

The slide features a light gray vertical bar on the left side. The main content area is split into two horizontal sections: a teal top section with the title and a dark gray bottom section with the presenter's name and date.

# Supporting Children with Anxiety: Evidence-Based Strategies

Lauren Santucci  
Wayland Middle School, February 27, 2020

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The slide includes the McLean Harvard Medical School Affiliate logo in the top right corner. On the left, a teal vertical bar contains the text 'Tell me!'. To the right, two rounded rectangular boxes contain the questions 'What are you seeing?' and 'What is your biggest concern?'.

Tell me!

What are you seeing?

What is your biggest concern?

McLean  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

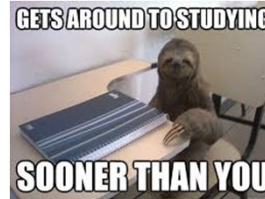
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Some anxiety is good!

Situation: You have a test in 2 days



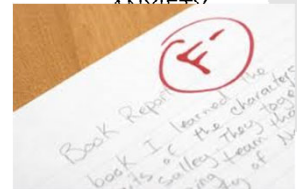
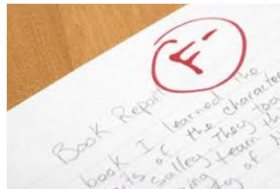
No Anxiety



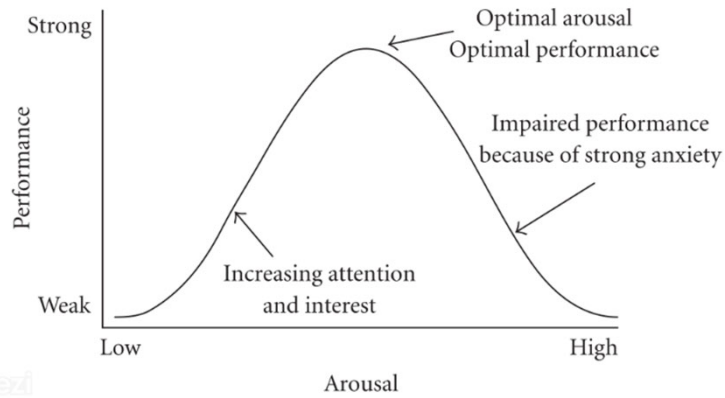
Optimal anxiety



TOO MUCH ANXIETY



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A Delicate Balance

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Anxiety can manifest  
in different ways!

3 responses to  
(perceived) threats



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When is  
anxiety a  
problem?

- Functional impairment in one or more domains: school, friends, family, extra-curriculars
- Child is subjectively distressed
- Child's responses seem disproportionate to events

This might look like  
difficulty:

- Completing classwork/homework
- Socializing with peers
- Participating in class
- Following directions

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## Students who feel anxiety in social situations

- Persistent, unrealistic worry about being negatively evaluated
- Keeps to self in class
- Reluctant to answer questions
- Distress when giving presentations
- Difficulty working in groups
- Difficulty initiating conversations with peers
- Isolation in unstructured settings (lunch, recess)

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## Students who worry a lot

- The “worry-wart”
- Excessive and difficult to control worry about the future, school, performance, health, personal safety, etc.
- Perfectionism (on-time, need to keep schedule)
- Excessive reassurance-seeking
- Unrealistically high standards for self
- Gets “stuck” in the worry
- High physiological arousal (startle response, leg shaking)

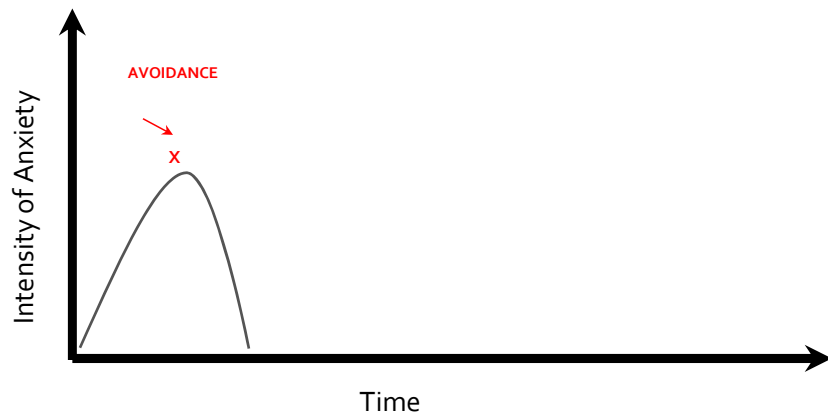
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# The role of avoidance



