

Anxious teens need to face their fears, not be saved

Katy Gosset 11:00, Apr 12 2018

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UNSPASH

Parents want to save their children from anxiety, but they shouldn't.

Parents of anxious teenagers should encourage their children to be brave and confront their anxiety head on, says a Christchurch-based clinical psychologist.

Catherine Gallagher has seen many children with anxiety issues following the region's earthquakes. Many others have fears about everything from performing and social pressures to wind, dogs and spiders.

It was natural for parents to want to protect their children by stepping in to "rescue them" from uncomfortable situations, but a better approach was to support children to face their fears, Gallagher told the RNZ parenting podcast [Are We There Yet?](#)

Don't let kid's anxiety become a member of the family

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Anxiety in children is normal but don't let it become a member of the family, says psychologist Catherine Gallagher, who has worked with children affected by the Christchurch earthquakes.

So it was important that parents had a core understanding of what caused the anxious feelings.

Anxiety was both normal and necessary and was driven by a primal 'alarm system' that signalled threats, she said.

The alarm system scanned the environment, preparing the body for action to meet the threat by freezing, fighting or taking flight.

Gallagher said that worked well when someone needed to escape a lion but was less suited to modern life.

"If you're running away from social threats, a fear of rejection or getting something wrong, the alarm is not designed for that but our brain hasn't evolved to tell the difference."

That could mean a primal response kicked in when it wasn't needed.

"So you can be left lying in bed the night before an exam and your body is pumped up on adrenalin that has nowhere to go", she said

Worse, Gallagher said this natural response to threats could be hacked.

"Thoughts from the past and future can trick the alarm system into firing, making us experience danger as current when actually we are safe."

She said, while distressing or negative thoughts had their own value in warning of potential threats, if too much attention was paid to them, they could snowball.

"Anxiety can become a member of the family that we have to take into account and bring along with us."

People were often tempted to either brood about the worrisome issue or try to ignore it, neither of which were effective.

Gallagher instead advised exposing children to the source of their anxiety and supporting them to take brave steps towards tackling it.

"This is essential when supporting a child with anxiety. We need to help them work out what is dangerous versus what their brain might be telling them is dangerous, how their brain is tricking them."

An example was finding an activity to calm an anxious child before school but making it clear that school would still be attended.

"You can stay and keep debating whether to go to school or not and that just means you won't be able to play that game before school. Either way we're going to school."

Parents who were firm with their socially anxious children would not harm them, Gallagher said.

"They are helping to form new connections and knowledge that will help them fight back against anxiety when it turns up. And it will."

Gallagher likened exposure to anxious thoughts to vaccinating her children, explaining that while they hadn't loved the jabs, they would enjoy the long term benefits of immunisation.

"I made that decision based on the fact that I wanted my child to be well in the future."

So short term pain was about creating a space where my child was going to be able to fight off illnesses or deal with issues down the track."

Gallagher said parents could teach their children anxiety management strategies but, unless the children actually had to use them, they wouldn't.

"A lot of this is about parents being comfortable to sit with their kid's distress, validate their child's distress and support them in doing this brave thing." she said.

Over time children would begin to understand their own patterns.

"Then the child knows that, "This is what I do. I get anxious and then the scary thing doesn't happen" and they know that, "I am equal to this. I can do it."

Hear more on RNZ's parenting podcast [Are We There Yet?](#)