What Keeps Our Kids Up At Night

Cynthia Baca RN MSN
Holly Harmon LCSW
STAR Clinic
What are they up against?

- **Stressors at Home**
  - Parental conflict
  - Sibling rivalry/bullying
  - Financial stressors
  - Drugs and alcohol
  - Parent legal issues

- **Environmental Stressors**
  - Violence in neighborhood
  - Natural disasters
  - Political unrest (North Korea’s threats to the US)

- **Stressors at School**
  - Bullying~ cyber, physical, social
  - Violence
  - Peer pressure
  - Budget Cuts
  - Student exploitation by teachers
  - Academics/standardized testing
What do you notice at school?

- Behavioral
- Emotional
- Academic
- Peer and Social
- Medical and Health
How do you know if this is a normal reaction to stress?

- Level of Impairment
- Duration of Impairment
- Severity of Impairment
- Self Reports of Distress
Generalized Anxiety

- Somatic complaints
- Upset over changes
- Reassurance seeking
- Easily tearful
- Always on alert
- Difficulty concentrating

- Rigid
- Worried about rules and guidelines
- The what ifs??
Separation Anxiety

- Increased need to be with parents
- Somatic complaints
- School refusal
- Tearfulness during downtime
- Difficulties in the morning
- Wanting to call/contact parents
- Increased reluctance to go on field trips
Social Phobia

- Changes?
  - Somatic complaints
  - Won’t raise hand in class
  - Important to fit in completely
  - Shyness out of proportion

- Watchful of other kids, but may not join
- Few friends
- Avoidance
- Difficulty in lunch, gym class, more socially oriented activities
Panic Disorder

- Random vs. cued
- Increasing avoidance
- Abruptly leaving class or needing to leave urgently
- Looking acutely uncomfortable
- Specific somatic symptoms - rapid breathing, increased heart rate, shakiness, confusion, foggy thinking
- Acute fear of imminent danger
The symptoms may or may not show up in school
- If school is a trigger, symptoms are marked and severe
- Hyper vigilance, startle response
- Difficulty focusing and concentrating
- Avoidance of stimuli
School Refusal ???

- Where does school refusal fit in?
  - Actually not a diagnosis, but an indicator of other issues
    - Family issues
    - Conduct disorders/truancy/drug and alcohol
    - Learning Disorders
    - Can be anxiety
What can school staff do?
Provide Understanding

• Help child develop a basic understanding of anxiety
  • Basic psycho education – what anxiety is, why we get it, how they can work through it
  • Connect the stressors to increased anxiety
  • Understanding that somatic complaints can be an outward sign of anxiety – isn’t necessarily “just in his/her head”
How to help them identify worried thoughts

- Talk about the recent stressors
- Be creative
- Suggest possibilities
- Other children have tried to...
- Multiple choice
- Use of humor
- Positive outlook
Basic Techniques

- Modeling – showing students how you might handle a similar situation
- Tag along – set up the problem and work through it together
- Use of self – anxiety is universal, allow them to see it around them
Typically see deficits in problem solving skills

Teach a method:
- Identify the problem
- Generate possible approaches
- Evaluate possible outcomes
- Test one out
“Coping Scenario”

- Variations
  - The worst happens and you get through it
  - It goes well and you get through it
  - Neutral outcome
- Helpful techniques
  - Coping questions
  - Alternate possibilities
  - Looking for evidence
  - Plan to tolerate physical symptoms
Family

- How much to involve the family?
- Likelihood of anxiety disorders in the family…
- Is the family facilitating the child’s anxiety?
- Psycho education for the family
- Treatment options
- The problems with facilitating avoidance
What can the family do to help?

- Separate fact from fiction
- Give support
- Be a coach
- Use resources and encourage the kids to use their own resources
- Check in with kids and schools intermittently
In Crisis

- Speak softly and slowly
  - Short, simple sentences
- Maintain distance
- Offer choices
- Keep it simple
- Basic skills – breathing, focus, calm
- Allow time – delay sense of urgency
Questions?

- STAR Clinic
  - Cynthia Baca RN MSN
  - 412-246-5259
  - Bacaca@upmc.edu
We acknowledge with gratitude the Pennsylvania Legislature for its support of the STAR-Center and our outreach efforts.

This presentation may not be reproduced without written permission from: STAR-Center Outreach, Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, 3811 O’Hara Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15213 (412)864-3346

All rights reserved, 2013