

Welcome

Metropolitan Psychological Associates, P.C., is a mental health family practice in Livingston County, serving children, adolescents, adults, couples and families. We are excited about this opportunity to provide mental health information to the local community in a newsletter format,

Our goal in preparing these bulletins will be to educate the community with up-to-date, useful information on mental health issues and to provide resources that will assist youths, adults and families in managing their daily lives. We hope our readers will find this newsletter interesting and informative.

Please visit Metropolitan Psychological Associates, P.C., at our website. If you would like to learn about specific mental health concerns, we would like to hear from you. Please drop us a line and we will address your suggestions. Additionally, if you have any questions regarding the topics discussed, please feel free to contact us.

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The Basics of Childhood Anxiety

Childhood is supposed to be a carefree time when the only concerns may be how soon the child will be able to have his/her next enjoyable experience. For many children, however, carefree time is being reduced and replaced with increasing worries and concerns. Today's children are exhibiting more anxiety symptoms than previous generations, including stomachaches, headaches, trouble falling asleep, poor concentration, clinginess to caregivers, nightmares, sadness, emotional outbursts, and refusal to attend school. In fact, anxiety is one of the primary mental health problems facing young people today. All children have fears, such as being afraid of the dark, thunderstorms, etc., but when does a common or developmentally appropriate worry/fear become problematic enough to seek professional help? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand childhood anxiety and its signs and symptoms.

Anxiety can take many forms but it is basically the fear that something bad is going to happen. This fear is present in all of us—children, teenagers, and adults. Fear is not necessarily bad; in fact, fear can alert us to potentially harmful situations. Although fear can be a protective factor, too much fear can create a highly cautious state in which an individual gets “stuck” in thinking about possible negative outcomes in a given situation. Moreover, this constant state of worry can create a propensity for believing there is danger present, when in fact there is no danger. Consequently a person can develop disproportionately anxious and worrisome thoughts. For example, they may become focused on the “shoulds” and “what ifs” or associated behaviors, which become difficult to stop thinking about.

It is important to understand that anxiety can have different faces and behaviors. Some children and adolescents can appear visibly distressed while others worry in silence. Some may appear frequently angry and/or frustrated. Those children who do not appear “typical” or “obvious” in their anxious presentation (e.g., outwardly expressing worries) are at greater risk of going unnoticed. To parents, teachers and friends, anxious children may look fine much of the time.

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Anxious kids tend to be conscientious, responsible, and careful how they handle a situation. They are perceived as competent, model children or students; very well mannered and perhaps straight “A” students. This presentation can cause these children to go unnoticed because their symptoms are generally not disruptive to others. Underneath this façade of collectedness, children struggling with an anxiety disorder can feel scared, alone, embarrassed, ashamed, “weird”, or out of place from others. These children may have fewer friends due to social anxieties or worries about being away from parents. They may spend too much time thinking about and preparing for upcoming events, focusing on perfectionism, and getting reassurance about perceived dangers. Worries may cause them to avoid fun activities, such as sports, parties, sleepovers or other outings. They can spend much time trying to manage their thoughts and feelings at the expense of their enjoyment and good times. Below is a list of red flags that may suggest a child is struggling with anxiety:

- Physical symptoms or complaints that frequently prohibit the child from going to school or participating in social activities (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, etc.).
- Sleep difficulties, including, falling asleep, staying asleep and nightmares.
- Anticipating events and/or problems, and worrying about them hours, days, or weeks ahead of time.
- Perfectionism and/or excessive self-criticism.
- Concerns about upsetting, angering, or disappointing others
- Shy, nervous and lacking confidence.
- Excessive avoidance of certain situations.
- Having to spend excessive time spent consoling and reassuring the child about their worries and concerns.

Although this list is not comprehensive, it provides a good basis for determining whether a child may have a problem with anxiety or related difficulty. Although the red flags above are to some extent common to all, an anxious child will persistently engage in these behaviors to the point that it interferes with their social and/or academic functioning.

It can be difficult for adults to recognize children who are suffering from anxiety. The child’s behaviors can be frustrating, illogical and even embarrassing. The seriousness of anxiety is often downplayed by society at large. “Don’t worry, be happy” and “Lighten up” are common examples of discounting anxious feelings in others. Unfortunately, for those struggling with an anxiety disorder, especially for children, it is not that easy. Adults may not see things as anxious children do, so they run the risk of becoming impatient and judgmental. They may unwittingly be overlooking a child’s fears and worries. Furthermore, adults, especially parents and teachers, who have or work with anxious children, struggle to understand how and why it is happening, and how to fix it.

Although childhood anxiety seems overwhelming and at times scary, it can be managed and controlled so that it has little or no ongoing influence on the child. With the help of a psychologist, it is important to identify the intensity of symptoms, how long the problem has persisted, and how to aid the child in learning ways to manage their anxiety. Everyone must learn to live with a certain amount of anxiety but we do not have to endure overwhelming anxiety. Fortunately, anxiety disorders are highly treatable. Treatment can involve child-centered treatment approaches including: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, anxiety management, and relaxation training. Also, parent training is recommended to teach parents how to help their child address concerns and causes. Depending on the severity of the anxiety, medication may be another option, and can be combined with therapy to provide an effective treatment for these problems.