

The Underlying Theory, Logic and Science behind Turnaround

...Or Why We Did It The Way We Did It.

We are practicing clinicians, not academics. We thank God for academics and their research. We stand on their science and their quest for what is effective. But there are things that only clinicians discover in the daily treatment of anxiety problems. Most of the problems we had with helping were not about the science but how to get it to work with kids. Over the years we ran into several obstacles in treating anxious children and created Turnaround to eliminate those obstacles.

The very nature of anxiety directly interferes with the treatment of anxiety. For anyone with serious anxiety, the last thing they want to do is go talk about it.

Turnaround does not send off the message: "Time to focus on Anxiety!" until we have had some fun. It has a very soft start. The doctors are approachable and very human. It is an adventure! What kid doesn't want to go on an adventure? The entire program is modeled after kids programs so it is like other entertainment they will immediately recognize. This is familiar territory, nothing unknown to evoke potential loss of control. We tell kids that they might feel anxious and to not let anxiety pull that trick on them. Knowledge of anxieties subtle "tricks" is crucial to successful treatment. Listening to a story is familiar. It significantly reduces the fear of losing control. You can always stop listening. Very different from a doctor or counselors office

The research is very strong that Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is by far the most consistently effective treatment for anxiety. A structured CBT treatment for children is pretty hard to find.

CBT is both effective and lent itself to the approach we knew would work for kids. It is much more directive and structured than most counseling approaches. There are a LOT of self-help tools available based on CBT. To our surprise they were overwhelmingly designed for adults. Probably most anxious adults have trouble with how the material is delivered but it was impossible for kids. A paradigm change in delivery was clearly needed. We outlined the treatment and then spend 2 years transforming it into kid-speak.

Anxious kids often feel like something is wrong with them and going for treatment might confirm this in their mind.

Turnaround is an at-home treatment program that doesn't seem like a treatment program. We take great pains to normalize what a child is feeling and reassure them their problem is common, treatable, and they are not "broken." We give them a healthy frame of reference to understand what is happening. It is interesting enough that families with children not struggling with anxiety can have everyone listen so the anxious child is not singled-out. It also helps siblings understand and empathize with the anxious child.

Very good problem solving approaches don't work. Sometimes the harder they are applied the worse it gets. Anxious children can resist change.

Anxiety can seem completely out of control of the sufferer. Seriously, you show me the most extreme anxiety symptom and I can guarantee it is an aspect of an attempt to solve the problem. Unfortunately, it is the wrong way to solve it so it doesn't work. Children with anxiety *desperately* want to overcome it; they just need the right method. To overcome anxiety disorders a whole new approach is necessary. The way to solve anxiety is very counter-intuitive. It is not something that most people would ever think would work. Anxiety has very specific rules. If you know them, you can defeat them. We designed Turnaround to give a comprehensive step-by-step plan that kids can follow.

Treating anxiety requires the right knowledge - and a lot of it. Anxiety is mysterious.

A lot of knowledge has to be conveyed because there are huge interpretive mistakes being made and to make a strong case for change there is much to be explained. Also, an experience can take seconds to feel but 10 minutes to explain. Conveying all this is not easy to do. It is easy to get too complicated. In Turnaround, we looked at even the smallest details to teach. We convey content the way a child might say it. We try to use lots of metaphors and figures of speech. We use familiar examples from TV and movies. Using other kids as examples is a way for a child to learn by imitation. We break it into small parts. Even the order we do things is carefully done. We added a workbook to complement the audio. We talk about and try to engage all the senses. We did our best to strip out all the psychological jargon.

There is a major biological factor that runs just outside of awareness or is completely mistaken for something else.

Try using the phrase "sympathetic nervous system" to a child. Yet, understanding this aspect of a body's function is so crucial for many types of anxiety that change is unlikely without this understanding. Anxiety locks on to whatever is feared. What is going on in the body (unless it is feared) runs in the background. Calm down the body and thoughts will begin to return to normal. Most kids have no idea of this crucial step and how it is part of the false alarm. So, we personified this with a character named Krank. We remove the mystery, identify the problem, externalize the problem and make the problem silly. Then we will teach them to counter Krank with Chill, a surfer dude.

Children won't listen to lectures; especially anxious children.

Turnaround is a dramatization, a screenplay, a theatrical production. There is comedy, excitement, tension, and climax. Everything is conveyed in dialogue. It is an active story unfolding to a listening child. Even when the doctors or other kids are "teaching" it is conversational. We made sure that no one talks more than 30 to 60 seconds at the most, usually less than that. There are a couple rare exceptions but only when many characters are speaking. Children stay glued to quick changing dialogue on TV but zone out on lectures. Like it or not, that is just the way it is. We believe this is even more the case when it is about

anxiety. No self-respecting 9-year-old will listen to 60 minutes of monologue (personally, my limit is about 30 minutes unless it is exceptional!)

Parenting young children is substantially directive. When there is any sort of problem, adults helping tend to be even more directive-perfectly normal. Anxious kids tend to be more stubborn. BOOM, anxiety goes up on both sides.

Kids are "invited" to come along and asked to choose to do this on their own. From the start we want children to choose to do this, not just comply with an adult's request. The entire program is designed so that a child can make their own changes. This is called self-efficacy and having the sense of overcoming anxiety on one's own is what makes the cure last a life time. A child must "will" themselves to make the needed changes.

Kids with anxiety don't have a reference point to compare themselves against. They feel isolated, embarrassed and unbalanced.

We introduce the listening child to other kids similar to them from the start so they realize their problems are pretty common. Children identify with other children. We tried to make the types of anxiety as broad and encompassing as possible. We also explain why they don't know many other kids with anxiety. Other kids just don't talk about their own anxiety. This is all done in dialogue which makes it much more persuasive than lectures.

Developmentally, children are very limited in their ability to "think about their thinking." They struggle talking about it in a way that leads to change.

Adults have the capacity to turn their subjective experience into words and ideas but it is still difficult for them. This abstract cognitive capability matures during adolescence and is still limited in school-age kids. Children are still relying on what adults and society tell them to make sense of the world. In Turnaround, we don't ask them what they are feeling because they may not have even a vocabulary that would fit. Rather we give them lots of ideas and ways of thinking so they can match their experience to that. For example, rather than ask for them to write a description of their anxiety, we have them draw it. We give multiple choice options, puzzles and give them tasks to experience what we are telling them.

There is a tremendous language gap for talking about anxiety between adults and children.

Most kids when asked why they are anxious will say, "I don't know." Parents and adults then try to guess what they are thinking and offer that. Sometimes a parent might hit that right on the head, but not usually. If there are too many misses then a child might stop hoping a parent will help and a parent will get frustrated. Turnaround creates a whole new language that parents can share with their children. Turnaround does the teaching so parents and kids can jump right to a shared language... and just talk. That alone reduces the stress.

Parents are not therapists. Parents can be fabulous with regular worry, concerns, problem solving. That is not the case with anxiety disorders.

Turnaround provides the framework and structure. We do the persuading and lay out the map for everyone to follow. Parents don't have to spend hours listening like a therapist or create a whole treatment program. Family life is busy enough. Turnaround saves parents incalculable hours and the constant battle to get your anxious child to change the way they think or do what they need to do. No dragging your child to the therapist, ignoring your other children to help the anxious one, or fighting with your spouse on what to do. Instead, follow the map that Turnaround provides.