Transforming Anxiety: WorryWiseKids.org

by Mark Katz, PhD

FOR CHILDREN whose attentional difficulties are accompanied by feelings of excessive worry, fear, and anxiety, the world can feel like a very scary and dangerous place, for reasons they rarely understand. "The good news," says Tamar Chansky, PhD, a nationally known expert in the treatment of childhood anxiety disorders, "is that children no longer have to suffer this way. First, though, we need to teach them to be 'worry wise.'"

Worry-wise children understand worry, fear, and anxiety in a hopeful new light. More than that, they've learned what it takes to control their worries, rather than having their worries control them. From whom did they learn to be worry-wise? From worry-wise parents, teachers, and other caring adults. And where did they learn to be worry-wise? A growing number of children are learning to overcome anxiety thanks to a website with the mission of "transforming the weight of the world into a world of possibilities."



Chansky and her colleague, psychologist Lynn Siqueland, created WorryWiseKids.org in 2004. This user-friendly website provides visitors with tools, resources, and practical strategies for improving the lives of children who suffer from anxiety-related disorders. Visitors learn the difference between normal anxiety—an important warning signal protecting us from danger—and unrealistically high levels of anxiety occurring in the absence of danger. The website offers many other helpful features as well.

Children prone to excessive worry can actually believe danger truly does lurk behind every corner. We're all familiar with the intense emotions we feel when we find ourselves in truly dangerous and threatening situations. Imagine experiencing the same emotions in situations far less threatening and dangerous. Such is the plight of children who worry too much. And, according to Chansky, excessive worrying actually increases our propensity to worry.

"When it comes to strengthening neural circuitry," says Chansky, "our brain operates on the principal of survival of the busiest. The more we practice a function, the stronger it becomes." We can also call upon our thoughts to rewire our brains in ways that help us rather than hurt us. Says Chansky, "When we learn to challenge our worrisome and anxious thoughts and replace them with more realistic ones, we're allowing our brain to establish a new map for making these more accurate and less anxious connections."

Ideas for parents

Helping children learn to overcome anxiety begins by first helping the adults in their lives become worry-wise. Parents who visit the website can learn creative ways to help highly anxious kids to make sense of the feelings with which they struggle and that have robbed them of so many of the everyday fun experiences other children enjoy. Parents can also learn tips for helping anxious children, such as:

- how to keep expectations in line with those of non-anxious children, while simultaneously approaching goals at a slower pace when necessary
- ways to highlight children's strengths by providing jobs and other responsibilities that show them they have something important to contribute
- how to help children learn to do things on their own
- how to help children learn how to handle manageable amounts of anxiety

The website also offers ideas on how to help brothers and sisters understand the "no-fault" nature of anxiety. Without better understanding, it's common for others in the family to think an anxious child might somehow enjoy feeling that way.

Ideas for teachers and others

Not all anxious children openly show their emotions, so it can be hard to know when a highly anxious child is in distress. That's why it's important that other significant adults in a child's life, such as teachers, recognize some of the red flags. On the WorryWiseKids website, teachers can also learn about different strategies that can help anxiety-prone children enjoy a more emotionally relaxing school day.

For children meeting eligibility criteria for special education, some schools now recognize the neurobehavioral underpinnings of anxiety-related disorders, and are qualifying children under Other Health Impaired (OHI) eligibility criteria. WorryWiseKids.org provides sample accommodations, including environmental considerations, alternative test-taking ideas, a host of strategies to increase

positive emotions and feelings of safety, and ideas for making homework a less stressful experience for both children and parents.

Other helpful features allow visitors to learn about the most common causes of anxiety, including the role of genetic predisposition, the impact of modeling, and the role of environmental triggers. Easy-to-understand descriptions are given of different anxiety subtypes, their common warning signs (red flags), and effective treatment interventions. Subtype descriptions are provided for generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, separation anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social phobia, selective mutism, specific phobias, and post-traumatic reactions.

Parents, teachers, healthcare professionals, and others can also participate in web-based case conferences and see how specific user-friendly cognitive behavioral strategies are being used to help children overcome anxiety and obsessive-compulsive symptoms.

According to Chansky, anxiety disorders rank as the most prevalent psychiatric condition in childhood, affecting over thirteen percent of the population. This makes anxiety disorders more prevalent than ADHD. Left untreated, anxiety disorders tend to worsen over time, and can potentially affect a person's general health down the road. Anxiety disorders are also the most prevalent psychiatric condition among adults, and the majority of adults report that their symptoms started in childhood. The good news, says Chansky, is that anxiety disorders are treatable.

Cognitive behavioral therapy

The WorryWiseKids website also provides an easy-to-understand overview of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). According to Chansky, CBT is the treatment of choice for anxiety. Research shows a seventy to eighty percent positive response rate, with gains maintained over time.

Through CBT, children learn ways to challenge their anxious and worrisome thoughts and to generate new and more realistic ones. Armed with their new worry-wise thinking skills, children then practice them in actual anxiety-evoking situations. They do so one small step at a time, beginning with the least fearful situations, eventually graduating to the most fearful ones. Chansky adds that medications can also play an essential role for some children. The WorryWiseKids website also lists resources for locating healthcare professionals trained in CBT.

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SOME HELPFUL BOOKS

On anxiety in children:

Tamar Chansky, Freeing Your Child from Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child's Fears, Worries, and Phobias *(Broadway Books, 2004).*

Tamar Chansky, Freeing Your Child from Negative Thinking: Powerful, Practical Strategies to Build a Lifetime of Resilience, Flexibility and Happiness *(Da Capo, 2008).*

On anxiety in adults:

Tamar Chansky, Freeing Yourself from Anxiety: Four Simple Steps to Overcome Worry and Create the Life You Want *(Da Capo, 2012)*

Larina Kase, Anxious 9 to 5: How to Beat Worry, Stop Second-Guessing Yourself, and Work with Confidence *(New Harbinger, 2006).*