Best Practices for Anxious Children and Teens

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The Anxious Child

- What we see...
  - Behavioral changes
  - Emotional dysregulation
  - Changes in academic performance
  - Peer and social difficulties
  - Medical and health complaints
  - Poor school performance
  - School refusal

- What they feel...
  - Hypersensitivity to criticism
  - Self-doubt and anticipated rejection
  - Misreading social and environmental cues
  - Somatic symptoms
  - Avoidance
  - Predicting poor outcomes
  - “Stuck” on past and future worries
Common Diagnoses

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Social Phobia
- Selective Mutism
CBT for Anxiety Disorders

- Psychoeducation
  - What is anxiety and why do I have it?
- Identify physical symptoms of anxiety
  - How it feels to be afraid
- Focus on the cognitions associated with anxiety
  - Expecting bad things to happen
- Coach children on the use of coping strategies
  - Attitudes and actions that can help
  - Living with anxiety
- Reinforcement
  - Rewarding engagement in activities that elicit anxiety
  - Offering praise
Provide Understanding

- Help the child develop a basic understanding of what anxiety is
  - Psychoeducation - What is anxiety? Does everyone feel this way? Why do people feel anxious in the first place?
  - Somatic Symptoms - The physical manifestation of anxiety
- Help parents understand what their child is experiencing
  - Education regarding cognitive and behavioral aspects of anxiety
  - What are somatic symptoms?
  - How to support an anxious child
    - The balance of validation with push for change
Identifying Physical Symptoms

- What changes in your body when you are feeling frightened?
  - Heart racing
  - Sweating
  - Shaking
  - Thoughts racing
  - Cold sweat
  - Tense muscles
  - Tunnel vision
  - Dizziness

- Panic attacks
- Sympathetic nervous system activation
  - Fight or Flight Response
- Somatic Complaints
  - Headaches
  - Stomach aches
  - Muscle tension
  - Chest pain
  - Trouble breathing
Relevant Coping Strategies

- Mindfulness and meditation
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Guided Imagery
- Grounding Strategies
- TIPP Skill
- Breathing Awareness
- Belly Breathing (Deep Breathing)
Identifying Worry Thoughts

- Be creative!
- Thought tracking tools
- Suggest possibilities
  - Use of self
  - Other children I work with...
- Discussion of thought distortions
- Use of humor
- Identifying worst-case scenario
- In-vivo assessment

**CATASTROPHIZING**

What if things aren't as bad as I make them out to be?
Challenging Worry Thoughts

- Evaluating the Evidence
  - What evidence supports that thought?
  - What evidence refutes that thought?
  - Are there alternative explanations?
  - Is it possible that the problem seems bigger than it is?

- Identifying distortions

- Reality Checking

- Experimentation
Building Problem Solving Skills

- Typically deficits in problem solving skills leads to feelings of helplessness and incompetence.
- Teach a method for dealing with the worst case scenario:
  - Identify the problem
  - Identify your goal
  - Generate possible solutions
  - Evaluate pros and cons of those solutions
  - Select your course of action
  - Evaluate outcome
Graduated Exposures

- Identify situations that elicit anxiety
  - This is typically easier for those with Social Anxiety, Specific Phobias, and Panic Disorder
    - Sometimes challenging for Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Identify the overarching fear(s)
  - What is the big fear?
  - Fear of public embarrassment
    - Triggering situations: Talking in class, calling to make an appointment, ordering food at a restaurant, introducing yourself to someone new
  - Fear of losing a loved one
    - Triggering situations: Sleeping away from home, going to school, loved one going on a trip, not being able to call the loved one, loved one going to a doctor’s appointment
Getting Buy-In

- Psychoeducation regarding the cycle of avoidance
  - For older teens, discuss the distress intolerance model
  - For children help them identify how avoidance has made their anxiety worse
- Identifying times that they have unknowingly used an exposure technique
  - For example - their first appointment with you, their first day at school, sitting in your waiting room, etc.
- What is their life worth living? Do current patterns help them achieve those goals?
- Willingness versus Willfulness
Building a Fear Hierarchy

- Organize situations that elicit anxiety under the umbrella of the overarching fear
- Collaboratively generate hierarchy of those situations
  - Have the child rate each situation - (1-10, how anxious does it make you to think about...)
  - Then organize those situations from least anxiety provoking to most
- Ideally the hierarchy should begin with something anxiety provoking but achievable - build up some victories to start
- Don’t overload the child, ideally 4-5 situations
- Should hope to “over-expose”
Constructing Exposures

- Start very small and continue to work up the scale
  - Evaluate each exposure afterwards (SUDS ratings)
- In-Vivo Exposures versus Imaginal Exposure
- Exposure ideas:
  - Separation Anxiety - Having mom sit outside the door, parents sitting in the waiting room, parents waiting outside of the building, parents dropping child off and leaving
  - Generalized Anxiety - Practice doodling, drawing in the dark, asking a teacher to clarify instructions, asking a friend for help on an assignment
  - Panic Attacks - Exposure to physical symptoms (increased heart rate, feeling warm/cold, feeling dizzy)
  - Social Phobia - Talking to someone new, approaching a group of people, calling someone on the phone, calling to schedule an appointment, raising hand in class, giving a presentation, ordering food at a restaurant, asking for directions
  - Selective Mutism - Nonverbal communication, tandem play, single word responses, answering/asking questions, talking to peers
How much do we involve the family?

- Anxiety disorders are often heritable - it is likely that others in the family have anxiety disorders
- Does the family system perpetuate the child’s anxiety and behavioral avoidance patterns?

Provide psychoeducation to help the family support the child in treatment

- Assistance with exposures out of session
- Skills coaching
- Discussion of available treatment options
- How to identify and disrupt avoidance patterns
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References