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Anxiety in Children: Overlooked Signs and Effective Supports

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Speaker: Dr. Caroline Buzanko

How is anxiety triggered in our bodies?

Typically, we see something that scares us, and our internal alarms start going off so that we can protect ourselves. Our amygdala is the little pink mass in the middle of our brain and it is responsible for sending off these alarms. Our HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis picks up the signal from our amygdala and sends out adrenaline from our adrenal glands in order to get our body ready to fight and run away; “fight or flight” response. Anxiety is generated when we are constantly stuck in this state.

Things to know about anxiety:

- Anxiety is a normal process that has been developed through years of evolution in order to keep us safe and aware of our surroundings.
- There is a difference between normal worries and disordered worries. That is, normal worries are temporary, but disordered worries lead to anxiety.
- We can still do life and achieve what we want to with normal worries; they do not hinder everyday life.
- Children do not “outgrow” anxiety and it gets progressively worse and can lead to other serious issues such as depression.
- Everybody is predisposed to anxiety and it is the most treatable disorder.

How anxiety affects children and teens:

- They get sucked in and overwhelmed by fear; the belief that I can't handle it.
- It shows up in their thoughts and they internalize it – increasing their own distress.
- These feelings are even more amplified for kids with ADHD and may cause them to lash out more.
- Anxiety takes up so much brain power and causes superficial learning.

Things that increase anxiety or make it worse:

- Stressors such as devices, social media, and everything that they can access online. They have a “crisis-saturated” world at their fingertips.
- Kids learn anxious behaviors from their adults.
- Using notions such as “nothing to worry about” and “everybody gets a trophy” – constant reassurance.
- The mindset of permanence: “always going to be stuck with this.”
- “Bubble wrapping” is enabling anxiety.

What we can do:

- The most important thing is early intervention.
- How we respond makes all the difference in the world.
- Taking away accommodations:
“It's cutting off their ability to make the networks to problem solve, to cope, to figure things out on their own, and ingrains that anxiety. And we're actually making our kiddos more vulnerable because they don't have opportunities to experience the stress. So, the confidence and resilience is stunted.”
– Dr. Buzanko
- We can't get rid of it, but we can change how we respond to it.
- Acceptance!
- Stretch our comfort zones.

Fun Fact:

“So quickly to yourself, how long do you think it takes for gum to digest if you swallow it? The things our parents tell us. I learned seven years. The most common, seven years, 30, or never, right? It's just in there. Guess what? It's no more than a week.”
-Dr. Buzanko