

NAVIGATING ANXIETY IN CHILDREN

BY JENNIFER COHEN HARPER

NAVIGATING ANXIETY WITH PERSONAL POWER AND SELF-COMPASSION

Anxiety is on the rise in our culture, both for adults and for our children. As caregivers, we want to do everything we can to reduce anxiety and help our kids thrive, but often our actions do the opposite, especially when we struggle with anxiety ourselves.

Because we so badly want our kids to feel better, the message of adults when children are anxious is often some version of “we need to get rid of this anxiety.” Then the adult works to distract the child, or convince them that there’s nothing to be anxious about.

How would it feel for you if your friends and family reacted to your worries that way?

Trying to get rid of a feeling never makes it go away! To help kids (and ourselves) feel more powerful and competent, we have to look directly at the anxiety, and listen to what it’s trying to say.

1.

ANXIETY HAS SOMETHING TO TELL US, BUT WE ARE MISINTERPRETING IT!

Everyone experiences anxiety. It's a normal part of life, and just like our other emotions, anxiety serves a purpose. It gives us information, and at times can even help our body prepare for what is coming.

Anxiety is one way our body tells us that something important to us is at stake. But we often interpret the experience of anxiety as *"something is wrong and I can't handle it"* or even *"something is wrong with me, and I can't do anything right."*

Those interpretations are just stories that our mind is making up! We don't have to believe them. But, they get stronger if we try to push them away. Instead, we need to actively tell ourselves, and our kids, another story.

If we can shift our mindset during anxiety to *"something important to me is at stake...I'm nervous about my ability to handle it...time to get my A-game on"* we can manage and even thrive during challenges. And so can our kids.

One of the great lies that anxiety tells us is that we aren't good enough. Not good enough for our family, friends, work, school, sports....in this context mistakes are magnified, challenges feel like threats, and it's easier to avoid new things than risk failing.

To counter this narrative, we need to build a relationship with our own body and mind that's rooted in what we can do, and at the same time be taught to soften towards ourselves through self-compassion.

Helping our kids find self-compassion starts with us being compassionate towards them, and ourselves.

ACTIVATING OUR COMPASSION (2 MIN)



This video is part of the online workshop Navigating Anxiety in Children: Meeting Stress with Inner Strength. Learn more at <https://www.eomega.org/workshops/navigating-anxiety-children>

2.

DISCONNECTION AND OVERSTIMULATION FEED ANXIETY

While the causes of anxiety vary widely on the surface, two things that make worries worse are disconnection and overstimulation. They amplify fear and decrease resilience for everyone, especially our kids, and in our modern life they are feeding our fears in a big way!

Disconnection (feeling that we aren't quite seen and understood, that we're in it alone) makes everything harder. For kids, it's often driven by adult and peer technology use, caregiver stress and distraction, subtle cues for support being missed, and behaviors being misinterpreted.

We've all felt the impact of being overstimulated. Having so much input that even our nervous system can't keep up, much less our minds. For children, this might look like academic pressures, over-scheduling, world and community events, or even just everyday things like a super noisy lunchroom. Overstimulation often leads to shutdown and avoidance, and for kids can also lead to tantrums, anger, and feelings of hopelessness.

When anxiety is rising for our kids, we can help by increasing connection, and decreasing stimulation. The more we manage our own overwhelm, slow down, and create meaningful experiences of being seen and heard for our kids, the more we will see the roar of their anxiety start to quiet.

BACK TO BACK BREATHING: A CONNECTION PRACTICE (2 MIN)



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3.

THE OPPOSITE OF ANXIETY ISN'T CALM, IT'S PERSONAL POWER

Once we've helped our kids feel connected, the next step is to bring some attention to what is actually happening, and what they can do to help themselves. And it's much easier to teach our kids these strategies if we use and model them for ourselves.

As my own kids have been growing up, it's been helpful to have some simple options for them to rely on when challenges arise; reminders that move them in the direction of resilience, and interrupt the nagging voices of worry and self-doubt. What I've taught them is that when things are hard, they can always take a break, ask for help, or power up and keep trying.

Paying attention to their body and mind can help them figure out which option they need. For example, fast breathing may mean they need to take a break and settle their nervous system. If their mind is making up all kinds of stories, it could be a good time to ask for help or gather more information.

And when our kids are looking a challenge in the face, reminding themselves how strong they can be (with powerful movement, dancing to an inspiring song, remembering a past success) can help them harness the inner resources to rise to the occasion.

“Power up and keep trying” doesn’t mean everything will go the way we want it to. It means we are using our strength, giving it our best shot, and managing our frustration along the way. And sometimes, in the process, we may need to take a break, or ask for help!

As we build these options (take a break, ask for help, power-up and keep trying) into day-to-day life, they start to become part of our children’s inner voice.

The goal is that when anxiety is rising, kids will ask themselves what they need. What important information is this anxiety telling me? What can I do about it?

Knowing they have options interrupts the feelings of helplessness and overwhelm, and moves them towards accessing their power.

4.

PERSONAL POWER GROWS IN THE CONTEXT OF COMPASSIONATE RELATIONSHIP

When anxiety is rising, the message children need to get from the adults around them is not let's get rid of this anxiety. Instead they need to hear *Your body is telling you something important, I see and understand how hard this is, you are strong enough to handle this, I'm here for you.*

The I'm here for you part is important. Often as adults we want to teach children tools so that they can manage anxiety on their own in the "real world". But remember, anxiety is magnified by isolation and diminished by connection.

When our children are feeling overwhelmed, the presence of a calm, compassionate adult provides a beacon of stability, a source of strength, and a reminder of their resources. Kids who feel like someone has their back can walk more confidently into the world, even when that person is not literally at their side!

The healthy development of our children's resilience system depends on connection. Give them tools, teach them about their power, but remember that one of their greatest resources is YOU!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Cohen Harper is an author, mindfulness and yoga educator, and Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) provider. She holds a master's degree in experiential education from NYU's Gallatin School, and has dedicated her two decades of work to creating spaces and sharing practices that support healing, strengthen connection, and help people joyfully embrace the full human experience with a sense of aliveness, agency, and personal power.

She is author of three children's books, *Thank You Body, Thank You Heart: A Gratitude and Self-Compassion Practice for Bedtime*; *Thank You Mind: Understanding Big Feelings on Tricky Days*; and *Thank You Breath: Finding Peace and Power from the Inside Out*, along with a variety of card decks, workbooks, and other resources.

As the founder of [Little Flower Yoga](https://www.eomega.org/workshops/teachers/jennifer-cohen-harper) Jenn has brought embodied mindfulness programming and education to schools and community organizations nationwide since 2006, serving students, families, educators, and mental health providers. For the past six years, with the development of [Mindfulness with Horses](https://www.eomega.org/workshops/teachers/jennifer-cohen-harper), she's expanded her services to the field, where the integration of equines into her work with individuals and families has provided a new way to heal and grow in relationship.

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