

How to Help Your Anxious Child: Expectations

Dr. David Russ

How long will anxiety last? When my daughter started having anxiety and then panic, I kept hoping it would last just a few weeks...then months...then a year. I am a psychologist so I knew what was happening but as a dad my expectations were all over the place like any parent. Having your expectations way off can make this journey more excruciating than it is already.

People with anxiety are impatient. Parents get impatient because their lives and the life of their child is seriously impacted. Anxiety feels terrible and they want it gone. When you child says they want it to go away but can't help it, they mean that. (They can do things but don't know what those are.) Your child will often have no idea what is happening. You can ask them why they think they are struggling and they may not have a clue. Anxiety disorders are complicated. Here is one of anxieties tricks. The more desperate and frustrated you get the more you activate the very part of the brain you need to calm. Your child needs your calm confidence. You will need to cultivate patience.

Overall you can have hope. Anxiety is treatable. Sometimes it responds really quickly. Sometimes it lasts longer than the wait at the DMV when you're in a hurry. Sometimes it goes away and then comes back. Don't get tempted by one of anxieties favorite distortions, "This will never go away!" Yes it will but you have to treat it. If you avoid facing it then it can last a very long time. I have watched the show, Hoarders, a few times. Hoarding is a severe symptom of OCD which is an anxiety disorder. Some of those people have been doing that a long time but they have not pursued treatment. Don't judge, facing fear is way up on the Richter scale. I only mention it because you may know of examples of anxiety lasting a really long time but two of the main reasons are avoidance or just not knowing what to do. Don't get tempted to fear the future, there is hope.

Anxiety is almost always far more complicated than it seems on the surface. You cannot think of it like regular worry and fear. It is different. I'll have to save that explanation for another article. Here are 6 things to think about regarding expectations:

1. Don't expect miracles or simple solutions. They can happen, just don't expect one. Each time you crank up your hope too high and you don't get a cure, the more upset you will get. Your child can overcome this, just watch out for the hidden pressure of "miracle" cures. By all means try things, just realize that this is not a simple issue.
2. Manage your hope. Be careful to not lose hope. That can lead to depression. This stuff is stubborn but there are all kinds of ways to treat this successfully. One thing frequently impacted is sleep. That is one of the first things to address if it is out of whack. Sleep deprivation can lead to depression and impatience (plus you drift off while listening to your pat...oh wait...that's me). If something hasn't worked then keep trying. Something will work.
3. Don't wait around for a cure to drop from the sky. Learn what you can, make appointments to see professionals, get resources for your child. You and your child have been given an obstacle. Set out on the journey to find a solution. Get yourself geared up. It will take as long as it takes.

4. Watch out that you don't get anxious about your child's anxiety. Don't start freaking out about the future. Yes, this will mess up your life to some extent. You can agonize over this or accept it. Things will go wrong--school, friends, you having a life.... It will be okay. Trust me, I've been there.

5. Allow for setbacks. Don't evaluate how things are going by any one day or set of days. It is up and down. Keep a record and look at the trends.

6. Do your best to minimize comments from the "audience". People will have lots of opinions about what you should do and what you are doing wrong. You have to manage who you talk to about this. You and your child are doing what you can. Keep critical people out of your expectations.

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.