

insights

May
2016

Helping the Anxious Child

On a daily basis, school professionals deal with the many ways that anxiety can interfere with academic, emotional, and social development in students.

The good news is that there is considerable evidence that a combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and medication (in particular sertraline, a selective serotonin-reuptake inhibitor or SSRI sold under the trade name Zoloft) can significantly reduce anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents. CBT helps individuals identify anxious and self-defeating thoughts, teaching them to both accept the thoughts and to challenge their accuracy, while engaging in behavioral experiments such as exposure tasks that are designed to help them face their fears and develop active coping skills. Little has been proven, however, about the specific factors or "active ingredients" that account for the positive changes that result from this treatment.

A recent study of 488 seven to seventeen year-olds was conducted by a Temple University professor in collaboration with psychologists from multiple sites around the country. The study sought to clarify the active ingredients of CBT alone, CBT and sertraline, and sertraline alone, as compared with a placebo pill treatment. Since anxious children report significantly more anxious self-talk as compared with non-anxious children, and tend to avoid anxiety provoking situations, the researchers hypothesized that progress would be mediated by both a reduction in anxious self talk, and by exposure to feared situations. Exposure tasks, they hypothesized, facilitate the development of active coping skills, such as distraction, biological self-regulation (e.g. paced breathing) and problem-solving. Exposure helps youngsters face and experience the anxiety, practice coping skills, and ultimately to change their perceptions of their own coping ability and self-efficacy.

Study results showed that all three treatments were effective compared with the placebo in reducing anxiety symptoms. However, to the surprise of the researchers,

changes in anxious self-talk did not appear to account for the improvement, while exposure and the resulting increase in coping skills in the face of stressful situations did. So, while it may be premature to rule out the importance of changing anxious self-talk, there is mounting evidence that exposure to anxiety-provoking situations, coupled with the direct teaching of coping skills to use in such situations, are critical components of reducing childhood anxiety.

Teachers can impact the lives of anxious students in multiple ways:

- By educating their understandably over-protective parents that allowing children to consistently avoid anxiety-provoking situations is the most reliable way to increase and maintain anxiety.
- By observing what tasks and situations a student avoids in the classroom, and by facilitating a process by which the student is gradually exposed to what is feared, while coaching him/her about potential coping strategies to tolerate the discomfort and manage the situation.
- By ensuring that highly anxious children are referred to appropriate district resources for assessment and possible treatment referrals. ■

Reference:

Kendall, P. C., et al. (2016). Mediators of Change in the Child/Adolescent Anxiety Multimodal Treatment Study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 84, pages 1-14.

ESS

EFFECTIVE
SCHOOL
SOLUTIONS

25 De Forest Ave., Suite 310
Summit, New Jersey 07901
Phone (973) 299-9954
www.effectiveschoolsolutions.com

The mission of Effective School Solutions is to provide high quality and cost-effective in-district clinical services for students with emotional and behavioral problems.