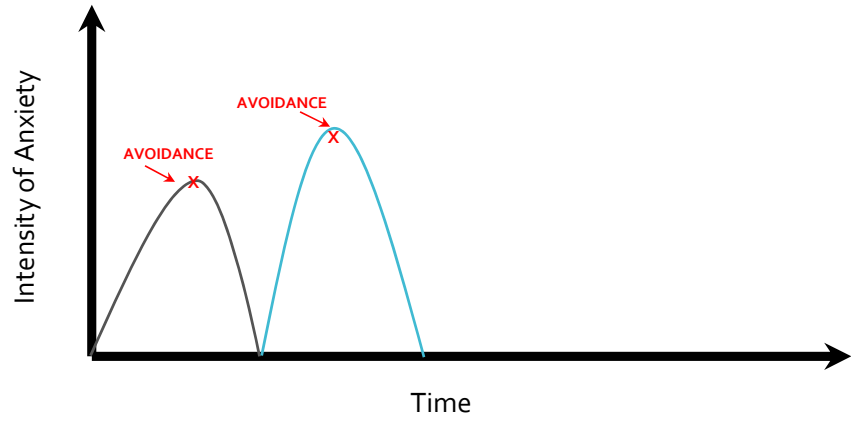
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# The Role of Avoidance



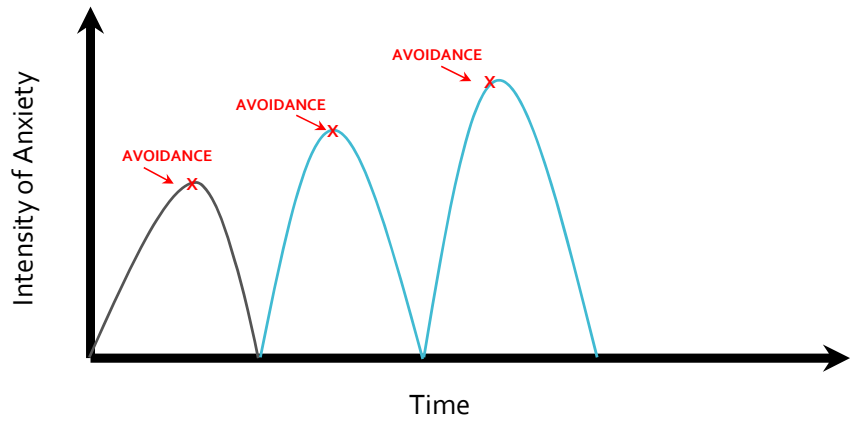
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# The Role of Avoidance



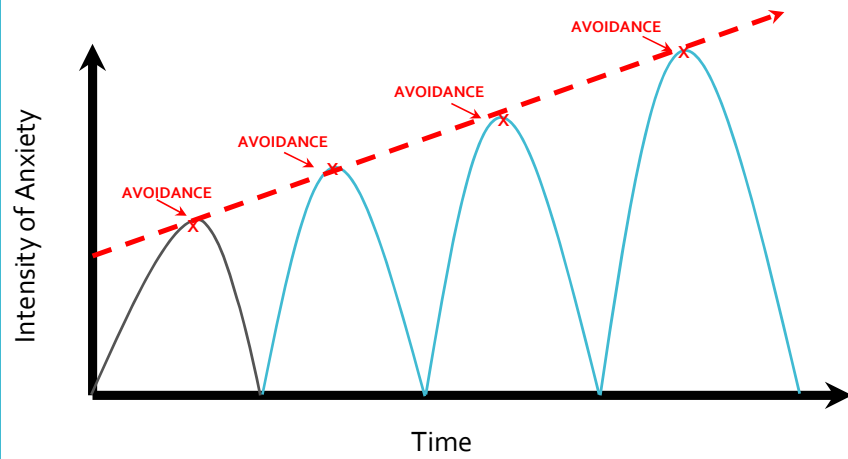
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# The Role of Avoidance



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## The Role of Avoidance



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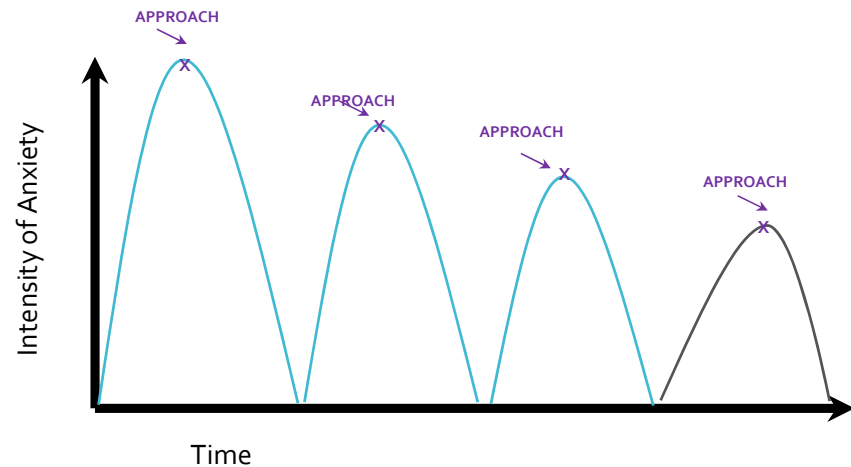
## How can we break the cycle?

