

Help Your Anxious Child - a Powerful and Proven Treatment Often Overlooked

Dr. David Russ

One of the most powerful and well researched techniques for treating anxiety is also one that may be the most neglected. It is deep relaxation and abdominal breathing. I'm very curious about this. I am a psychologist and I've been working with anxiety disorders my entire professional career. For some reason this proven straightforward technique is extraordinarily hard for people to actually follow through on. Don't get me wrong, people really want to get over anxiety. So what's the deal with this? I'm sure there are many reasons but one of the main things I believe is that people don't feel like this will help when it comes right down to it. Compared with intense anxiety this feels like saying stop to a hurricane. However, let me offer another way to think about this.

Your nervous system has two parts that are important for our discussion. The part of your nervous system that is responsible to prepare you for danger is called the sympathetic nervous system. It mobilizes you in preparation for danger. Its activity is sometimes called the "fight or flight" response.

The part of your nervous system that is responsible for calming you down is called the parasympathetic nervous system. Its activity is sometimes called the "rest and digest" response. These two systems are complementary in nature. You could think of the sympathetic as the accelerator and the parasympathetic as the brakes (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parasympathetic_nervous_system). In our anxiety treatment program for children, Turnaround, we turn these two parts into two characters, Krank and Chill.

If your child has been anxious she or he has "exercised" the sympathetic nervous system day in and day out. You could think of it as in tip-top shape like an athlete. On the other hand, their parasympathetic nervous system is a couch potato (stained tee shirt, flopped on the sofa, pizza crust between cushions, etc.). Relative to what they've been doing with the sympathetic nervous system it hasn't been exercised at all. It is like going to the gym once or twice and expecting to be able to compete with an athlete who's been working out for months.

If you haven't been exercising and you decide to get in shape then you will notice a lot of resistance as you try to create a new habit. I think people are surprised when they begin to "exercise" the parasympathetic nervous system with the discipline of deep relaxation and abdominal breathing and they feel a similar kind of resistance. Shouldn't relaxing be easy? Unfortunately, when you are anxious it is hard to do. Just like the couch potato, it is easy to give it up before you get results.

Let's say you went to the gym for months and did curls with only your left arm. And then your friend asks you to help pick up a heavy item. For your left arm it's no problem but you might drop it because you have a wimpy right arm. Why would your nervous system be any different? The good news is that your nervous system learns quickly and you don't have to match how frequently you've been anxious with how frequently you practice relaxation and abdominal breathing. However, I can tell you it would probably take at least three weeks of once or twice a day practice before you could expect any significant results. But isn't it incredible that someone who's been anxious for months or maybe even years could in the course of a few weeks develop this powerful internal resource to offset what, to anxiety sufferers, seems like an overwhelming anxiety response? Seriously, this is a 20 minute daily discipline that could change your child's life. Like any new behavior is hard to develop the habit but it will really pay off once they do.

Instructions on how to relax and breathe correctly can be found all over the Internet. An audio version will make this practice easier so that you can just play it for your child and they can follow the directions. And because it's something you do over and over some variety can help prevent the boredom that comes with familiarity. Our child program includes just such a variety of audio recordings that are kid friendly as part of the treatment program. But there are many available resources so that you can find what works for your child. If you have a computer with a microphone you can create your own recording. Um, you could consider doing it with your child as a way of modeling it for them...just a thought.

Dr. David Russ is a licensed psychologist in private practice in North Carolina. For the last two years, Dr. Russ and Chris McCarthy (PhD candidate), have been developing an innovative treatment program for anxious kids. In seeking help for his own child, Dr. Russ discovered there were almost no media-based resources that specifically spoke to children about anxiety and how to overcome it in an age-appropriate way. The passion and love for their own kids and patients led to the creation of "Turnaround". The professionally produced audio program is based on the science of cognitive-behavioral therapy which has shown conclusive results in successfully treating anxiety. They have added a unique innovation. The science is combined with kid captivating fun, creativity and age-appropriate explanation! A group of kids go on a journey meeting all kinds of curious characters. The steps to overcome anxiety are embedded throughout this fun adventure. It is done with professional actors, artwork and production to keep any child engaged and helped. Information is available at www.myanxiouschild.com.