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Parenting the Anxious Child

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Overview: Anxiety within the Family System

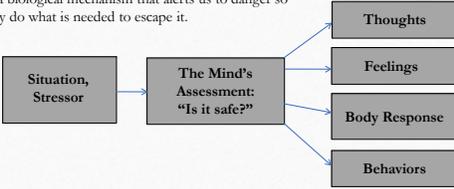
- What is anxiety?
- Typical anxiety in children vs. excessive anxiety in children
- Anxiety disorders and evidence-based psychological treatment
- The importance of systems in childhood anxiety
- The accommodation of anxiety as a maintaining factor of the cycle
- Supporting your child, rather than their anxiety
- The power of parents to help their children overcome anxiety

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The Stress Response

Anxiety is a biological mechanism that alerts us to danger so that we may do what is needed to escape it.



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graph LR; A[Situation, Stressor] --> B[The Mind's Assessment: "Is it safe?"]; B --> C[Thoughts]; B --> D[Feelings]; B --> E[Body Response]; B --> F[Behaviors]
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Typical Anxiety in Children

- Everyone experiences anxiety. Anxiety is adaptive and can be helpful to us.
- Anxiety is developmentally appropriate during childhood as children have new experiences, gain new skills, and learn about themselves, others, and the world around them.
 - Anxiety is heightened when the circumstance is unfamiliar, unpredictable, and imminent.
- Common anxieties in children – separating from parents, using toilets, costumes, darkness, being alone, animals/insects, making new friends, trying new foods, academics, performing well in extracurricular activities, being accepted by peers

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Excessive Anxiety in Children

- Anxiety is excessive when it is high in intensity.
- Anxiety is excessive when it is persistent.
- Excessive anxiety is maladaptive and interferes with daily functioning.
- Excessive anxiety may interfere with a child's accomplishment of age-appropriate developmental tasks.
- This developmental interference occurs because of the child's attempts to find ways to avoid feeling anxious – this is natural, but maladaptive.

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Anxiety and Related Disorders in Children

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Selective Mutism
- Specific Phobias
- Panic Disorder
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID)
- Other disorders often modulated by anxiety:
 - Trichotillomania, Excoriation Disorder, Tic Disorders and Tourette's Disorder

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Anxiety Disorders in Children

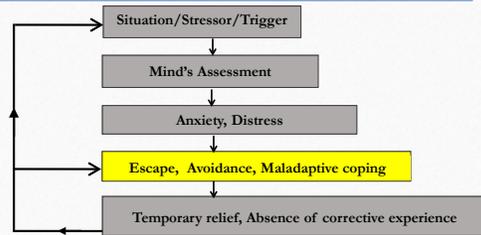
- **One in eight** children suffers from an anxiety disorder.
- Anxiety disorders are treatable.
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and CBT with medication for more severe cases, in the treatment of anxiety disorders in youth.
- **CBT** is considered to be the most evidence-based psychotherapy for anxiety disorders.

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Maladaptive Coping and the Maintenance of Anxiety



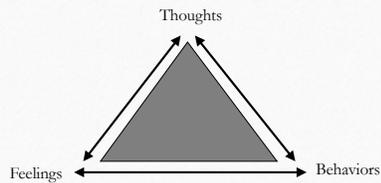
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Evidence-Based Treatment for Anxiety: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

- CBT for anxiety typically involves:
 - Psychoeducation
 - Correcting erroneous cognitions
 - Exposure therapy
 - Confrontation with anxiety-provoking stimuli
 - Eliminating compulsions or avoidance behaviors



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Goals for Effective Behavior Change and Building Resilience

- Exposure therapies facilitate new learning.
- Learn that anticipatory anxiety is often greater than the distress associated with the stressor.
- Learn to tolerate anxiety/distress.
- Learn that anxiety/distress is temporary.
- Learn that the feared outcome rarely, if ever, occurs.
- Increase mastery. → “I can do it!”



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Systems Play an Important Role in Childhood Anxiety

- Child distress = family distress (and other systems, too)
- Expressions of distress may serve as:
 - Strategies for emotion regulation
 - Ways in which to manipulate the environment to gain external accommodation
- Systemic factors are important to address:
 - Systems can unintentionally and unknowingly maintain the anxiety.
 - Systems have the potential to help support the child's path to wellness.
 - Sometimes, individual therapy is not an option, or is not sufficient without addressing this.