Gradually face stressors instead of avoiding them!



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What happens when we approach?



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How to Help Kids Approach Feared Situations

- Talk to the child and make a plan
- Slowly increase the expectations, in collaboration with the child
- Check in with child regularly to see how the plan is working
- If child is stuck, take a step back without backing down

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## Example: Social Anxiety

1. Ordering for self in a restaurant
2. Asking a store clerk a question
3. Answering the phone
4. Calling a friend or family member on the phone
5. Taking a survey of others in the clinic
6. Having a conversation with a new person for X mins
7. X min speech in session, topic is child's choice, prep time
8. X min speech in session, topic is teacher's choice, limited prep time
9. Giving book report in front of small group of students or teachers
10. Giving presentation in front of class

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## Example: School Refusal

1. Drive to school, sit in car in front of building
2. Walk around school building when students not present
3. Attend one hour of school in preferred location
4. Attend one class (preferred)
5. Attend half day of school in classroom
6. Attend full day of school – half in class, half in preferred location
7. Attend full day of school, in classroom

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### Example: Class Participation

Student raises hand with no expectation of being called on

Call on student 1 time with a question they know the answer to

Call on student 2x with questions they know the answer to

Call on student 1x with a question they may not know the answer to

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### Preparing your child for the road



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## Challenges Parents Face

Do we problem solve?  
Do we remove obstacles?

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## So what Can Parents Do?

1. Validate
2. Praise/encourage brave and effective behavior
3. Externalize the worry/anxiety
4. Support gradual exposure
5. Help kids identify more helpful thoughts

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## Validation

**Validation** is a relationship skill that communicates to a person that their feelings make sense and are understandable to you.

### Why Validate?

- Building Relationships
- Emotion Regulation

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## Examples of Validating Statement

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"That's got to be so [difficult, upsetting, scary, frustrating, etc.] for you."

---

"I imagine that must have been hard for you."

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"It must make you feel horrible to have someone do that."

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"I can see how hard you are working."

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"Wow, (she/he/they) must have made you feel really angry/sad, etc."

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"I can see this is important to you."

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"What a frustrating situation to be in."

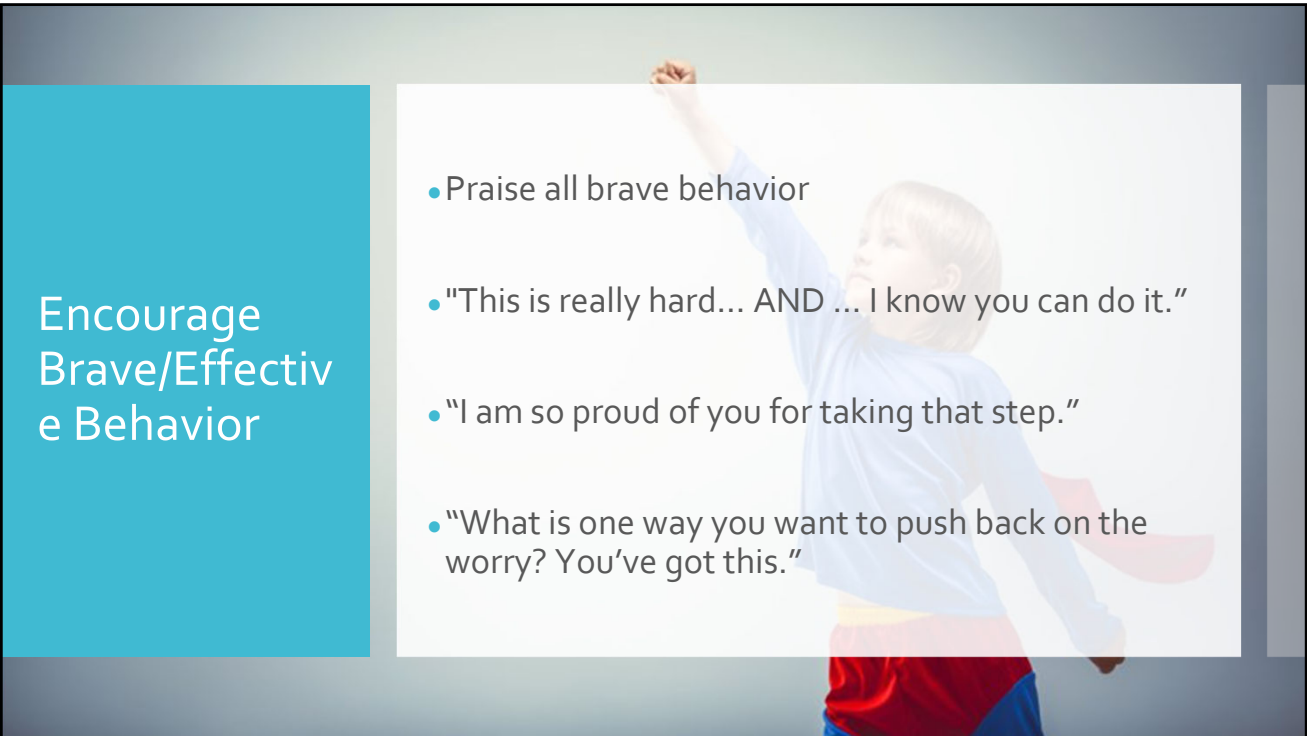
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## Validation Tips

