respond to their own anxious thoughts and feelings, just as a palm tree would respond to the wind, it doesn't fight against it as there is no need to, it knows it can outlast the wind. We need to teach the kids that they can withstand the wind.

The one take home message from the entire presentation is that fear/anxiety and avoidance are team mates. Avoidance is the life blood of anxiety disorders. If we can arm kids with non-avoidance coping skills we can help them to not fall into the trap of not experiencing anxiety, then the anxiety itself will die a natural death, it's like taking the oxygen out of the fire. We need to ensure we don't protect the kids from the experience of anxiety but we need to teach kids that they can persist and outlast the experience of anxiety itself.

The way to respond to anxiety is as counterintuitive as diving into the wave that is just about to hit you. Our natural instinct is to turn back and run back to the shore. But the water is faster than we are and will catch us from behind and get us into the washing machine spin cycle. The best thing to do is dive into the wave of anxiety and do things we are afraid of, and while doing so we are learning that the estimation of the risk was out of proportion to the actual risk and kids can learn that they can effectively cope with the experience of anxiety. Good parents try to help their kids not to suffer, but we also know that growth and comfort are incompatible experiences. The more that we try and protect our kids, the more we fall into a trap and the more we think that the anxiety is too much for our kids to handle, the more we teach them that they are incapable of experiencing and coping with anxiety.

**Doing the things you are afraid of doing is not the outcome of treatment, it is the treatment.** Persisting in distress is the active ingredient, it is the mechanism of change. This calls for a paradigm shift. If you are doing something as a parent that is important for the child and the child is experiencing anxiety while they are doing that, it is like getting sweaty at the gym, it doesn't mean anything is wrong, it means they are getting a good workout. We measure progress not in the measure of anxiety but the use of avoidance as a way for kids to regulate their emotions.

Our job as parents is to teach kids **non-avoidance ways of coping with anxiety**, this is a paradoxical response to their distress but that indirectly it will help decrease their anxiety over time, not immediately, when it would actually increase anxiety. The hallmark of an anxiety disorder is the unnecessary avoidance, which short circuits our natural learning process. The anxiety can last to perpetuity if we have never challenged the anxiety by seeking information/evidence of whether the fear was accurate or not. As parents we need to expose kids to what they are scared of, validate what the kids are feeling and show confidence in their ability to handle the anxiety with a 'I am 100% confident that you can handle it'. We need to applaud children for persisting through anxiety.

### **Why this is so important?**

**1) Anxiety disorders are the most common in the category of mental health disorders across the life span**

**2) They affect us at the earliest age of any acquired mental health disorder**

Of all the categories of mental health disorders, anxiety disorders have by far the earliest onset. The median age of onset is 11 years, which means during one's lifetime, if they are going to have an anxiety disorder, half will have it before they turn 11. These numbers keep getting worse.

**3) These are the most treatable of mental health disorders.**

Approximately 8% of children in the age group of 13-18 currently have an anxiety disorder in this moment. It gets worse if we look at life time prevalence, 31.9% (1/3rd) of children are projected to have an anxiety disorder in the 6 years of their development between 13-18 years. 26% of boys and 38% of girls (10 times that of eating disorders which affects 3%) will have at least one anxiety disorder prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. During these 6 years, 8% will have a severe anxiety disorder that interferes with their day to day functioning like going to school. According to a recent study 57% of high school girls reported feeling persistent sadness and hopelessness. Chronic absenteeism among our students across the country has gone up by 93% since the pandemic.

The need for services to address anxiety disorders is immense. The reason this talk is important is because of all the kids who are suffering this early and in profound ways, a very small minority get treatment for their anxiety disorder, about 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the kids receive treatment for their anxiety disorder, as compared to 79% for ADHD.

The anxious kids are by design chameleons, they try to blend in and not draw attention to themselves, which leads to silent suffering, which happens very often. Of the kids who do get treated, less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> receive evidence-based treatment that works and 2/3rds don't,

and they don't realize the treatment is not effective, but they think it's they who don't work and they begin to feel helpless and hopeless. The tragedy is that we know what works and the vast majority of anxiety disorders are treatable if they are given the right evidence-based style of treatment, but the treatments are tragically underutilized.

In 2019, before Covid, the average teens were 5-8 times more likely to show symptoms of an anxiety disorder than their same age peers did during the Great Depression, WW2, Vietnam War, Cold War. This is indeed the age of anxiety, the waters that these kids are swimming in, before the hurricane of Covid hit. This is the first generation where the teens are more stressed than their parents are. We as parents look back at our high school years with nostalgia when we didn't have to worry about mortgage payments, Car EMIs, Tuition payments, worried about all the challenges that adulthood brings, but it's not like the good old times, this generation is more stressed than we are. The expectations and demands on kids are so much higher than what it used to be.

