

# SUPPORTIVE PARENTING FOR ANXIOUS CHILDHOOD EMOTIONS

HELPING YOUR CHILD RETURN TO SCHOOL

We'll get started in just a few minutes!

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WHOLE CHILD COLORADO

# WELCOME

- I was a high school and middle school English teacher for four years before becoming a counselor.
- I've been a counselor for eight years and worked in eating disorder clinics, residential treatment centers and school based settings.
- I founded Whole Child Colorado and provide primarily school-based therapy in schools.
- My son, Benji, is about a year and a half old.



## AGENDA

- Identifying Anxiety and Strategies
- SPACE Treatment Method
- Resources
- Questions



# PART I: ANXIETY

## BUILDING A COPING SKILL TOOLBOX

Me before therapy:



Me using my coping skills after  
processing with my therapist:



@SOMETHINGWENT

## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

- Anxiety gets a bad rep, but it's actually really beneficial!
- Humans are unique in our ability to imagine dangers, and take steps to avoid them.
- Nest of wasps

Anxiety: "What if this happens?"

Me: "But it won't."

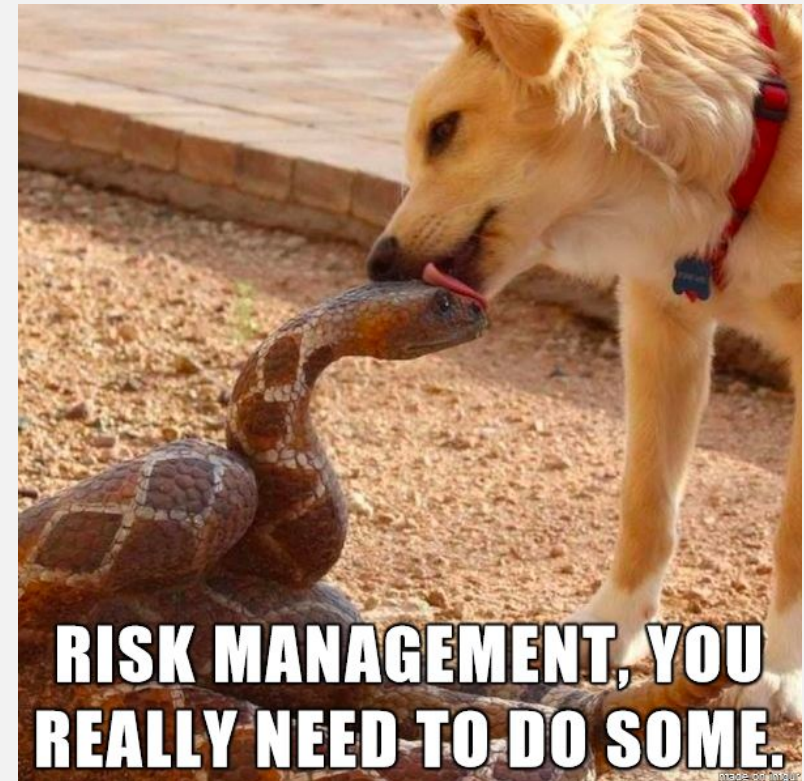
Anxiety: "But what if it does?"

Me:



## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

- However, this ability becomes problematic because we become vulnerable to worries that aren't realistic or likely. (i.e. My husband's fear of sharks.....in a pool...)
- Being able to imagine danger also means we have to be very skilled at balancing possible risks against potential benefits.
- This is really hard to do, especially for children and teens!



## THINK ABOUT YOUR CHILD

- Does she seem to always come up with the worst scenarios imaginable?
- Have you ever felt frustrated that she seems to focus on the negative rather than the positive?
- Does your child seem to downplay the possibility that things will actually go well, and instead tends to believe that they won't?
- Perhaps even when things turn out fine and the negative event your child feared does not happen, does it seem as if she has trouble learning from this, or believing that it could go this way again?



## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

- Anxious children typically overestimate the likelihood of negative events and downplay the likelihood of positive ones.
- If a child evaluates an event as being very likely to be negative (i.e. I'll go to school and everyone will laugh at me.) that will outweigh potential positives (i.e. I'll go to school and it will be fine.), and they are more likely to avoid the event totally.
- So that calculus makes it really understandable why a child would start trying to avoid those events, the “really scary” risk simply isn't worth the “meh” outcome.



## WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE: BODY

- Sweating, difficulty breathing, heart pounding, headaches, nausea, stomach upset, mouth dryness.
- Anxiety symptoms are not dangerous in a healthy child. They are uncomfortable, but no different than heart pounding and sweating because they were running hard in soccer. They just feel scarier because in soccer they know why they are feeling out of breath and anxiety is sometimes harder to identify.
- Even if your child does not yet know how to calm himself down, his body will eventually calm down on it's own.



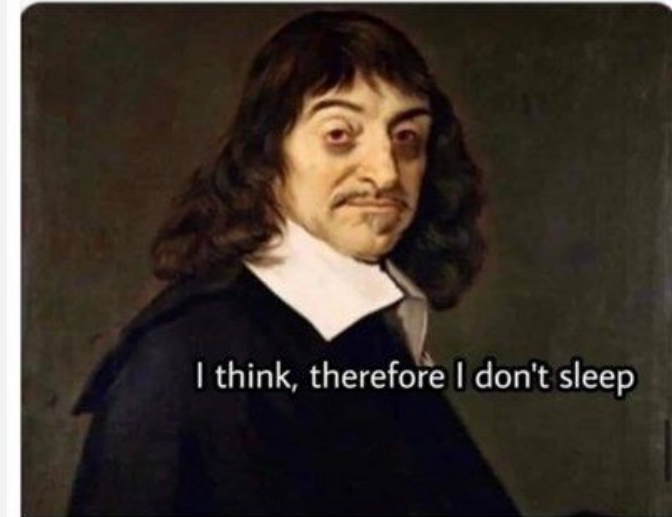
## STRATEGY: FIVE SENSES

- A lot of my adolescent clients hate breathing exercises, especially when they are escalated. They usually respond better to the Five Senses exercise. (This works great for panic attacks too – I use it with my husband, who is usually both grateful and annoyed that he’s been “therapized.” )
- When your child starts feeling escalated ask them to start naming things associated with their senses: What do they see? What do they smell? What do they hear? What do they taste? What do they feel?
- You can guide this for them at first with the goal of teaching them to independently self-regulate in moments when they notice anger/anxiety rising.

## WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE: THOUGHTS

- Attention bias to anxiety.
- Imagine a fire started in the kitchen while you were talking on the phone. You would probably drop the phone and put out the fire, because your brain is prioritizing safety.
- Anxious children may feel like there's a metaphorical fire in the classroom and can't pay attention to anything the teacher is saying because they feel so unsafe. However, there is no way for them to put out the fire, because it's happening in their brain leading to a constant tunnel vision in which they are only able to focus on their own anxious thoughts.

When it's 3am and you're still awake,  
reflecting on your own existence:



