

# Living with Anxiety:

Helping Anxious Clients, their Partners  
and Families to Survive and Thrive in  
the Face of Anxiety

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# Anxious Clients Are Not Alone

- People suffering anxiety are suffering! And so are their partners, families and friends
- When working with anxious people, learn about their relationships with partners, family members (e.g., parents, siblings and children) or friends
- There will be a dynamic element to treatment based on how the system will change

# Listen for Push Back Against Using Psychotherapy for Initiating Change

## Subtle messages such as

- You have time to work this out
- I can help with that
- Wait and see – try this app first and see how it goes.

# Overt Messages

“That therapist expects a lot of you.”

“This has never worked before.”

“Shouldn’t you just try meds?”

“This is really expensive. How long will it take?”

# Listening to the Impact of Anxiety On The Others Living with The Anxious Person

- A therapeutic task is learning how others are affected by your client's anxiety (Or if they are your client talking about a family member's anxiety)
- Sort out anger first
- Listen for control issues
- Listen for motivation to let things be different

# Active Listening – Necessary Skill for All

- Learn to listen to the whole sentence
- Before responding with one's own opinion (reassurance, argument) repeat what was said. Paraphrase is okay if it was long, but don't change the statement as a way of demonstrating a better thought.
- When the speaker agrees – “Yes, I said that” – then offer a reply to the exact point
- Check if the speaker can repeat the reply before moving on
- Speakers need practice and to get the feeling of repeating is not agreeing – normally that takes a bit of time to fully understand

# Helping without Taking Over

- When others learn what anxiety management tools can and cannot do for their anxious loved one it will benefit your client
- Start with breaking into the temptation to offer reassurance that eases anxiety.
- Teach family/friends how to give the ‘right reassurance’, i.e., “You can handle anxiety.”

# Skills for Family/Friends

- Teach about how anxiety affects a person – it will increase others' ability to stay calm and patient
  - Offer the concept of loving 'detachment' from the outcome, i.e., family is not responsible for the anxiety a loved one feels.
  - They are not responsible to control or change it
  - Educate about therapy and how it helps
- If others are not in therapy with your anxious client, help the client inform family/friends about helpful responses to the anxiety



# Some Anxiety Is Hard for Families to Handle

- Family and friends may be more challenged to deal with some kinds of anxiety because it has such an impact on them and not just on the anxious one
- Safety concerns
- Health anxiety
- Social anxiety

# Safety Anxiety: Germs, Money, Behavior: Help the Family Listen and Respond

- Active listening: Hear the fear, acknowledge they heard it, and demonstrate they understand what the anxious person is worried about
- Family then may describe briefly what they agree with and what they reasonably will (or will not) do - the anxiety can't "run the show"
- Explain they will take responsibility for the outcome of their actions, and then follow through with the more reasonable behavior

# Exploring Possible Underlying Contributions to Health Anxiety

- May need to discuss the 'why' in treatment as it could be
  - Remembering traumatic experience
  - Focused on family history
  - Fear of death
  - Fear of being without resources

# Health Anxiety

- Is this about a current, diagnosed concern? It might be necessary to get collateral information to deal with realistic concerns. What do others know about this?
- What if I get sick? (e.g., COVID, or heart like a parent)
- Health worries are typical of generalized anxiety, not necessarily hypochondriasis
- Does the family need to be involved (to help the client relieve anxiety or to decrease their own over-involvement)?

# Health Anxiety without Medical Dx

- Have client notice: When one worry is relieved does another emerge? Be alert to worries in 'themes' (e.g., STD's, virus, heart, cancer, etc.)
- That helps them to treat health worries as anxiety disorder, not a medical health problem
- Separate 'possible' from 'probable' for any situation
- Shift to awareness of coping skills if illness occurs

# Specific Responses to ‘Potential’ Health Issue

- Separate caution from worry/obsessive self-observation (“If I have a problem, I won’t fail to notice it”) (No Internet Searches!!)
- Identify and plan for *appropriate* health observation – consult a physician if symptoms are present
- Do not seek *reassurance* rely on health monitoring apps and devices for daily.
- Avoid making a non-MD directed decision to monitor, e.g., take BP every 15 minutes or use daily blood sugar test kits when no evidence of diabetes

# Health Anxiety with Medical Basis

## Worry Well and Only Once Technique

Clarify the actual worry. Is there a legitimate health issue, “I am sick.” Or potential, as whether a cancer may recur, or waiting on test results?