A research study by Peter Gray showed that between 1950-2010, the average length of the school year in the US increased by 5 weeks. The average amount of time children in the age group 6-8 spent at school plus homework increased by 11.4 hours per week between 1981-2003, equivalent to adding a day and half to an adult's work week. Children should have child directed play time with no pay-offs, which is very important for them to learn critical competencies and social skills. We now have parents and coaches hovering over the kids directing them. We should give children the space to explore and learn through mistakes. We are raising fragile kids. Between 2009-2014, the rate of teen depression increased by 37%, which coincides with the invention of the i-phone. Kids are living in this age of anxiety, its life.

When children are in a persistent state of hopelessness, it interferes with their ability to learn and demonstrate knowledge. It becomes very difficult for them to focus and retain information, things are harder to do when we are in a state of high anxiety. As adults when we are in a state of stress, it becomes very difficult for us to demonstrate knowledge.

We want to give children skills. Imagine if you are on the observation deck of Empire State Building and you are enjoying the view, and out of nowhere a fire alarm goes off. We will experience anxiety, and an urge to flee, how do we get out of here, lot of intrusive and scary thoughts. But imagine if you are in the same scenario and there is an announcement from the superintendent informing that maintenance work is happening and the fire alarm is getting checked and to disregard it, we might be irritated with the fire alarm going off but we will not experience a high level of anxiety with the urge to flee. The difference lies not in the alarm, but your understanding of what the alarm means, or what it does not mean, your appraisal and interpretation of what the alarm means will profoundly affect your experience.

For children, we can help them think what their own anxiety alarm means and does not mean. Their appraisal of the importance of the alarm will fundamentally and profoundly impact their experience of it, we want them to be an informed viewer seeing their own anxiety alarm as an irritating false alarm, that gives them no useful information.

Imagine a kid who is scared of butterflies, and is therefore apprehensive to go outdoor and play during recess. Maybe she was stung by a bee/wasp and is therefore scared of flying insects. Would you give the kid a fly swatter or a bug spray and send them off to play outdoors. The reason we wouldn't is that we are reinforcing that butterflies are dangerous, and the entire time they are out there, they are going to be hyper vigilant, which means they are not going to have a lot of fun. And if she loses the fly swatter or runs out of bug spray, her anxiety levels will reach above baseline level as every time you are using the swatter or bug spray you are teaching your brain that butterflies are dangerous and you can't handle the emotions that come with it. The girl will never learn that butterflies are harmless.

When parents come with the best interest of their child in mind and mention that they are looking for ways to prevent their child from experiencing anxiety, you are teaching the child's brain that whatever he/she is fearful of is dangerous. Please don't swat the butterflies, anxiety is no more dangerous than a butterfly, you are teaching the brain that they are dangerous and you cant handle them. We don't want parents, caregivers to be complicit in not allowing kids to experience anxiety, we want them to persist in distress.

One common thread that runs through all forms of anxiety disorders is overvalued ideation, when we as humans think our thoughts are way more important than they actually are. When a kid is having a scary thought, they are confusing the thought with evidence to support it. They are telling themselves a scary story, and they are forgetting that what is happening in that moment is that they are telling themselves a scary story. What is behind the scenes footage to their scary thoughts? When a kid is having a 'what if' thoughts, we want to reframe it as 'what is' happening right now, right now you are having a scary thought of say failing my test, they are reminding themselves that they are having scary thoughts. Why are we valuing them in the ways that we are?

Perfectionism is a disease amongst the youth, where they are conflating their value/self worth with their achievement, and their standing. Perfectionism is a risk factor for eating disorders and suicides. Perfectionism can work at low levels of stress, but when it fails, it fails catastrophically. We need to celebrate the effort rather than the outcome. We need to teach children optimalism, that sees failure as feedback. What is best depends on the given situation we are in. When a kid has many projects or papers to juggle, they feel they need to study for each one perfectly, they will decrease their efficiency and effectiveness and increase their suffering tremendously, we need to be the counterbalance to the scourge of

perfectionism and the value derived from achievement culture that these kids feel so immersed in these days.

### **Teach kids to be anxious and brave/strong/anything they would want to be**

You can be scared/ anxious and brave/strong at the same time. I can be anxious and any damn thing at the same time. This is what we want to teach the kids, to be anxious and ..... or anxious during.....as opposed to anxious instead of.....We teach the kids and families to be anxious and, or anxious during. We teach them to treat anxiety as a passenger in the back seat of the car we didn't invite him to, we should never give anxiety the drivers seat and decide where we are going. The evidence based treatment is about being anxious and .....the rest of that is anything you care about or value, teach them to pursue their values and not to pursue their comfort.

### **Teach Children to be their own Coaches**

We want to teach children to be their own coaches. These are not examples/reasons of why they should not be anxious, that they are experiencing the wrong emotion or that they are broken, instead we are validating that it is ok to be anxious BUT we are teaching them that it is important to persist in the presence of anxiety. Encourage the kids to think along these lines. I can do hard things because..... get them to complete these statements.

