

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