

# THE COUNSELOR

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## ANXIOUS CHILDREN

All children have anxiety during certain times in their development. Children from 8 months through preschool may show intense distress when they are separated from their parents. It's common for young children to have temporary fears of the dark, storms, strangers, and animals. Some children are very anxious. They are sensitive and worry too much. They're nervous and uptight. These children become extremely anxious and stressed out when faced with pressure. Some children worry constantly about the future and about failing. They worry a lot about school, friends, and sports. They fear embarrassment or making mistakes. Many anxious children are perfectionists, consumed with doing things exactly right or they refuse to do them at all. They become paralyzed by their perfectionism. Some have repetitive thoughts and actions. They have low self-esteem. Some anxious children need lots of attention while others remain quiet and well behaved. Anxiety is a problem when it occurs too much of the time or interferes with daily life, such as separating from parents, making friends, attending various activities, focusing on academics, or sleeping at night. Severe anxiety disorders can affect a child's thinking, decision-making ability, perceptions of the environment, learning, and concentration. Thirteen percent of children ages 9 through 17 have an anxiety disorder. This "terror within" blocks them from fully experiencing and enjoying life.

### Anxiety Disorders

**Overanxious Disorder** - Excessive worry, apprehension, and anxiety occurring most days for a period of 6 months or more. Concern over a number of activities/events. Almost always anticipating the worst. Difficulty controlling anxiety. Restlessness, on edge. Easily fatigued. Difficulty concentrating, mind goes blank. Irritability, muscle tension, headache, nausea, difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or restless sleep. Significant distress, problems functioning. Also - Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

**Separation Anxiety** - Constant thoughts and fears about the safety of his/herself and fami-



ly. Does not want to go to school. Complains often of stomach aches and other sicknesses. Worries about sleeping away from home. Very attached. Panics and/or throws temper tantrums when separating from parents. Trouble sleeping or nightmares.

**Panic Disorder** - Repeated episodes of intense fear that strike often and without warning. Recurrent unexpected panic attacks and episodes of worry about having other attacks. Avoidance of situations from where escape might be difficult or help might not be available. Physical symptoms include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, feelings of unreality, and fear of dying.



**Social Phobia** - Persistent and significant fear of one or more social situations where a child is exposed to unfamiliar persons or scrutiny by others and feels he will behave in a way that will be embarrassing and humiliating.

**Social Anxiety** - Fears of meeting new people. Few friends outside the family.

**Specific Phobias** - Specific and significant fear that is unreasonable and excessive. Triggered by the presence of specific feared situation or object. Exposure to the situation or object provokes an anxiety reaction immediately. Distress, avoidance, anticipation of the feared situation or object significantly interferes with the child's

functioning or routine. Animals, insects, storms, heights, water, needles, blood, etc.

**Obsessive Compulsive Disorder** - Repeated, unwanted thoughts or compulsive behaviors (counting, hand washing, etc.), seems impossible to control. The obsessions and compulsions cause notable distress and impairment, are time consuming (more than one hour a day). Common obsessions include dirt and contamination, repeated doubts, need to have things arranged a specific way, fearful aggressive or murderous impulses, and disturbing sexual imagery. Compulsions frequently involve repetitive hand washing, checking locks, windows, doors, counting rituals, repeating actions and requesting reassurance.

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder** - A pattern of flashbacks and other symptoms like persistent physiological arousal such as difficulty falling or staying asleep, irritability and anger outbursts, difficulty concentrating, excessive vigilance, and exaggerated startle response. These symptoms persist for more than a month and cause significant distress and impairment in functioning. Occurs in children who have experienced a psychologically distressing event like physical or sexual abuse, being a victim or witness of violence, or exposure to some other traumatic event such as a bombing or hurricane.

**Acute Stress Disorder** - Exposure to a traumatic event in which child experiences, witnesses, or is confronted by an event involving actual or perceived threat of death, serious bodily injury. Person's response involves intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Traumatic



dren both struggle with letting go. Separation anxiety in children is magnified. First time parents tend to have more anxiety in raising their child. Trauma and extremely stressful situations also cause anxiety in children and adolescents. Child abuse, natural disasters, violence, and exposure to life threatening events cause significant anxiety. Medical conditions may also cause anxiety. Anxiety runs in families too. Studies show that 50% of patients with Panic Disorder have at least one relative affected with an anxiety disorder. A variety of factors can combine to cause anxiety in children. Anxious children often become anxious adults. Untreated anxiety can lead to depression.



event is continually re-experienced much like posttraumatic stress disorder but the symptoms persist for less than one month.

**Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety** - Child develops behavioral symptoms within 3 months in response to an identifiable stressor. Symptoms and behaviors cause marked distress which results in significant occupational, social, or academic performance. Disturbance does not last longer than 6 months.

### **Causes/Dynamics**

Young children whose parents are anxious are more likely to have an anxiety disorder. Parents who are highly anxious, hypercritical, and display fearful or negativistic reactions to stressful situations tend to promote anxiety. Parents plant seeds for anxiety by being overly protective. Overprotection, parental fears, and the child's sensitive disposition interact to undermine the child's sense of competency and self-esteem. Parents block their children's emotional growth when they constantly rescue their children from difficult situations. Overprotected children don't feel like their parents believe in them. They take on their parents' worry and doubt their own ability to become more independent. Parents and chil-

### **Treatment**

Good treatment addresses both symptoms and underlying causes of anxiety in children. The source of anxiety must be understood, exposed, and dealt with gradually. Cognitive behavioral therapy is very effective in treating many anxiety disorders. This approach teaches children to react differently to situations and bodily sensations that trigger anxiety symptoms. It also teaches them to understand how their thinking patterns contribute to their symptoms. They learn how to change their thoughts so that symptoms do not occur. This awareness of thinking patterns is combined with other behavioral techniques to help children confront their feared situations. Counseling and psychotherapy focuses on resolving conflicts, stresses, and developmental issues. Counseling

helps children and adolescents identify and resolve underlying emotional pain/hurts, and combat fears. Difficult family relationships, are examined and addressed. Parents learn how to let go appropriately and help their children gradually become more independent. Medication may be necessary when the symptoms are so severe they interfere with daily life. Therapy and medication together is recommended for very anxious children, especially those diagnosed with post traumatic stress, obsessive compulsive, and panic disorders.

Anxiety in children can also be lowered by the avoidance of stimulants, keeping good sleeping habits, and reducing stressful situations at home and school. Parents, monitor the ways you relate to your child. Are you overprotective? You may have to face some of your own fears and anxieties. You can help your child become more confident when you believe that he can learn to face situations that produce anxiety. Believe in him. Create an open atmosphere for talking about feelings. Share yours and invite your child to do the same. It really helps for them to talk about their feelings. Help your child develop and rehearse a practice plan for handling potentially threatening situations. Gradually help your child try the things he fears. Don't force him. Encourage your children to talk when they are afraid. Don't make fun of your child's fears, take them serious. Monitor sources of fear like TV, toys, books, and relationships. Lead by example, resolve your own fears and anxieties. Help your child examine their beliefs that lead to fear. Praise your children when they have small accomplishments in overcoming anxiety provoking situations. Teach your children to pray, to go to God, and ask Him for help in dealing with life, especially troubling situations. Pray with your children. Invite God into the healing process. He is the Ultimate Healing Agent in completely restoring your child. Help your children develop and grow in their relationship with God. Encourage them to trust in God and let go of their irrational fears. Rely on the Lord when you feel anxious and insecure. Your children are watching. Let them see God help you overcome.

### **Freedom**

Children do not have to be enslaved by anxiety. They can overcome this terror within. There is hope and help no matter what causes their anxiety. This life is very challenging. We live in an evil, fear-producing, fallen world, but God still owns and rules this earth. Our problems here are temporary. There will be no worries in Heaven. We can still live victoriously no matter what the threat is, real or imagined, until that glorious today. Our loving Savior can calm our fearful, restless, anxious hearts. He can do the same for our children too. Children do not have to be intimidated and overwhelmed by life. They can experience God's peace and freedom too, when they draw upon Christ. Show your children how a strong vibrant faith in God Almighty crushes the very roots of anxiety and fear. Help them live the very words and promises of God. Encourage them to enjoy that freedom. Remind them by your words and actions that "We have not been given a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind." (2 Tim. 1:7). Help them read and carry out Philippians 4:6-7. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." God will honor your children's prayers and give them freedom from endless worry.



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