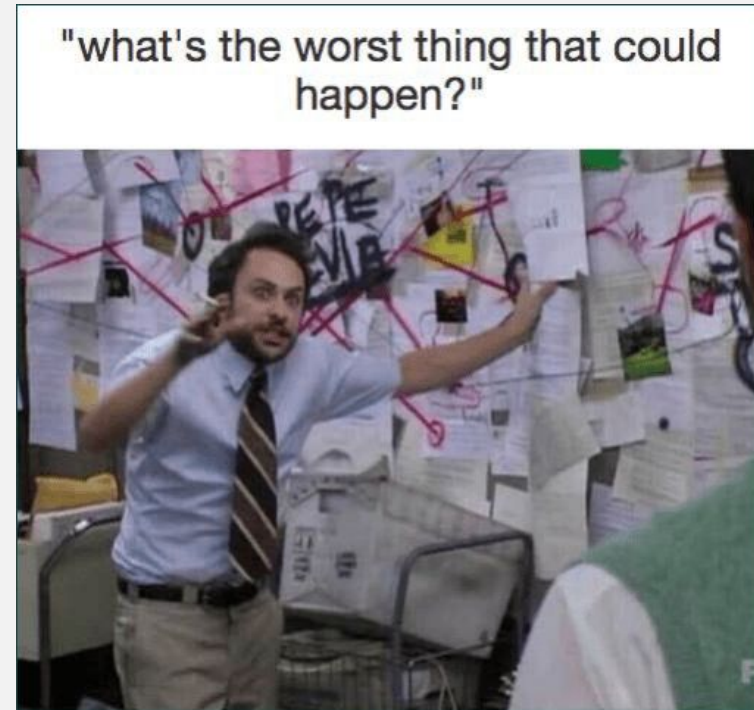
## STRATEGY: COPING THOUGHTS

Help your child to refute their common cognitive distortions, or the negative thoughts that often pop up for them.

- Step 1: Have children identify a negative thought that comes up frequently for them.
  - Example: “I’m going to fail.”
- Step 2: Have children identify a coping thought that contradicts this thought.
  - Example: “It’s okay to make mistakes.”
- Step 3: Have children practice using this coping thought whenever their negative thought pops up.
- When explaining this strategy to clients I often use a sink analogy.

## WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE: BEHAVIOR

- **Avoidance Creep:** If a child has a bad experience with one extracurricular activity, they start to avoid all extracurricular activities. Over time it impacts their ability to function as the child avoids more and more things, the number of places and situations she feels safe will get smaller and smaller.
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares, appetite changes, temper tantrums, fights, oppositional.



## STRATEGY: EXPOSURE LADDER

- Using the exposure worksheet provided on the website (or one you create or find online) have your child rank their anxieties from the situation that gives them the **LEAST** anxiety to the one that gives them the **MOST** anxiety.
- Have your child assign each situation with a rating 1-10 of how much anxiety it causes them thinking about it.
- Starting with the situation the gives them the least anxiety, have them try it and give a rating 1-10 of how much anxiety they felt before and after the situation. Hopefully their rating will go down the more they practice.
- Once they feel comfortable with the lower ranked anxieties, have them work their way up the ladder.

## STRATEGY: EXPOSURE LADDER

Situation	Overall Anxiety Rating (1-10)	Anxiety Rating at the beginning of the event	Anxiety Rating at the end of the event
Raising hand in class	3	5	1
Eating lunch with unfamiliar peers	8	9	3



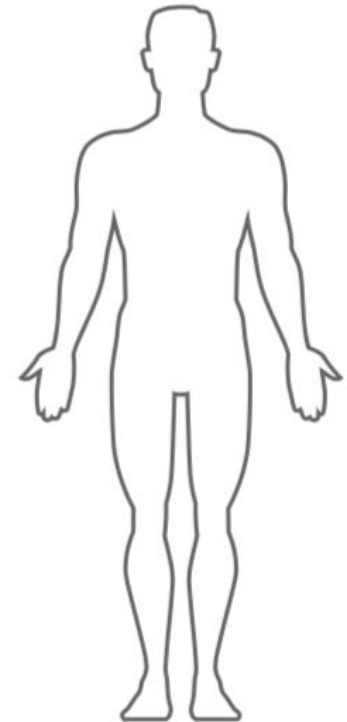
## WHAT DOES ANXIETY LOOK LIKE: FEELINGS

- Anxiety is based in fear and uncontrollable fear is intensely unpleasant.
- Don't overlook the “fight” in fight, flight or freeze. Link between anxiety and anger is very strong.
- Escape Room.



## STRATEGY: RESPONSES, REACTIONS, FEELINGS

- So this guy's a little creepy, but there are ways to make this LESS creepy, I promise.
- Have your child draw a picture of themselves or use an outline if that works better for you.
- Have your child identify by drawing, coloring or writing what happens in their bodies when they feel anxious and stressed.
- Have your child write down what those body reactions make them feel and think.
- Problem solve with your child how to reduce the anxiety in order to reduce the bodily sensations.

