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When to Worry About A Child's Worries And What To Do About Them

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Transforming Children's Lives

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive.

We've become the leading independent nonprofit in children's mental health by providing gold-standard care, delivering educational resources to millions of families each year, training educators in underserved communities, and developing tomorrow's breakthrough treatments. **Together, we truly can transform children's lives.**

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Our Work

Research

We are at the forefront of neuroscience efforts to find objective biological measures of mental illness that will lead to earlier diagnosis, more individualized treatment methods, and new and better interventions.

Clinical Care

We provide world-class clinical care to children struggling with mental health and learning disorders. We have helped thousands of children get the help they need in our offices and in their communities.

Public Education

We equip millions of parents, educators and policymakers with the information they need to end the stigma and misinformation that cause so many children to miss out on life-changing treatment.

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Plan for Today

- The positive aspects of anxiety
- Signs of clinical anxiety and how it may present differently in different children
- Ineffective ways to help children manage their anxiety
- Effective ways for caregivers to help children manage their anxiety
- When and how caregivers can intervene further

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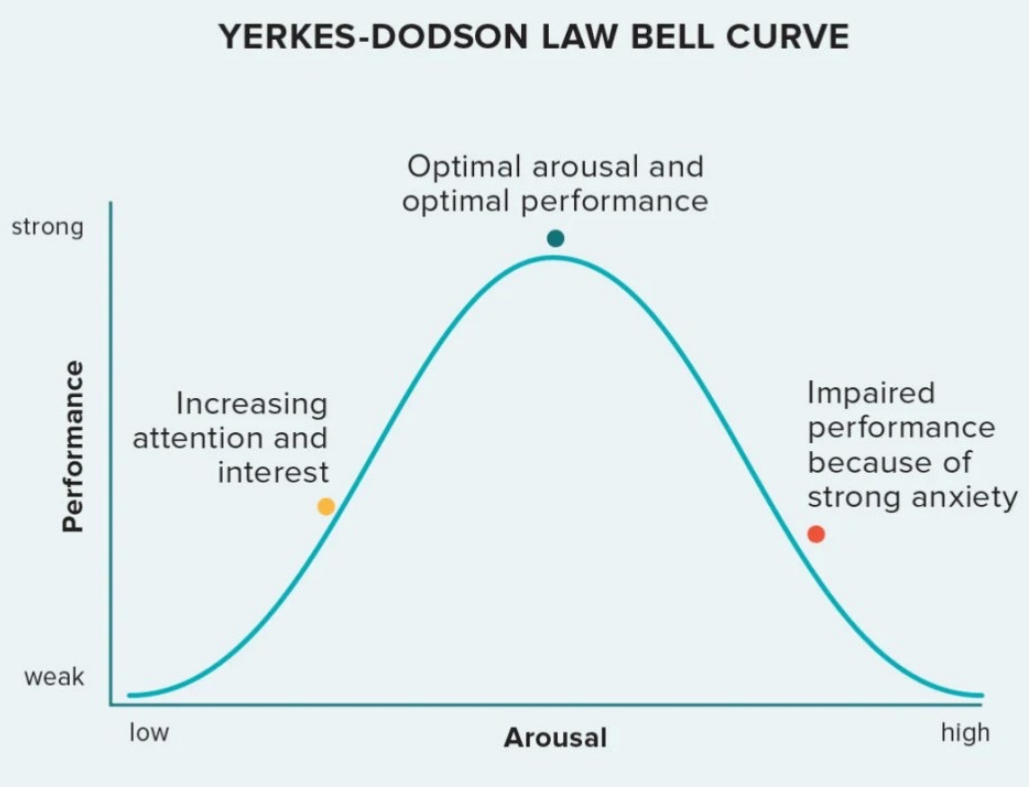
Positive Aspects of Anxiety

- All people exhibit signs of anxiety, and it's not necessarily a bad thing
- Anxiety is a normal and adaptive bodily system that tells us when we are in danger
- Anxiety also motivates us to succeed (think of your high-achievers)
- When is it more of a concern?



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Normal Anxiety vs Problem Anxiety

- Sometimes our bodies warn us about danger that is not real, like a false alarm
- Also, anxiety becomes problematic when it gets in the way of a person's ability to function or live a balanced life
- Consider these factors:
  - **Intensity:** What is the degree of the person's stress?
  - **Duration/Flexibility:** Can the person recover quickly when the source of stress goes away?
  - **Impairment:** Does the stress interfere with the person's daily life?