Imagine if you are on high dive board for the first time and you are really terrified, what is it that you tell yourself? These are the kind of things we want the kids to tell themselves when they are facing any of their fears.

Right now I am having a scary thought about.....

Fear is temporary and harmless. This is important for parents to remember as we tend to treat kids as fragile and that the experience will break them, but they will stronger having gone through the experience. Human struggle is rich with meaning and purpose, if we prevent our kids from struggling, we are preventing them from growing. Having them know that they can experience any emotion and that they can be ok is very important.

Teach the kids to believe that scary thoughts can't harm them, just because they are scared doesn't mean they can't do it and that they are stronger than their fear

### **Self-Efficacy**

An individual's belief in his/her capacity to execute behaviors is necessary to produce specific performance attainments. How effective can you be in meeting the demands of the environment. The good news is that it is not an attribute but is a skill that can be taught, learnt and practiced and improved.

I know I can do it because.....

**Mastery Experiences**-Area in her life where a child feels very competent. Kids can learn from other people overcoming challenges in movies/books. It is important for children to hear about their parents struggles and sacrifices they made in getting where they are and becoming what they are. Letting kids know that struggle is ok and is an essential part of life, it builds character.

**Verbal Persuasion**-You validate the kids emotion but reassure them that you are 100% sure they can handle it. Having an adult (teacher/parent/coach) say that 'I know this is going to be really hard but you I am 100% sure can handle it.' is a very effective persuasive method to help them jump forward into the uncertainty.

A bird is perched on a branch, and notices a crack in the branch. Is the bird unafraid because it can think of many reasons why the branch is strong and unlikely to break or is it unafraid because it knows it can fly? Knowing you can fly is self-efficacy not because bad and hard things will not happen, but because you can handle bad and hard things, you can handle the experience of anxiety, that they can handle more than they thought. Kids will learn to use skills other than avoidance as a way to regulate their emotions, the skills and knowledge they pick up in the process will be applicable and will see them through challenges they will continue to face in life. In the process, Kids will learn things about themselves and their capacity that they will otherwise not know.

### **Flexibility is strength**

What gives the palm tree the ability to withstand the strong winds is its flexibility. Knowing that if you are lost in the woods, there are many ways to get out. There are many ways to accomplish your goals. Having an illusion of a narrow path to success, its never singular, very important for kids to understand.

If you have a kid with a lot of anxiety, separate the kid from their anxiety. Look at anxiety as a something begging for attention and avoidance. The child's anxiety is begging for attention avoidance, and reassurance. We love our kids too much and care too much about their future to allow anxiety to stick around and we will do everything to help them feel better. In doing so, we may give them temporary relief in the short term, but we increase their suffering and distress in the long run. Anxiety thrives on attention and avoidance, and we as parents should have a non-cooperative agreement with the child's anxiety.

If your kids are struggling with a Math problem, you can either give them the answer, but they wouldn't have learnt how to solve the problem, and will get used to your support in solving Math problems in the future and cope with frustration. We don't want to give kids the coping



answer either, they will then become dependent on our support to cope, rather than looking internally for skills and abilities.

We should ask questions, name and contain the emotion, 'seems like you are feeling frustrated, or anxious or whatever the emotions is in a given day' and then we say, 'what can you tell yourself when you feel this way?'. This serves two functions, 1) you are giving less attention 2) you are helping them to look internally for appropriate coping skills in the presence of anxiety. That's the way the brain learns by pairing things together. If you are in situations where you are repeatedly cued in to look internally for appropriate coping skills, then the presence of anxiety itself will become a cue to look internally for coping skills. Kids will gain practice and get better using these skills.

Model calm for children, that's exactly how you would like the child to feel. Model non-anxious behavior, model containment of the emotion, their anxiety is not a crisis or a catastrophe, it is uncomfortable. Calm is contagious.

When parents come and ask 'What do I do when my child is experiencing anxiety', the question Dr. Dalton asks is 'what do you do when they are not experiencing anxiety'. As parents we want to validate their emotions, we want to persuade them that we believe in their capacity to handle anxiety. How do we applaud them for coping effectively? Water the seeds and not the weeds. We have to teach the kids that they have the strength to handle anxiety.

### **Importance of Resilience**

In the age of anxiety that kids are living, where there is so much expected out of them in academics, extra curriculums, socially, it is important to teach children resilience which is not an attribute but a skill that can be taught, practiced and strengthened. As parents, we need to help children 1) foster connections 2) we need to model altruism 3) help them develop a structured routine 4) take breaks and have unstructured play time 5) teach self-care 6) accept change as a part of life 7) help them set goals and work towards them 8) nurture a positive outlook 9) build self-confidence and 10) facilitate self-discovery of their interests and potential.