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Anxiety is a Biological Social Response

- Fear responses in baby mammals are qualitatively different from of mature mammals.
 - Experiments have shown that baby monkeys run to their mother figures when scared.
- Chronic over-response of internal activation is consistent with chronic over-response of interpersonal systems
 - Parent is hard-wired to notice a child's cues and respond to provide protection and regulation for the child
 - When the child is reactive, the parent typically exerts control of child, rather than the child self-regulating



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Accommodation of Anxiety

- Any behavior carried out to help a child to avoid anxiety-related distress
- Common, evolutionary, natural response to childhood anxiety
 - Parents are attentive to child fear cues and don't want to see their child suffer
- Often carried out in the service of trying to maintain the function of the system and may do so in the short-term
- Yet, accommodations serve to reinforce the need for accommodations and negatively impact the course of anxiety disorders and treatment outcomes

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Family Accommodation of Anxiety

- Present in ~95% of parents of anxious children (especially mothers)
 - (Shimshoni et al., 2019; Benito et al., 2015; Storch et al., 2015)
- Associated with more severe anxiety symptoms
 - (Norman et al., 2014; Lebowitz et al., 2016)
- Associated with more severe impairment for child and family
 - (Thompson-Hollands et al., 2014)
- Predicts poor treatment outcome
 - (Kagan et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2017)
- Leads to additional problems (e.g., sleep related problems)
 - (Lebowitz & Shimshoni, 2019)

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Parent-Child Behavior Patterns: Reassurance Seeking



- Anxious children often seek reassurance from their parents to relieve distress.
- Reassurance seeking may appear as different ways of asking you questions, repeatedly, seeking advice, or “checking.”
- Providing children with reassurance “rescues” your child from distress, rather than providing them with opportunity to cope.
- Providing children with reassurance also reinforces the child’s need to gain reassurance from others when distressed.

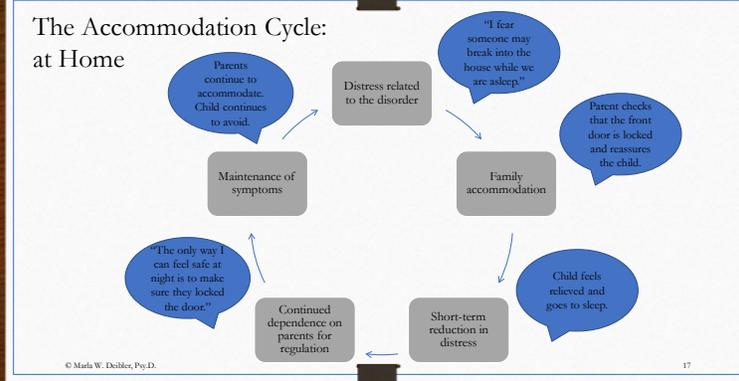
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Parent-Child Behavior Patterns: Parental Avoidance and Request Fulfillment

- Parents of anxious children often fall prey to avoidance behaviors, too.
- Parents engage in avoidance (distraction or pivoting away from the anxiety) and carry out other requested behaviors (demands) to avoid potential emotional meltdowns or other unwanted consequences, such as acting out behaviors.
- Avoidance of potential anxiety-provoking stressors serves to assist the child in escaping from distress, rather than providing opportunity to build their own coping skills.
- Avoidance also reinforces the child's belief that the stressor must be (and can be) avoided.

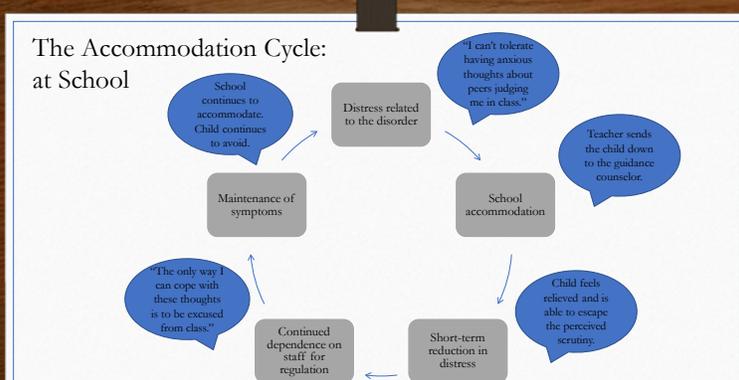
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The Accommodation Cycle: at Home



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The Accommodation Cycle: at School



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Systems can Serve an Important Role in Improving Childhood Anxiety

- It is important that therapists address family and/or school accommodations in the process of a child's exposure therapy.
- But, what if the child is unwilling to participate in treatment or what if individual exposure-based treatment is not accessible?

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Parents can Help their Children Better Manage their Anxiety Indirectly by Changing their own Behavior



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Parent-Based Treatment for Childhood Anxiety

- SPACE (Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions)
 - (Lebowitz et al., 2013) Yale Child Study Center
 - Evidence-based treatment for parents to help their children overcome problematic anxiety
 - Does not require the child's participation in therapy
 - Unilateral parental action
 - Main goals are to systematically:



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Providing High Quality Support to your Child

Acceptance Validation + Confidence = Support

“I see that this is hard for you, but I 100% know that you can handle this.”