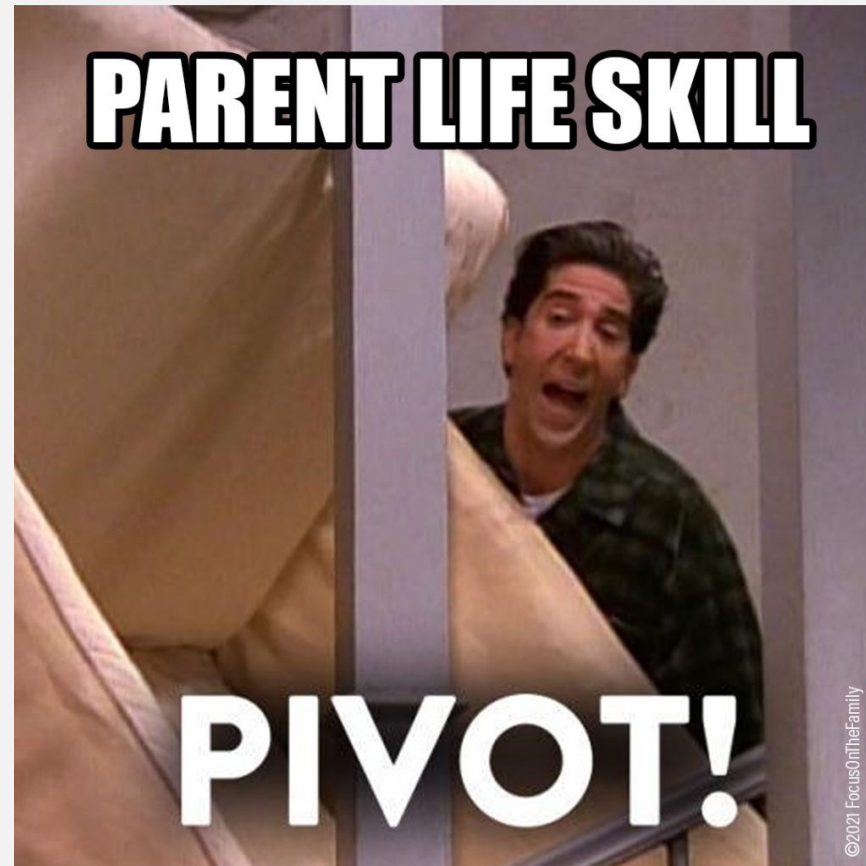


## STRATEGY: BODY SCAN

- Body Scans are mindfulness exercises that can help students feel more connected and aware of what is going on in their bodies. By increasing awareness and noticing trends, students can start to understand and control their somatic symptoms.

<https://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/courses/whole-health-for-pain-and-suffering/Script-Body-Scan.pdf>

## PART II: SPACE TREATMENT



## SPACE TREATMENT

- Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions developed by Dr. Eli Liebowitz at the Yale Child Study Center.
- Systematic treatment approach that has been tested in clinical trials and found effective.
- It focuses entirely on parents and provides them with tools to help children.
- At no point are parents required to pressure their children into doing things they don't want to do. SPACE focuses on parent behavior- it's the only thing you can control.
- We'll focus today on a lot of school-based examples, but SPACE is designed to work with a range of anxious behaviors.

