

Thinking Positive Thoughts About Your Anxious Child: Avoiding Four Common Negative Beliefs

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Gregory's father, Ken wore the face of a parent exhausted from the repetitive behavioral problems stemming from his child's anxiety. Gregory struggled with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD), which caused him to resist change, transition, and requests that made him feel out of control. Just last night, Ken lost it with Gregory when he refused to share something with his little brother. "It just seems like he's intentionally cruel and inflexible," Ken states with great fatigue.

Parenting an anxious child can be mentally taxing and it's easy to become a sour grapefruit in their presence. Anxious complaints can restrict a parent's movement, demand a great deal of time, and exhaust their patience. No parent chooses to be negative, it just happens as a consequence of the anxious disorder. When I see this taking place in the families I counsel, I review the four toxic parenting beliefs associated with anxious kids and offer four strategies to cleanse the mental wasteland and restore the broken relationships.

Vicky Flory defines four common beliefs mistakenly held by parents of anxious children, namely seeing the child as hostile, unreasonable, exaggerated with their emotions, and the child not being emotionally dependent upon the parent. Accommodating one or more of these beliefs collapses the emotional bridge between parent and child, leaving the child stranded on an island of anxious fear. The repetitive thought of seeing the child as hostile interferes with parental support because the parent views the child as mean and their intentions motivated by malice. Ken held this belief. He overly focuses on his child's negative behaviors and missed the distressed emotions fueling them.

Reckoning the child as unreasonable, the parent sees the child as beyond help and unable to respond/learn in a normal manner. They increasingly grow ambivalent toward the child, focusing exclusively on controlling the child's behavior through angry verbal and non-verbal responses. The child views himself or herself more negatively and anxious thoughts and behaviors worsen.

Believing the child's demonstrated emotions are not genuine leads to mistaken assumptions. The parent becomes mistakenly convinced their child is manipulative, dramatic, and cunning. Verbal and non-verbal suggestions of anxious distress are misconstrued by the parent, leading to anger, harsh punishments, and withdrawal.

The fourth hindering belief that the child is not emotionally dependent upon the parent is inaccurate because the child is solely dependent upon the parent. Though their attempts may be clumsy, and demonstrated affection and appreciation sparse, the parent is the child's best chance at getting his or her emotional needs met. The dilemma for parents is balancing the natural desire for affirmation and affection from their child with the young anxious sufferers inability to express such positive and soothing emotions. Summarizing, four common mistaken parental beliefs can weaken the parent-child bond and worsen a child's anxiety. Maintaining an active awareness of these mental parasites can trap them as they hatch and grow.

Four effective strategies can be implemented to heal the relationship and cultivate support. I use the acronym, FREE to help parents remember. First, Ken needed to offer Gregory a Fresh start, a new day each and every day. Ken needed to address each day's issue as a separate incident from the past and cease vexing expressions,

repeatedly bringing up the past and stating that nothing ever changes. Vexing comes from the parent feeling despondent and grasping for anything that might change the child's behavior, even if it's negative and shaming. Ken needs to mentally prepare himself each morning in order to offer a Fresh start. Exercise, diet, stretching, and any other expressions of self-care has been shown to greatly help. As a sage once said, "You cannot impart what you do not possess." A parent needs to have their own Fresh start before they can offer one to their child.

Second, a parent needs to be Reasonable in their expectations. A parent should check their assumptions and slow down their responses. Anxious children feel strong negative emotions that can reactive responses. Focus more on their child's heart, their emotions, rather than just their behavior. Pay attention to their facial expressions. If they look angry and frustrated, chances are they really feel more fearful or depressed. Address their hurt. Give them hope. Give them a vision of what they'll life will be someday when they are free from their fears.

Third, develop Empathy for the anxious child. Recognize that many of your child's negative behavioral patterns are rooted in feeling anxious and depressed. The negative expressions are consistent with symptoms of child anxiety and depression. Developing empathy for the sufferer is one of the most effective ways to change negative beliefs. I encouraged Ken to sit down with Gregory and ask him what it feels like when he's afraid, to patiently encourage them to speak about his inner feelings. This may have to done a few times for trust to build. A parent needs to apologize for past offenses, reaffirm their unconditional love and support, and commit to do better.

Lastly, anxiety Education is an effective way to build empathy and treat anxiety. I instructed Ken and Gregory to work together through books and programs designed to educate parents and treat child anxiety. This can be a great way to gain empathy for your child and show support. An excellent resource is the audio program Turnaround: Turning Fear Into Freedom which invites the anxious child on a ten day camping adventure with six other children who struggles with various types of fears. Created by two clinically experienced therapists, the program is professional and based upon the proven treatment methods of cognitive-behavioral therapy and yet, manages to be highly entertaining kid friendly. Parents report it facilitates healthy dialog with their child by giving them a shared language. There are 2 CDs included for parent education. For further information, visit www.myanxiouschild.com.

Ken successfully implemented FREE and greatly improved his relationship with Gregory. Together they are listening to Turnaround and Gregory is nearly free of his anxious symptoms.

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Ref. Flory, V. (2004). A novel clinical intervention for severe childhood depression and anxiety. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 9(1), 9-23.