7 tips to help kids feeling anxious about going back to school

27 May 2020, by Mandie Shean

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As COVID-19 lockdown measures are lifted, some children may experience social anxiety about the prospect of returning to school.

People with social anxiety may fear embarrassment or the expectation to perform in social situations, or worry exceedingly about people judging you poorly.

In certain situations, people with anxiety may find their heart beats quicker as adrenalin is released into their blood stream, more oxygen flows to the blood and brain, and even digestion may slow down.

These are helpful responses if you need to run away or fight danger. But social situations are generally not life threatening, and these physical symptoms can interfere with socialising.

People with social anxiety may fear looking silly, being judged, laughed at or being the focus of attention. For anyone, such experiences might be unwelcome but for those with social anxiety they pose an unacceptable threat.

Social anxiety in Australian children

One Australian report found that about 6.9% of children and adolescents surveyed have a diagnosed anxiety disorder, 4.3% experience separation anxiety and 2.3% a social phobia.

Social phobia (social anxiety) is more common in adolescents, whereas separation anxiety (intense anxiety over leaving caregivers, such as parents) is more prevalent in children.

These figures only account for those who have a diagnosis of anxiety. They do not include undiagnosed young people who experience high stress in social situations.

Any recent prolonged absence from school may have increased social anxiety, as avoiding what you fear can make your fear become greater.

This is because you do not get to learn that the thing you fear is actually safe. Your beliefs about the threat go unchallenged.

Anxiety can also increase through what psychologists call reduced tolerance. The more children withdraw from the situations that cause them fear, the less tolerance they have for those situations.

Anxiety can affect education

The educational cost for students with anxiety is considerable.

The research shows students with poor mental health can be between seven to 11 months behind in Year 3, and 1.5—2.8 years behind by Year 9.

That's because these students experience more absences from school, poorer connection to school, lower levels of belonging and less engagement with schoolwork.

7 strategies to help overcome social anxiety

So what can children do to overcome anxiety as they return to school? Here are some useful tips.

1. deal with some of the physical symptoms. It is hard to think if your body is stressed. Use calming strategies like mindfulness or breathing exercises. Slowing your breathing can reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, anger and confusion. Useful apps to help you control your breathing include Smiling Mind (iOS and Android) or Breathing Bubbles (Android only).
2. anxiety increases while using avoidance techniques such as avoiding eye contact, not raising your hand to answer a question, or not attending school. So the most effective way to deal with social anxiety might be to face it. Allow your child to have small experiences of social success—give their opinion to one person, start a conversation with someone they know—so they can learn to feel safe in these social situations.
3. fear and anxiety are normal and benefit us by helping us to respond efficiently to danger. Rather than read your body as under threat, think about the changes as helpful. Your body is preparing you for action.
4. while avoiding your fears is not the answer, being fully exposed to them is not the answer either. Providing overwhelming social experiences may lead to overwhelming fear and failure, and may make anxiety sufferers less likely to try again—or at all. Start small and build their courage.
5. supportive listening and counselling are less effective than facing your fears because these approaches can accommodate the fears. While you want to support your child by providing them with comfort and encouragement—ensure you also encourage them to face the fears that cause the anxiety.
6. you cannot promise negative things won't happen. It is possible you will be embarrassed or be judged. Rather than try to avoid these events, try reframing them. Remember that that we all experience negative social feedback, and this does not make you silly or of less value. It makes you normal. Or, rather than see it as embarrassing, maybe it can be funny.
7. remember it is the "perception" that something is a threat—not the reality. Reasoning with your child to help them see your perspective may not change theirs. This reality only changes with positive real experiences.

What we think is truth is often revealed as untrue when we face our fears. There is joy in social situations. Keep turning up to them.

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