Different Types of Anxiety Disorders

- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Selective Mutism
- Specific Phobias
- Panic Disorder

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What happens during anxiety?

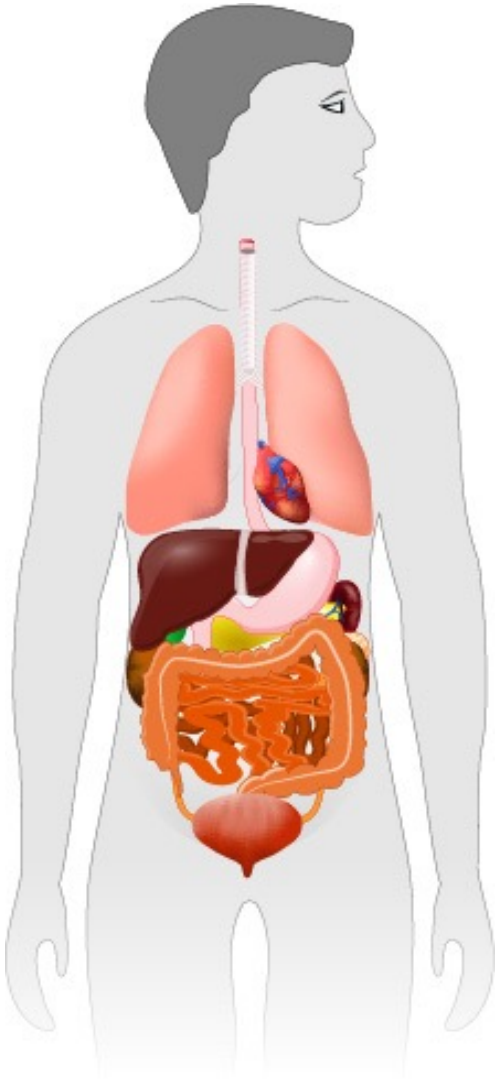
Skin: chills, sweating

Lungs: quick, deep breathing

Heart: beats faster

Stomach: digestive enzyme output decreases

Muscles: tense, may tremble



Eyes: pupils dilate

Saliva: increases

Bowel: food movement slows

Blood vessels: blood pressure increases

Racing thoughts: headaches, mind flooded

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Anxious Reactions

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Fawn

Flop

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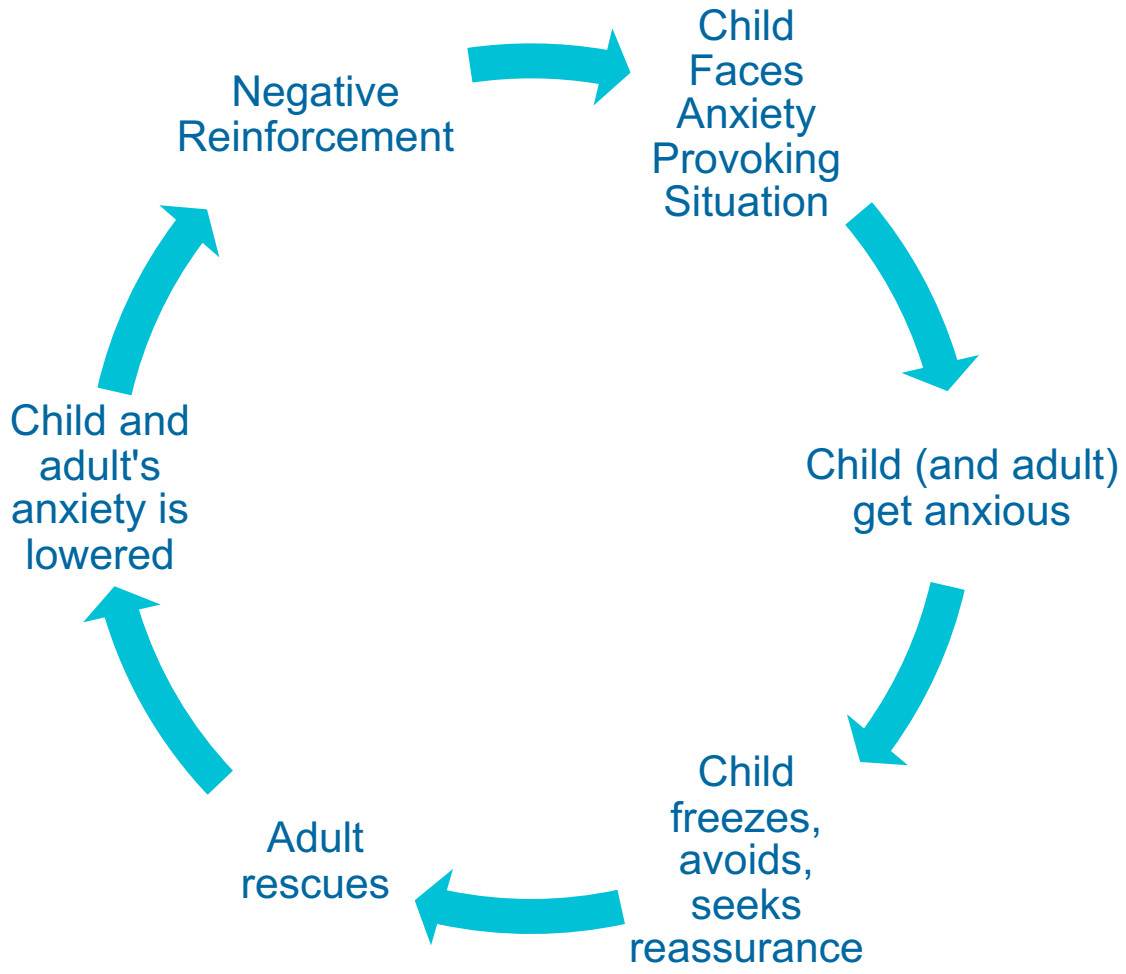
Negative Reinforcement Cycle of Anxiety- Ineffective Ways of Managing Anxiety



