

Stress, Anxiety, Perfectionism, and Parenting

DR. JULES NOLAN, PSY.D., LP, NCSP
PHOENIX SCHOOL COUNSELING

Stress

Normal part of living, helps us create strong brains.

Stress isn't the problem – it is chronic stress with no recovery that is a problem

When we rush in to “save” them from stress we make them think it is a huge crisis and that they are incapable of handling it. Hold back a little, let them problem-solve

Emotions can feel like “fire” but they are more like “waves”

We are built to withstand emotional discomfort

Anxiety

Fear is emotional response to real or perceived threat

Anxiety is anticipation of future threat

Anxiety Disorder is excessive anxiety that persists (6 mos) and is developmentally inappropriate

2:1 females to males

Social anxiety 2-5% of population

GAD 1% among adolescents

Why so much now?

Access to information and social comparison – mostly telling them they don't measure up

Better tools to differentiate

Parenting strategies – helicopter parents have become snowplow parents

Over-pathologizing Stress and Anxiety

- Emotional antibodies?

Biological

Brain, amygdala, RAT, PFC, memory and learning,

Brain is naturally anxious

You have neuroplasticity – get better at what you practice

Co-regulating

What might you be doing to prolong or “feed” anxiety?

Behavioral

Fleeing the anxiety provoking situation REINFORCES anxious behavior –
how we accommodate can make it worse

- School
- Home

How do you respond to their anxiety? Can increase or decrease

- Think of when a toddler gets hurt – do we panic?

Most important it to ACT like you know what to do – even if you don't

- Tone of voice, calm, assured, acknowledge the stress but be confident they can handle it.

Exposure plus response prevention

Perfectionism

Not a mental health disorder in DSM – but relates to anxiety, even subclinical

Not wanting to fail (fear)

One resulting problem is stopping taking risks or performing at all because of this fear

Another problem is cheating and academic dishonesty because performance is tied up in self-worth

Low self-esteem disguised as high standards

How we might make perfectionism or anxiety worse

Kids have an idea of who they are – based on how we talk to them or what we have told them about who they are

Anxious kids, especially smart ones, believe they are one thing. Don't want to do anything to prove us wrong – get afraid to try, to start

Start by paying attention to how we praise

- Effective praise – avoid “you’re smart, a great athlete” and instead praise process. – you worked hard even when I could see you getting frustrated
- I saw you had success with that, how does that feel?
- Model self-compassion, especially with failure
- Praise “failure”. Have anxious kids work quickly with focus on time to complete and not “correct”. You get better at what you practice
- Examine your own beliefs about this. What model are you giving?

Treatment is Exposure

Careful of letting them avoid or flee things that make them anxious. HOWEVER, they don't get better if they never have to face their anxiety provoking situation.

- Can be BRAVE and AFRAID at the same time

But....DON'T “throw them into the deep end of the pool”. Use baby steps and practice calming strategies.

- Exposure therapy - gradual “exposure” with calming strategies and self monitoring
 - Start by thinking of the thing
 - Picture of the thing
 - Fake thing
 - Real thing very briefly
 - Sitting with the emotion, not fleeing it

Parenting Strategies for Anxious, Stressed Out, Perfectionistic Kids

DON'T MAKE IT WORSE!

Our Job as Parents

Build emotional resilience

Keep them emotionally close

Model what we want to see

Show up every time (which battle to pick)

Prepare THEM for the
WORLD....not the other way
around

Build emotional resilience by
practicing with hard emotion

Normalize Emotion Not just the pleasant ones

Anxious feelings

Remember the finish line

Sadness

College expectations

Frustration

High school surprises

Loneliness

The neuroscience of behavior

Disappointment

Anger

In Childhood – Don't Feed the Beast

Careful what you "reinforce"

- Ruminating
- Too weak to tolerate
- Must be saved – foster independence, 4th grade

Careful of too much "opportunity"

- Too many lessons
- Not enough unstructured time
- The blessing of boredom – overscheduling – Aim for 75%
- Average is wonderful

NAME IT TO TAME IT – More Emotion Words = More Skillful with Emotion

Remember that simply naming emotions calms and helps us to develop skill around emotions

Help them put words on their emotions

- I feel bad – “What kind of bad?”
- I’m so stressed – “Where do you feel stress?” “How can you tell you’re stressed?”
- I’m so tired – “Tired physically, like you need a nap? Or emotionally, like drained, worn out?”
- There are >2000 words to describe emotion. We use 10 or so.
- Practice this yourself – when driving, name 5 emotions you are having and the likely cause

Adolescence is a Time to Switch Parenting Tactics....From “Expert” to “Curious”

When they are stressed and overwhelmed, if they come to you with it

- Listen and probe feelings – don’t offer solutions
 - “Wow, that sounds really hard...what have you done in past situations that has worked?”
 - “It sounds like you feel frustrated and worried about failing. That must feel awful. Have you ever dealt with something like this before? What worked for you?”
 - “How have you handled this in the past? What kinds of things make you feel better?”

What worked before now makes them feel like they are failing

In childhood they would bring their worries to us and we would find solutions, make them feel better

In adolescence, if they bring their worries to us and we find solutions, it makes them feel like they are failing

Our well meaning advice sounds to them like “You are failing at this” “You can’t handle this on your own” “Your are doing it wrong” “I am so much better at handling your problems than you will ever be”

Protective Factors

Mindful practice

Modeling

Lots of experience with emotion

Concrete skills

Self esteem – not from compliments but from struggles

Honoring Autonomy

They are part of the family, not the centerpiece

Having expectations – contribute to the family

Having house rules – and consequences when rules are broken

Religious Affiliation

Co-Regulating

Understand That Parenting Includes Grief

Every stage is a mixed bag

Particularly difficult from fabulous 5 to trying tween

Honor their sovereignty

Take it easy on yourself

MOOD METER

How are you feeling?



Apps and computer-based resources



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- Remember all your mood data
- View and share your mood data

Over time, you'll develop emotional intelligence skills that can help you in all areas of life.

Books and Publishers

Permission to Feel – Marc Brackett

Under Pressure – Lisa Damour

Raising Cain – Michael Thompson

Magination Press – APA publisher with many titles

Websites

Dr Jules Nolan (Facebook)

Phoenix School Counseling (Facebook)

Hey Sigmund