## COMMON PITFALLS IN PARENTING AN ANXIOUS CHILD

### Protective Parenting

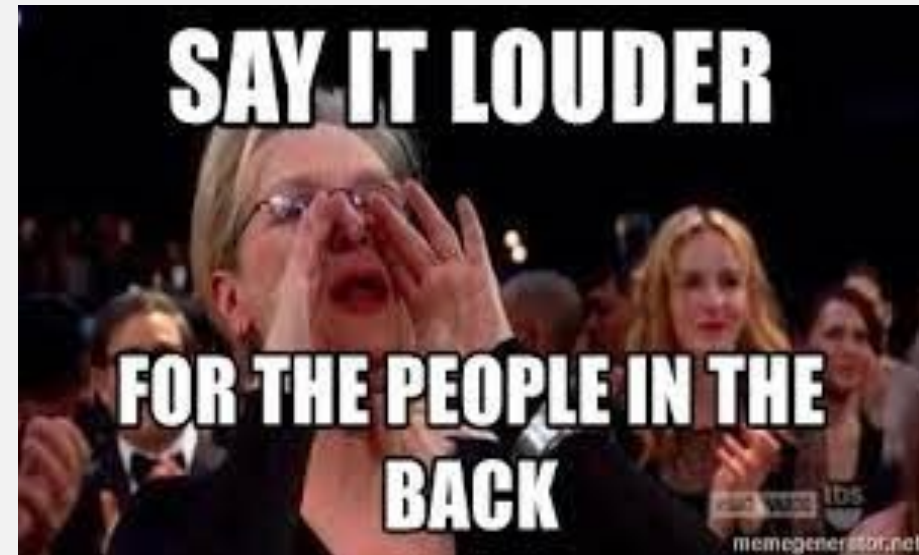
- Taking on the role of protector for our child, when a danger is not present, can convey to your child that she is in need of protection, making her feel less safe and more vulnerable.

### Demanding Parenting

- Demanding is when you expect your child not to feel anxious, or to be able to act as though he is not, despite the very real anxiety that he is feeling. If you are demanding that your child not feel something that he does feel, this demand is not likely to actually change his feeling.

## WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED TO LEARN ABOUT ANXIETY?

- Children can cope with anxiety and it is okay to feel anxious sometimes!





## WHAT ARE ACCOMMODATIONS?

- Family accommodation is the term used to describe the changes that parents make in their own behavior to help their children avoid or lessen feelings of anxiety.
- Allowing your child to stay home and do remote learning on days they are experiencing social anxiety.
- Checking homework several times at night because child is worried it is not perfect.
- Picking your child up from school when they are anxious or have physical symptoms of anxiety.
- Answering multiple anxiety related texts or calls from your child per day.

## HELPFUL VS UNHELPFUL ACCOMMODATIONS

- Some accommodations act as scaffolding, propping children up and helping them grow stronger and more independent.
- However, other accommodations make anxiety worse by making children feel that they are incapable of coping with anxiety on their own.
- Accommodations are helpful when they teach children they are capable of coping with being anxious.
- Questions to ask:
  - Is this accommodation helping your child to gradually cope more?
  - Or is it helping your child to avoid more and more?
  - Is this a step forward or a step backward, relative to how your child has been coping recently?

## EXAMPLES OF UNHELPFUL AND. HELPFUL ACCOMMODATIONS

Situation	Helpful Accommodation	Unhelpful Accommodation
Your child is afraid of messing up at baseball and does not want to go to practice.	You agree to speak to the coach and explain your child's fear to him.	You encourage your child to stay home so he won't feel bad.
Your child wants to be picked up from school because they have a headache due to anxiety.	You encourage your child to take a quick water break with the teacher's permission and stay for the rest of the day.	You pick your child up from school.
Your child wants to stay home from school because they are experiencing social anxiety.	Do a relaxing meditation before school with your child.	Let them stay home.

## WHAT IF NOT ACCOMMODATING MAKES THE ANXIETY WORSE?

- It probably will. But in the long term, your child will eventually realize they are capable of coping with anxiety without the accommodation.
- Children don't feel loved because they get what they want. They feel loved because they get what they need.



## WHAT ACCOMMODATIONS DO YOU USE?

### **Ask yourself:**

- Is this something I do because of my child's anxiety?
- Does my child become more anxious if I don't do it?
- Do I do the same for my other children, or would I do it for another child?
- Do I feel as though I have no choice but to do this? Do most people do this for their children at this age?
- Have I tried to stop it?