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Supporting the Child, Rather than the Anxiety

- Providing high quality support to the child, rather than to the anxiety will strengthen the child's ability to manage their anxiety
- Eliminating accommodations of anxiety
 - The goal for a healthy system is to slowly work toward eliminating accommodations, whether through SPACE, in individual exposure therapy, or on one's own
 - SPACE provides a structured, systematic collaborative reduction of accommodations as implemented by parents over the course of weeks/months
 - The intention is for the parents to change their own behavior, thereby influencing the child's

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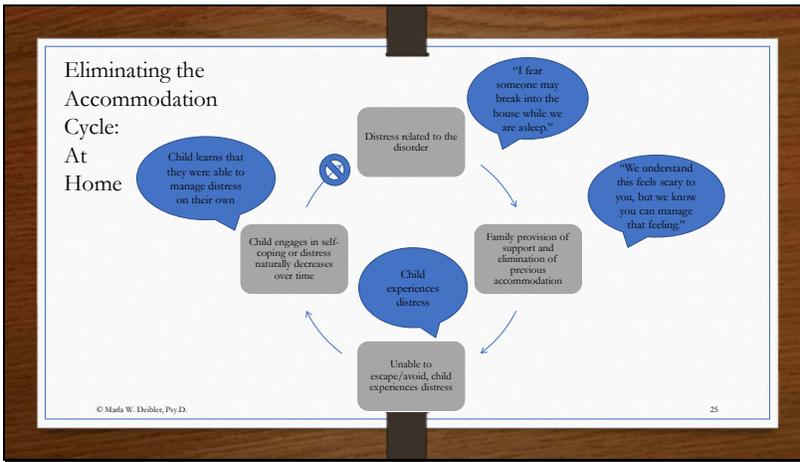
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Outside of Therapy: Tips for Eliminating Accommodations

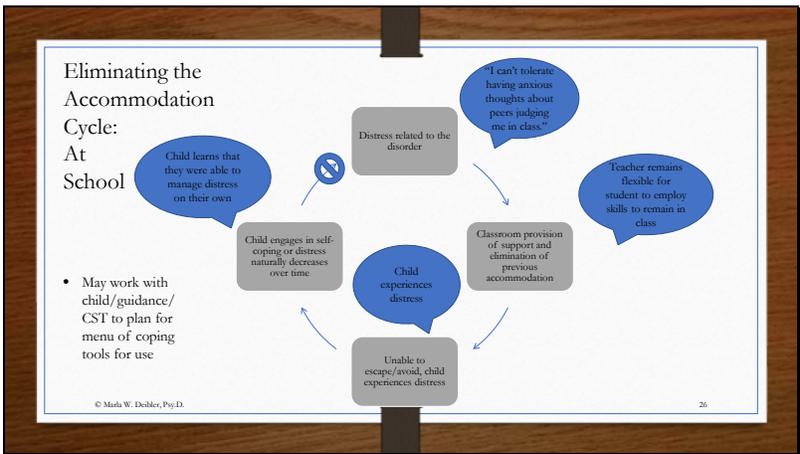
- Choose one specific accommodation to reduce or eliminate at a time.
 - Make this decision clear, concise, and consistent.
 - Ensure all systems in the child's daily life are aware of significant changes (and on board).
 - Do not respond to anxiety's response to this change.
 - Ignore anxiety's attention-seeking, reassurance seeking, reaction-seeking behaviors to the greatest extent possible or briefly acknowledge and move on.
 - Ignoring or discontinuing reinforcement of previously reinforced behavior will decrease the behavior (extinction).
 - So, hang in there!

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Build Your Own Coping Skills



- Parents must be able to tolerate their children's distress and model acceptance of all emotions, including anxiety, as "normal" and temporary.
- Remember that building resilience and achieving the long-term goals of effective behavior change far outweighs the temporary relief of escape/avoidance behaviors.
- If parents, themselves, struggle with anxiety, it is recommended that they seek treatment.
- Stay calm, cool, collected. You want to model openness to experience, emotion regulation, problem-solving skills, optimism, and psychological flexibility.

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Overcoming Child Anxiety

- The most important component of effective anxiety treatment is exposure (facing your fears) and learning to manage anxiety/distress.
- Behavior change is a process of shaping, involving encouragement of desirable behavior (reinforcement) and refraining from reinforcing previously reinforced undesirable behavior (extinction).
- Understanding and changing the systems in a child's life can be essential to helping a child overcome anxiety.



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Resources and Readings

- NJ Center for Tourette Syndrome and Associated Disorders: NJCTS.org
- International OCD Foundation: IOCDF.org
- TLC Foundation for Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors: BFRB.org
- Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies: ABCT.org
- To find a SPACE provider, visit SpaceTreatment.net
- "Freeing your Child from Anxiety" by Tamar Chansky, PhD
- "Talking Back to OCD" by John March, PhD
- "Up and Down the Worry Hill" by Aureen Wagner, PhD
- A series of workbooks about anxiety, such as "What to do when you Worry too Much" by Dawn Huebner, PhD

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