- CONNECT before you redirect!
- Validating a child's feelings does not necessarily mean that you like or agree with what they are doing, saying, or thinking. It ONLY means that you understand, see, and respect what they are feeling.
- Validate the emotion, not the behavior.

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## Encourage Brave/Effective Behavior

- Praise all brave behavior
- "This is really hard... AND ... I know you can do it."
- "I am so proud of you for taking that step."
- "What is one way you want to push back on the worry? You've got this."

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## Externalizing Anxiety & Worry

- Separate the anxiety from child's identity – you are working together to put anxiety in its place!
- Encourage child to talk back to anxiety - "boss back"



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## Supportive Responses

- "Is that Delia asking or the anxiety?"
- "That sounds like the Anxiety Bully talking, and I don't want to give him my attention"
- Reduce gradually: "I think that's anxiety talking" → thumbs up/nod → no response

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# Addressing Unhelpful Thoughts: Catch, Check, Change



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## What You Think

Situation:



Feeling: Anxiety

Thought 1:

"I don't know any of the material."

Thought 2:

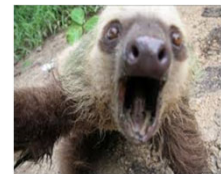
"I'm going to fail."

Thought 3:

"I'm going to flunk out of school."

Thought 4:

"EVERYTHING IS AWFUL AND I CAN'T DEAL WITH THIS!!!!!"



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## Cognitive Restructuring: Overview

### Step 1: CATCH

Identify the anxious thought



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## Cognitive Restructuring Overview

### Step 2: CHECK

**Gather evidence for and against this thought:**

- How helpful is it to you to hold on to this thought?
- What happened the last time you were worried about this?
- How many times have you worried about this, and how many times has the feared outcome actually happened?
- Is there another way it could turn out?
- How will you feel about this in one week, 1 month, 6 months?
- What would you tell a friend?

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# Cognitive Restructuring: Overview

## Step 3: CHANGE

Based on evidence, generate more helpful/realistic thought



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# What You Think

Situation:



Feeling: Anxiety

Thought 1:

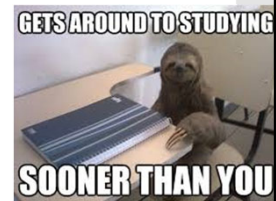
"I don't know any of the material."

**CATCH!**

**CHECK:** "Have I passed tests before? Have I been in class and done the homework?"

**CHANGE:**

"I can do this. I have been in class, and I know a lot of this. I will do my best."



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## Encouraging Independence

- Children build self-confidence by developing new roles
- Becoming more independent helps child feel more mature and confident
- **Anxious children tend to be less independent than peers**
- Sense of personal control very important for improving anxiety

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## Encouraging Independence by Targeting Self Help Skills

- Encourage child to engage in 3 age-appropriate self-help skills they do not normally perform
- Choose “low hanging fruit” - activities they can do by themselves but are not at the moment
- Respect the child’s struggle
  - Reduce amount of help you are giving slowly if having difficult time
  - Children learn by trying, failing, and trying again
  - Stay calm and show child it’s okay not to be perfect
  - Give information child might not have (“it helps to start with the top button”)

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## Making it more fun for kids



- Toss ball – calm thought/worried thought game of catch
- Bravery box – decorate box, write down all the brave things they do on one side of slip of paper, what they learned from it on other side
- Make coping cards- worried though on one side, brave thought on other
- Can use rewards to motivate children to face their fears (gradually!)

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## Take Away's + Homework

- Struggling and learning to persevere in the face of stress and anxiety is a critical developmental task for children and teens.
- As parents, we have the incredibly hard task of resisting our instincts to immediately step in.
- Look for opportunities to help your child build resilience and self reliance in the face of challenges.

### Homework:

- Notice your urges when your child is struggling
- Step back
- Use your own coping strategies

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Any Questions?



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