## SIX STEP SPACE TREATMENT

1. Create an accommodation map.
2. Practice your supportive statements.
3. Choose which accommodation to reduce.
4. Create your plan.
5. Discuss your plan with your child.
6. Implement your plan.



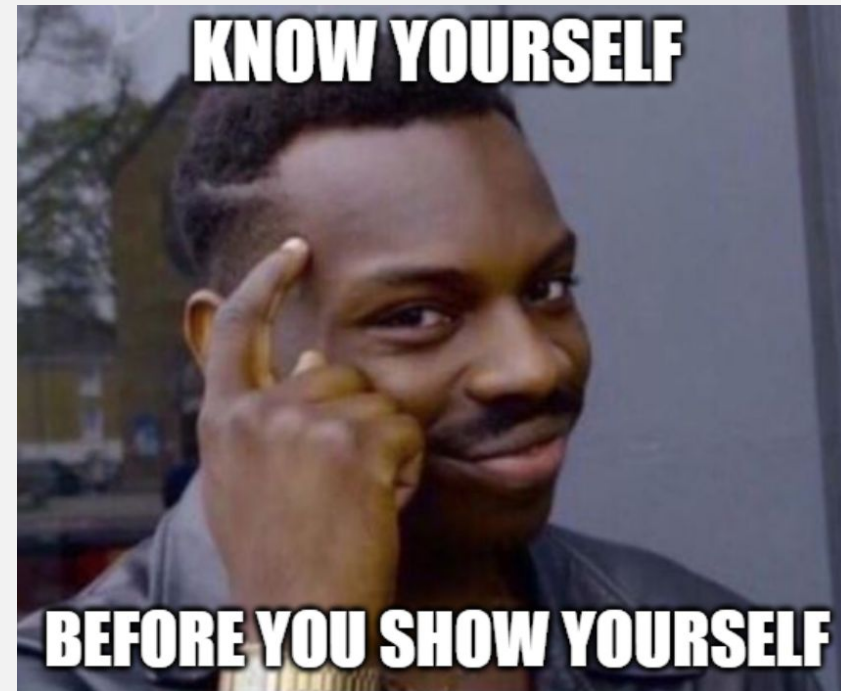
## STEP 1:ACCOMMODATION MAP

Time of Day	What Happens? Who is Involved?	Frequency (Tally)
Morning (Getting up, getting dressed, breakfast, going to school).	Mom waits for social worker to take Reggie to class.	Every Day
Afternoon (lunch, pick up, homework, after school and social activities)	Mom picks Reggie up and makes sure to be first in line of cars.	Every Day
Evening (dinner, family time, pre bedtime)	Mom always lets Reggie know what room she is in.	Every evening
Bedtime (getting ready for bed, bath/shower, going to bed)	Mom or Dad lie in bed with Reggie until she falls asleep.	Every night
Night time	If Reggie wakes up, Dad will sleep in Reggie's bed.	2x a week
Weekend	One parent is always with Reggie, no babysitters	Weekends



## STEP 1: MONITOR YOUR ACCOMMODATIONS

- Once you make your accommodation map, just take a few days or weeks to notice and monitor your accommodations.
- Notice which accommodations you are using most frequently, and which ones are having the most significant negative impact on you or your family's life.



## STEP 2: BEING SUPPORTIVE

- We cannot remove accommodations without increasing support.
- Support allows you an alternative way to respond to your child when he is anxious.
- Acceptance + Confidence = Support
- You are supportive when you respond to your child's anxiety in any way that tells him that you get it, that you understand he is actually anxious and that you don't judge him for it, while always showing him you have complete confidence that he is actually able to cope with some anxiety and that you know he can be okay despite feeling anxious.

