

Anxiety and Learning Disorders

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My Background

- ▶ Family Therapy
 - ▶ Systemic Thinking
 - ▶ Solution Focused
 - ▶ DBT
- ▶ School Psychology
 - ▶ Academic vs. Emotional
 - ▶ Teacher Consultation
- ▶ Executive Functioning Skills

Purpose for Today's Presentation

▶ This conference will provide information from theory and practice to address the interaction between anxiety and learning disorders. Parents will learn about how to recognize the symptoms of anxiety associated with learning disorders and how to support their children in an empowering way.

Agenda

- ▶ Learning Disorders
 - ▶ Definition as the target population
- ▶ Anxiety
 - ▶ Definition
 - ▶ Triggers
- ▶ How to help
 - ▶ Executive Functioning Skills
 - ▶ Resiliency

Learning Disorders

- ▶ Academic skills substantially and quantifiably below expected levels according to individual's chronological age, causing significant interference with academic or occupational performance, or with activities of daily living, and confirmed by individualized standardized achievement measures and clinical assessment.

Learning Disorders and Anxiety

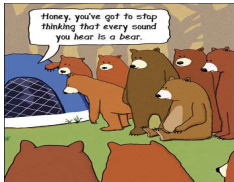
A Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles. The left circle is labeled "Learning Disorders" and the right circle is labeled "Anxiety Disorders". The overlapping area in the center represents the intersection of the two conditions.

Anxiety

- ▶ Definition:
 - ▶ Anticipation of future threat (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)
 - ▶ An abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Anxiety

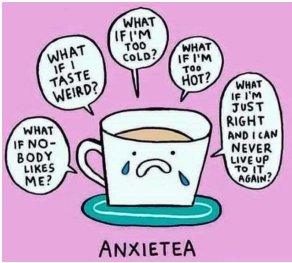
- ▶ Differences with Fear
 - ▶ Fear is emotional response to real or imminent threat
 - ▶ Fear is necessary for protection



Anxiety

- ▶ Types often found in schools (American Psychiatric Association, 2013):
 - ▶ Generalized Anxiety Disorder is characterized by persistent and excessive anxiety and worry about things that are difficult to control, regarding home or school performance
 - ▶ Social anxiety disorder refers to the fear or anxiety the individual feels of social interactions and situations that involve the possibility of being judged

Anxiety



Anxiety

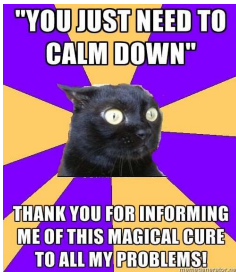
What do we see at home?

- ▶ Stressed about homework
- ▶ Difficulties sleeping
- ▶ Emotional dysregulation
- ▶ Perfectionism
- ▶ Difficulties concentrating
- ▶ Problems with task completion

What do we see at school?

- ▶ School refusal
- ▶ Low grades
- ▶ Test anxiety
- ▶ Social difficulties
- ▶ Difficulties concentrating
- ▶ Problems with task completion

How can we help?



How can we help?

- ▶ Research-based says...
 - ▶ Exposure
 - ▶ Relaxation
 - ▶ Mindfulness
 - ▶ Executive Functioning Skills
 - ▶ Resiliency emphasis

How to help: Theoretical Foundation

- ▶ Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

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graph TD; Feelings[Feelings] <--> Thoughts[Thoughts]; Feelings <--> Behaviors[Behaviors]; Thoughts <--> Behaviors;
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How to help: Theoretical Foundation

- ▶ Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)
 - ▶ Mindfulness
 - ▶ Interpersonal effectiveness
 - ▶ Distress tolerance
 - ▶ Self Regulation

How to help in practical terms

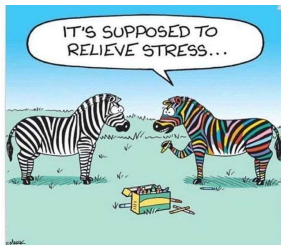
- ▶ Exposure
 - ▶ Can't vs. Won't
 - ▶ Just Do It!
 - ▶ Reward approach to anxiety-producing situations, not the outcome, i.e. anxiety ladder
 - ▶ Allow mistakes, allow the struggle
 - ▶ Do not support avoidance of difficult situations

How to help

- ▶ Relaxation
 - ▶ Breathe! (Belly breathing, 4 square breathing)
 - ▶ Facilitate a quiet, uninterrupted space and time
 - ▶ Provide coping thoughts
 - ▶ Practice positive self-talk

How to help?

- ▶ Mindfulness: all senses and in the present



How to help?

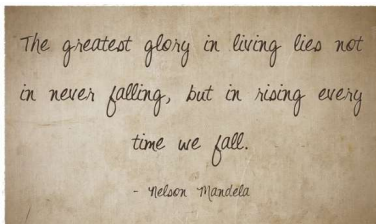
- ▶ Executive Functioning Skills
 - ▶ Interrelated independent skills, including response inhibition, working memory, emotional control, sustained attention, task initiation, planning and prioritization, organization, time management, goal-directed persistence, flexibility, and metacognition (Dawson & Guare, 2012)
 - ▶ Undergoing development until young adulthood

How to help?

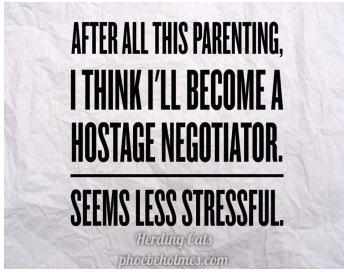
- ▶ Executive Functioning Skills (EFS)
 - ▶ Work on study skills
 - ▶ Support strategies for the different skills
 - ▶ Prevent emotional overflowing
 - ▶ Time outs for accessing rational thoughts
 - ▶ Clear expectations and rules

How to help?

- ▶ Resiliency



Final thoughts



References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2012). *Coaching students with executive skills deficits*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary (11th ed.). (2003). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

Questions?

THANKS!

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