



EXPLAINING ANXIETY DISORDERS TO CHILDREN

It can be challenging to explain anxiety disorders to children. Sometimes parents will not tell their children that a family member has been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder because they do not know how to explain it to children or they think children will not understand. In an effort to protect children, they sometimes continue with family routines as if nothing was wrong.

The strategies of saying nothing and continuing with routine activities are difficult to maintain, and over time will only be confusing to children trying to understand their relative's problem. Because children are sensitive and intuitive they will notice when a member of the family has emotional, mental and physical changes. Parents should avoid being secretive about the relative's anxiety disorder, as children will develop their own—often wrong—ideas about their relative's condition.

Children from three to seven years of age tend to see the world as revolving around them. As a consequence they blame themselves for unusual and upsetting events or changes in the family, or for unusual changes that occur with other people. For example, if a member of the family has a fear of heights, and becomes upset when a child climbs a ladder, the child may assume he or she is the cause of the person's unusual behaviour.

To explain anxiety disorders to children, it is important to provide them with only as much information as they are mature or old enough to understand. When providing information to toddlers and preschool children, parents should use simple, short sentences. That is, the sentences should be worded in concrete language and be free of technical information. For example, "Sometimes your father doesn't feel well and it makes him upset."

Or, "Your father has an illness that makes him feel upset when he sees someone climb a ladder."

Children in elementary school can process more information. They are more able to understand the concept of an anxiety disorder as an illness; however, too much detail about the nature of the illness and how it is being treated could overwhelm them. One way to explain anxiety disorders to elementary school children is to say, "An anxiety disorder is a kind of illness that makes people worry a lot about heights and getting sick. Worrying so much makes them avoid tall buildings."

Teenagers can manage most information, and often need to talk about what they see and feel. They may worry about the stigma of mental health problems and may ask about the genetics of anxiety disorders. Teenagers will engage in conversations about anxiety disorders if information is shared with them.

There are three main areas that are helpful for parents to cover when speaking with children about anxiety disorders:

1. The parent or family member behaves this way because he or she has an illness.

It is easiest for children to understand an anxiety disorder when it is explained to them as an illness. Tell children that a member of the family has an illness called an anxiety disorder. You may explain it like this: "An anxiety disorder is like a cold, except that you don't catch it, and rather than giving you a runny nose, it makes you worry a lot, sometimes for no reason. This worry makes people with an anxiety disorder avoid heights, or stay away from things that bother them, or check things over and over. Sometimes, they want others in the family to act the same way that they do. An anxiety disorder takes a long time to get better. People with an anxiety disorder need help from a doctor or therapist."

2. Reassure the child that he or she did not make the parent or family member get this illness. Children need to know that their actions did not cause their loved one to develop the illness. People with anxiety disorders may become depressed as they struggle with their symptoms. It is important to reassure children that they did not make their loved one fearful or anxious.

3. Reassure the child that the adults in the family and other people, such as doctors, are trying to help the affected person.

It is the responsibility of adults to take care of the family member with an anxiety disorder. Children should not worry about taking care of anyone who is ill. Children need their parents and other trusted adults to protect them. Children should be allowed to talk about what they see and feel with someone who knows how hard it is for a relative to struggle with the symptoms of an anxiety disorder. The changes that occur in a loved one because of an anxiety disorder are often scary to children. They miss the time spent with the person who is ill.

Participating in activities outside the home helps children as it exposes them to healthy relationships. As the relative with an anxiety disorder recovers, and he or she gradually resumes family activities, this will help to improve his or her relationship with the children in the family.

If the relative with an anxiety disorder is a parent, he or she and the other parent should talk with the children about explaining the anxiety disorder to people outside the family. The support of friends is important for everyone. However, because anxiety disorders can be hard to explain, and some families worry about the stigma of mental illness, family members will have to decide how open they wish to be about their situation.

Some parents who are affected with an anxiety disorder may find that they are less patient and more easily irritated than usual. They may find it hard to tolerate the loud, messy, chaotic play of their children. For them, the family may have to design and develop structured routines to ensure that the parent with an anxiety disorder has quiet and restful time away from situations that might trigger symptoms of the illness. Times should be planned to allow for children to play outside the home or for the parent with an anxiety disorder to rest for part of the day in a quiet area of the home.

Do you need more help?

Don't be afraid to reach out for more help. If you're not sure who to talk to, consider calling **Timmins Family Counselling Centre** to learn more about anxiety and if counselling is right for you.

You can reach us at **705-267-7333**.

You can also visit our website at www.timminsfamilycounselling.com