## MAKING STATEMENTS MORE SUPPORTIVE

Old Statement	Acceptance	Confidence	New Statement	Acceptance	Confidence
You just have to power through.		X	It's hard, but you have the power to get through.	X	X
I get it, it's not easy for everyone.	X		I get that it's hard, but I'm sure you can cope with hard things!	X	X
You're fine.		X	I know it's really hard now, but you're going to be fine.	X	X
I'll help you now, but next time I won't.	X		I know you feel like you need my help, but I believe in you.	X	X
You've always been a worrier.	X		You feel worried, but it's okay to feel that way.	X	X
You're going to have to learn how to handle things.			Anxiety is uncomfortable, but you can handle it.	X	X

## STEP 2: CREATE SUPPORTIVE STATEMENTS

- Take some time and write a couple of supportive statements using the formula that applies to your child's situation. It's okay to use the same statements on repeat.
- Before you start removing ANY accommodations, start increasing your supportive statements for at least a week or two. (If you are walking your child to their classroom every day, it's okay to continue to do so, just also couple that with a supportive statement. "I know it makes you anxious to go into the building alone, but I believe that you are capable of difficult things!")
- It is not your job to make your child accept your support. How many times have you rejected a compliment? ("OMG, this old thing?!") It is only your job as a parent to OFFER support. I promise it's sinking in, even if they act like it's not.



## STEP 3: PICK ONE ACCOMMODATION TO REDUCE OR STOP

- Choose an accommodation that is frequent, controllable, interfering. Some examples:
  - Parents play “Marco Polo” to let child know where they are in the house. (Separation Anxiety)
  - Parents speak in place of child in various settings. (Social Anxiety)
  - Parents answer repeated questions about the future and reassure child she will be okay. (Generalized Anxiety Disorder)
  - Parents pick child up from school when child is feeling panic symptoms. (Panic disorder)
  - Parents avoid malls and other crowded places. (Panic disorder/ Agoraphobia)

## STEP 4: CREATE A PLAN

- A good plan for reducing accommodation should be as detailed as possible. We'll go over a sample plan and then I'll provide a worksheet to help you create your own.
- Notice in the plan we're going to talk about, we are **ONLY** focused on the parent behavior, there is nothing in there that we are asking or requiring of children.



## SAMPLE PLAN

- Accommodation: Dad often picks up Niki from school before lunch time because Niki complains of stomachaches due to anxiety about school in general, and specifically about sitting with other students during lunch time. As a result Niki is failing many of her classes after lunch.
- Plan:
  1. Dad will not pick Niki up from school early anymore.
  2. Dad will have a meeting with Niki's counselors and the nurse at school to inform them of his plan and create strategies to help Niki cope with physical and mental symptoms of anxiety while still in the school building.
  3. If Niki calls or texts to be picked up during the school day, Dad will encourage Niki to talk to the nurse or counselors to help use her in-school strategies.
  4. If Niki continues to call or text dad, he will reply with one supportive statement ("I understand you are feeling anxious and are uncomfortable right now, but I believe you are capable of coping with this!"). After that Dad will stop responding to calls and texts.
  5. Dad will inform other caregivers of plan, so everyone is on the same page.



## CREATING YOUR PLAN

- What: What is the accommodation you are planning to reduce or stop?
- When: Write down whether you will change the accommodation all the time or only during particular parts of the day. When will you start implementing the plan? (Try to avoid starting your plan near big or new events, like one parent being out of town for a trip.)
- Who: Does the plan involve only you or are other parents or caregivers a part of it?
- How and How much? Do you plan to limit the accommodation to a certain number of times per day or to a specific number of accommodations in each situation? Or are you stopping cold turkey? Either one is fine, just be consistent and think about what makes sense for your family!
- What will you do instead? Offer suggestions for other coping strategies? Make a supportive statement? Remind him that you're not accommodating anymore? Will you leave the room? Will you stay nearby and try to remain calm and composed? How will you stay calm if your child is distressed and angry?
- What will make this hard? Think about the challenges you are likely to encounter. How will this effect your other children?

## STEP 5: DISCUSS YOUR PLAN WITH YOUR CHILD

- Explaining your plan becomes a powerful statement of support! You are going to stop accommodating because you believe your child is capable of coping!
- Describing it to your child makes it more likely you'll stick to it.
- Your child can help modify and improve the plan! Listen to their suggestions, the process can be collaborative.