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Enabling (Over-Accommodating)

- Caregivers may inadvertently play a role in children's anxiety symptoms by:
  - Participating in a child's anxious behaviors
  - Helping children avoid anxiety-provoking situations altogether
  - Providing reassurance
- Enabling helps children avoid engaging in the activities they fear → Avoidance maintains anxiety in the long-run because kids do not learn that they can cope with their fears

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Accommodating Appropriately

- We don't want to **flood** a child with anxiety by making them face their biggest fear right away, so instead we provide reasonable accommodations for things that are **too hard** for the child right now.
- We gradually **fade out supports** over time.
- Some common accommodations involve:
    - Bathroom
    - Eating
    - Assignments (extended deadlines, ability to use computer)
    - Testing (extended time, private room)
    - Presentations
    - Extra help from teachers
    - Counseling- individual or group
    - Related services (speech therapy, occupational therapy, etc.)

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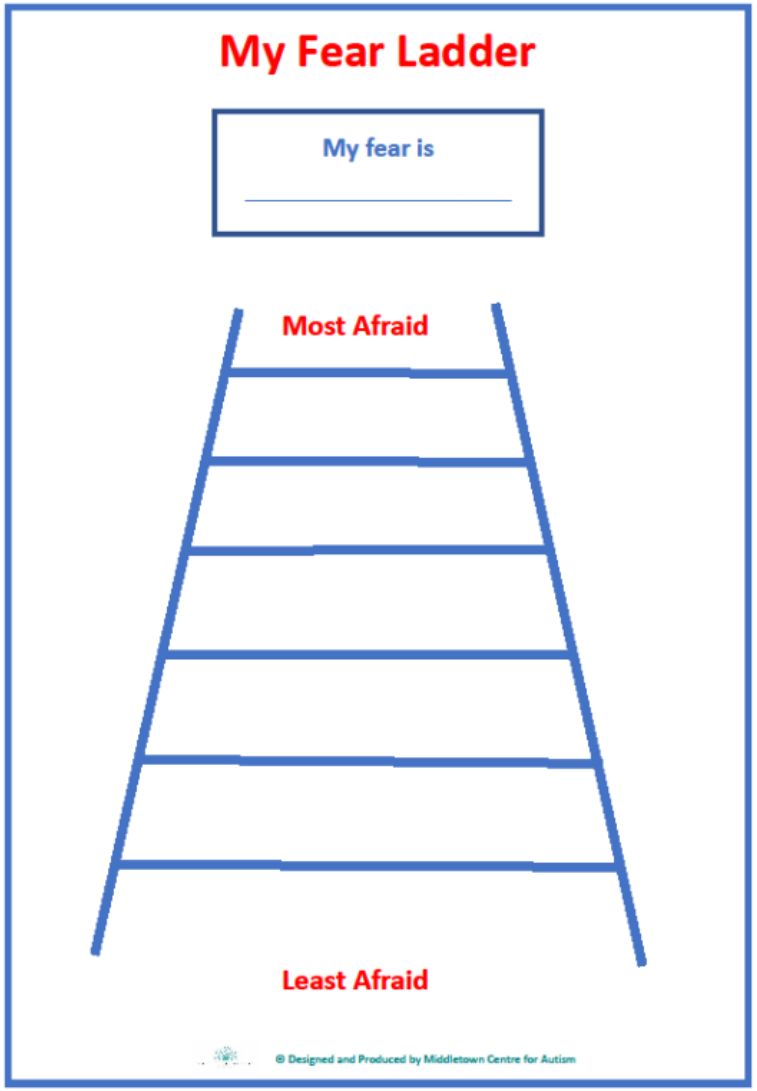

