



Advanced Behavioral Solutions presents:

Normalizing Emotions for an Abnormal Year: Supporting Childhood Anxiety and Depression

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Defining Anxiety and Depression

- ▶ A persistent pattern of emotion and symptoms that disrupts daily functioning
- ▶ Negatively affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act

Anxiety – A feeling that is a natural response to stress, but an Anxiety Disorder is when the brain and body respond in an exaggerated way to stress (real or perceived)

Depression – A persistent change in mood that is typically characterized by sadness and/or hopelessness that effects a person's daily functioning

What it really looks like

Anxiety

- ▶ Crying/clinging to caregivers
- ▶ Refusal behaviors
- ▶ Restlessness/Agitation
- ▶ Worries/Fears
- ▶ Meltdowns
- ▶ Attempting to be in control
- ▶ Reassurance seeking
- ▶ Sleep difficulties/somatic complaints
- ▶ Racing thoughts
- ▶ Getting stuck in thoughts (not moving on)

Depression

- ▶ Lack of interest
- ▶ Excessive sleep
- ▶ Decreased motivation
- ▶ Irritability (especially in children/teens)
- ▶ Withdrawing from friends/loved ones
- ▶ Not enjoying things they used to
- ▶ Uncharacteristic conflict
- ▶ Most common mental health disorder
- ▶ Decrease in basic daily hygiene/self-care
- ▶ Change in grades – or not

Worsening Factors in Anxiety and Depression

- ▶ Transitions
- ▶ Unexpected changes
- ▶ External pressure/stressors
- ▶ Internal pressure to keep up appearances, to “look okay”
- ▶ Lack of social support
- ▶ Health issues
- ▶ Concerns about safety (covid, violence, etc.)
- ▶ Changes in seasons

Worsening Factors (cont'd)

- ▶ A normal year can bring enough external stressors to worsen symptoms for some – but this year has brought up many more – the volume has been turned up to 100 on this (FOR EVERYONE)
- ▶ Mental health struggles have increased substantially over the last year
- ▶ For a child/teen, this impact has been even more significant – they don't have the experience, skills, etc. to comprehend and cope with the changes happening in the world

What Parents Can Do

General Strategies

- ▶ Provide structure
 - ▶ A routine and expectations are helpful, as long as they are realistic
- ▶ Pre-teaching
 - ▶ Anxiety and Depression limit mental capacity, so going over expectations, new situations, or simply what to expect ahead of time can greatly improve a child's functioning when they are dealing with emotional distress
- ▶ Consider Sensory/Emotional Overload
- ▶ Consider social needs (more or less social interaction)

General Strategies

- ▶ Behavioral Activation
 - ▶ Get them up and around, daily hygiene practices, exercise, engaging their minds
 - ▶ If this does not seem to be working, then start with smaller tasks and build up
- ▶ Having open communication
- ▶ Informing other family members as appropriate/helpful
 - ▶ Not over-informing or sharing without your child's consent
- ▶ Establishing/upholding boundaries for your child's well-being

Pandemic Impact

We have all seen how the pandemic has impacted kids, and all of the ways they have had to adult unexpectedly, but...

- ▶ Anxiety has been amplified by COVID
 - ▶ Will I get it? Will a loved one get it? Why do some people wear a mask and some don't? Why can't I spend time with my friends all the time?
- ▶ Depression has also been amplified by COVID
 - ▶ Decreased access to social supports (feeling isolated), limited energy/productivity, not able to do the things we use to do, not being as productive

Pandemic Impact

This (*still*) isn't over – We don't know what is going to come and how long some of these changes might last

- ▶ Do not make reassurances that are out of your control!
 - ▶ Everything will be back to normal soon... (we as adults cannot guarantee that)
 - ▶ It's okay (and HEALTHY) to say "I don't know" – it's honest and teaches children that we can't always predict for what is to come and models that we can still handle unexpected things

Supporting through the Holidays

- ▶ Many kids are out of practice since, for many, it has been a long time since large family gatherings have been different
 - ▶ Holidays used to be pretty predictable, but now they may not be
- ▶ For a child with Anxiety or Depression, these situations can...
 - ▶ Be uncomfortable/Feel new or different
 - ▶ Worsen symptoms

For some, it isn't unexpected that they may not want to participate in the same way that they used to if their Anxiety is increased by the plans or if Depression has decreased their motivation or they are exhausted by social situations

Supporting through the Holidays

How to deal with family/friends who don't understand

- ▶ Coaching others on how to interact, what the boundaries are, etc.
- ▶ Coaching/Preparing your child for – questions, behaviors, establishing what their boundaries are, etc.
 - ▶ Helping your child to manage their expectations is important – learn what they expect and help them prepare for the unexpected
- ▶ Limit their exposure to controversy/debates about the state of things:
 - ▶ what is right/wrong with covid
 - ▶ discussion for and against mandates
 - ▶ politics
- ▶ Limit their exposure to “known chaos” within the family
 - ▶ The goal is to not add unnecessary stressors

Let's rally around our children!

- ▶ Offer a balance of support and expectations
- ▶ Be a source of comfort
- ▶ Help them to cope
- ▶ Give them a space to discuss how they're feeling
 - ▶ Remember – We all need to vent before we are ready to hear suggestions!

When these strategies are not helping, seek out professional help

- ▶ DO NOT wait until it gets worse!

Seeking out extra help

Build a support team for you and your child

- ▶ Professional support
 - ▶ Psychotherapy/counseling (Individual and Group)
 - ▶ Psychiatry (medication)
 - ▶ Be prepared that this will take time and effort – mental health struggles are on the rise and many therapists have limited openings
 - ▶ DO NOT WAIT UNTIL IT'S A CRISIS – THE HUNT WILL TAKE TOO LONG
- ▶ School support
 - ▶ Anxiety and Depression that is impacting a student's success can qualify them for formal accommodations (Section 504 Plan or IEP)
- ▶ Family/Friend support

***Communication should be open amongst all people supporting your child**