## WHEN TO TELL YOUR CHILD

- Tell them at a time when they are relaxed and NOT anxious. Driving is often a good time for hard conversations with kids.
- Let your child know when to expect the plan to start taking place, tomorrow? Next week?
- Tell your child why and break down the what when, who, and how of the plan.
- Make a supportive statement.
- Take accountability for the accommodations you've been making.

Welcome to being a parent of a teenager. Prepare for a large amount of eye rolling, emotional outbursts, and thoughts of running away. And that's just the parents.



FACEBOOK.COM/MOTHERHOOD.ORG

## EXAMPLE EXPLANATION

- “Ricardo, I know you are anxious about speaking to your teachers, but I also know you are capable of coping with your anxiety. In the past I’ve been emailing your teachers when you have a question about something, but I don’t think that is helping you become less anxious, so I want to make a change. Starting tomorrow, if you have a question about something in class, I’m going to encourage you to ask your teacher about it or email your teacher yourself - I’m not going to do it for you. I know that this might be hard for you at first, but I have so much confidence in you! I love you and want to support you the best that I can.”

## STEP 6: IMPLEMENT YOUR PLAN

- Pay attention to how your child's responds to your lack of accommodation over time.
- Success does not mean your child is not anxious or upset. Success means YOU did not accommodate and your child got through it.
- Stay supportive!
- Don't argue. The longer you argue or explain yourself, the longer your child thinks they have a chance to change your mind. Explain once and let your child cope independently. Anxiety cannot last forever – what goes up, must come down. It's good if your child has a toolbox of coping strategies they can draw from.
- Praise your child! “I am so proud of you for coping on your own. That was so hard and you did it!” Have a grandparent call and offer praise! Even small prizes or rewards are appropriate!

## WHEN TO SEEK HELP

- Generally, I tell parents that if an anxious behavior or feelings are disrupting some aspect of your child's life: social, academic, activities, eating, or sleeping, it might be time to find a counselor! But I also firmly believe that therapy can help everyone, and should be a required part of adolescence! 😊

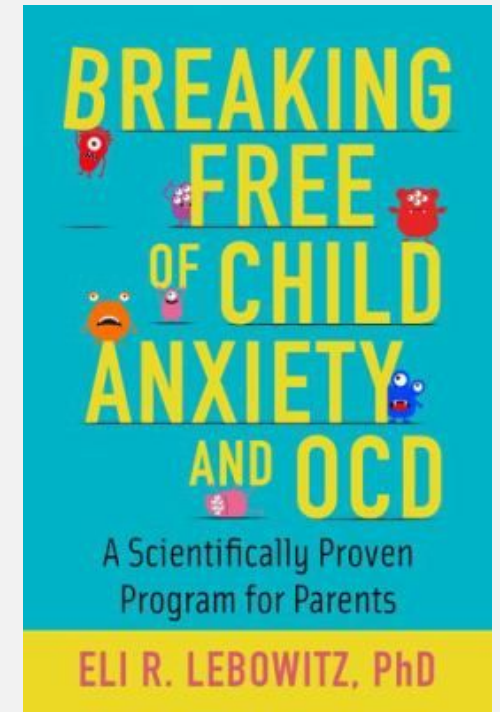
## YOU GOT THIS!

- Remember that you are the mirror your child is looking into to see himself. Show your child a view of himself as strong, capable and loved!



## RESOURCES

- Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD: A Scientifically Proven Program for Parents by Eli R. Lebowitz, PhD
- <https://www.betterworldbooks.com/product/detail/Breaking-Free-of-Child-Anxiety-and-OCD--A-Scientifically-Proven-Program-for-Parents-9780190883522>
- <https://www.spacetreatment.net/>
- Adapted worksheets and other resources can be found on my website:  
[www.wholechildcolorado.org](http://www.wholechildcolorado.org)
  - Hover over “About”
  - Click “SPACE Parent Resources”
  - Password is “Jeffco”





## QUESTIONS?

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