How to effectively break the cycle of anxiety and help children manage their anxiety

- Work with your child's team (child, caregivers, outside treatment team, school psychologist, teachers) to develop goals and a **gradual** plan to help the child **approach** feared situations (called gradual exposures)
- The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it

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Building a child's motivation to push through their anxiety

- First, validate that being a student is hard, and it makes sense that someone may feel anxious given the situation
- Acknowledge that facing fears is hard, and avoidance is much easier
- Then, discuss what's in it for the child? (think long-term goals, strengths, interests)
- Set realistic, long-term goals and small steps to achieve them
- As children work toward completing small steps, we can provide positive reinforcement (labeled praise for *effort, hard work, trying their best, being brave, being kind, being flexible, showing resilience, etc. and/or small rewards)*

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Be Aware of Triggering Setting Events

Somatic	Environmental	Mood-related
• Fatigue	• Unexpected changes in schedule	• Irritability
• Poor nutrition	• Arguments with peers/family	• Frustration
• Medication side effects	• Death anniversaries	• Sadness
• Physical illness	• Long commutes	• Heightened negative emotions

These factors may exacerbate symptoms and make anxiety more difficult to manage. Encourage children (and yourself!) to engage in self-care first.

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Use a child's strengths and interests!

VIA Classification of Character Strengths

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Teach, Model, and Reinforce Coping Skills

- People can use coping skills to help them handle tough situations:
  - Taking a break
  - Distracting with an activity
  - Positive self-talk
  - Bossing back anxiety
  - Mental imagery
  - Deep-breathing
  - Relaxation techniques
  - Progressive muscle relaxation

- Establish coping plans with children to make it easier for them to put their skills to use in the moment: “You have a presentation coming up, which I know can be anxiety-provoking for you. Let’s practice the presentation ahead of time!”
- Positively reinforce anxiety-fighting behaviors:
  - Praise students’ efforts towards approaching difficult situations
  - Create reward systems and establish reasonable consequences
  - Be a cheerleader by encouraging children to take brave guesses and face their fears, such as turning in an assignment that’s “good enough”

Signs Intervention May be Necessary

- Chronic physical health symptoms
- Jitteriness (shaking leg, fidgety, nail picking)
- School refusal/multiple absences
- Excessive reassurance seeking
- Avoidance of various activities
- Unable to do their job or function as a child
- Unable to live a balanced life
- Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities
- Concerning comments (i.e., suicidal ideation, burn-out)
- Lots of time spent at home or on technological devices
- Isolation/loss of social connection
- Sudden reduction in grades
- Extreme oppositionality/irritability

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Tips for Intervening

- Notify your child's support team if you have any concerns about your child (teachers, school psychologist, administrators, outside treatment team)
- Stay calm
  - Approach child in a non-judgmental way, ask questions, and listen to them
- Avoid making assumptions
  - Ask your child about what's going on from his/her perspective
- Normalize challenging situations that come up often as a child
- Encourage self-care, gradual exposures, social support, and professional help when needed

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Summer Exposures

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Thank you!

Questions?

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References

Strategies in this presentation are drawn from evidence-based interventions and resources, including:

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