- If so, set up the steps that person can do to follow through with appropriate care.
- List every, single aspect of worry and keep at it until it is all on the table.
- Identify whether information from others will be needed

# Finishing “Worry Well and Only Once”

- Decide whether you have enough information. If so, you are done worrying well.
- Then: Decide “When do I need to worry about this?”
- Then, between now and that date, when the anxiety arises, DO NOT rehearse all the reasons not to worry. Simply say “Stop! On this date \_\_\_\_\_ I will think about it!” and then distract or stop and swap.



# The 'Hook' for Families in Health Anxiety

- The need seems real, and compassion makes it hard to redirect discussion to anxiety management while not discussing the health itself. It may feel callous to others.
- Don't engage in replanning the plan; If Worry Well technique has not been used utilize worry management strategies. ('Stop and Swap', distraction, Invite the Worry and so on.)
- Family member reminds "There's a plan," without re-engaging in reviewing the plan

# Social Anxiety Affects Adult Relationships

- Learn how the partner/family is affected.
- Help clients weigh impact of anxiety on family life. They are often unaware/uninsightful about their impact
- Identify individual social needs from family social needs, e.g., attending a school play or parent/teacher conference has different implications than attending a neighborhood BBQ
- Start with one social change - usually that which is most likely to improve the family relationship

# Social Anxiety in Adult Settings

- Ask about how the anxious person is managing anxiety in social settings – are drugs or alcohol involved?
- How does the family react to that?
- Pressure to make the family happy will not reduce social anxiety – help the family members to differentiate between desire to please and ability to participate.
- Social exposure can be done with family participation: setting time limits, frequency limits, smaller exposures and evaluating outcomes

# Social Anxiety Exposures for Children

Help parents understand the key components of exposure and sort out their own frustrations before beginning. (E.g., a parent who alternates between anger and compassion confuses the child)

- Keep motivations and benefits for participation simple and clear
- Help parents scale down expectations – no overwhelming “deep end of the pool” experiences work.
- Plan graduated exposures for school or social settings

# Impact of Parental Anxiety

- Parents teach children how to think with trepidation about the world, other people, their own choices
- Help parents see the impact of their message : the child is in danger, incompetent, the world is dangerous, don't trust, etc.
- Parental anxiety can undermine a child's confidence and make the child feel incompetent to handle a situation, calm herself, find a new solution to a situation on her own, etc.

# The Impact of Parental Modeling of Anxiety – Help the Anxious Parent

- Help anxious parent learn to calm down and recognize controlling behavior. Teach active listening.
- Check: Is there a trusted friend/family member willing to listen to the concerns (so the parent won't express it to a child)
- Discuss why and teach the anxious parent to allow the non-anxious parent to make decisions (after listening to fears)

# Help the Partner/Friend of An Anxious Parent

- Anxiety is real but irrational. Help family members realize that the anxious parent's worries may exist in the absence of any reality-based threat
- Reassurance won't relieve it. Use active listening, again with focus on understanding a concern is different than agreeing it is relevant.
- Goal is not to argue with anxiety.
- Detachment means compassion for anxiety and remembering it is the responsibility of the anxious one to handle anxiety

# Parenting Disagreement about a Child's Anxiety

- Hearing the concern when one parent is anxious about children and imposes restrictions that seem unreasonable to the other
- Getting agreement between parents when an anxious child disrupts the family, e.g., bedtimes, restaurant meals
- Identify mutual parental goals so the anxious parent is agreeing on reasonable expectations even if not, at first, agreeing on how to achieve them
- What family rules are affected? – e.g., leaving the table, using devices for distraction – and how will other children be affected



# Anxiety Can Exhaust Friendship

Reassurance-seeking from a friend wears on friendship.

- Help anxious clients develop insight into the impact of their anxiety because friends are unlikely to tell them
- Help clients prepare for helpful conversations: Identify the goal of the conversation, e.g., “I need to decide if I should stay home sick,” or “I need to let go of my fear that my lover is leaving me,” or “I am afraid of scheduling that trip because I don’t know if I will be comfortable with the group who will be on it.”

# Friendship Skills for Anxious People

- Set a time limit on the conversation and schedule a second one if needed
- Identify 'take-aways' briefly
- Provide feedback, with a thank-you, to a friend - **later** - about how the conversation helped (keep it brief – do not re-discuss the problem)
- Make an effort to contact friends without discussing yourself