

***Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents:  
Recognizing and Treating the Emerging Epidemic***

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“Anxiety in children diminishes their intellectual, emotional and social development, as well as physical health” (Foxman)

I recently attended a two day workshop on Anxiety Disorders in Thunder Bay presented by Paul Foxman, a clinical psychologist. He is also the Founder and Director of the Center for Anxiety Disorders in Vermont. Dr. Foxman specializes in anxiety disorders in children and adults. He addressed the key anxiety disorders and offered effective therapy strategies and techniques for the following:

- Separation anxiety disorder
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Panic disorder
- Phobias (including social phobia)
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Anxiety disorder associated with a medical condition

In addition, he discussed the role of family and school in contributing to anxiety and made recommendations to schools to help to reduce anxiety (e.g. managing test anxiety). For more detail and information regarding these anxiety disorders, you can go the following website and access the power point. You will find many helpful and effective strategies that can be used in the classroom.  
<https://dentonllc.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/anxiety-disorders-in-childrenadolescents-recognizing-emerging-trends.pdf>

Paul Foxman believes there are three basic ingredients that contribute to anxiety in children -- *biological sensitivity*, *personality*, and *stress overload*. *Biological sensitivity* refers to the fact that some of us are born with a high level of sensitivity to both external stimulation; due to such sensitivity, we tend to react intensely – a disposition toward reacting to stimuli with higher than average intensity. They are especially sensitive to stress.

*Personality* refers to a common pattern of personality traits of the anxiety-prone person:

- Is responsible, dependable, hardworking
- Is a perfectionist and has high expectations
- Aims to please and seeks approval
- Is sensitive to criticism and fearful of rejection
- Easily influenced by the opinions of others
- Needs to feel in control
- Has difficulty relaxing
- Has difficulty with strong emotions
- Has problems with assertiveness

*Stress overload* often determines when the anxiety will surface which triggers anxiety.

Children, and adolescents may find that school is contributing to anxiety due to performance demand, social issues, safety issues, and/or stress-inducing responsibilities. Here are some ways students can manage anxiety at school:

- Develop a predictable schedule or routine
- Set smaller goals or break down larger goals into more manageable short term goals
- Seek support when feeling overwhelmed or ask for help when needed (i.e. teacher)
- Focus on individual tasks one at a time
- Improve time management skills
- Develop small relaxation techniques appropriate for the school

No doubt anxiety is an issue in all schools. Foxman suggests that schools should have an “Anxiety Prevention Program”. First of all, reducing anxiety in schools begins with recognizing the personality traits. Here are some suggestions for teachers in helping to reduce anxiety in the classroom:

- Maintain a calm and structured classroom; establish routines (structure reduces anxiety)
- Develop a positive relationship with your students
- Be aware and understanding of family stresses
- Be flexible and help with preparation for transitions/changes
- Use behaviour as communication of feelings (source of negative behaviour)
- Recognize the different learning styles
- Manage your own stress and anxiety
- Encourage the process of learning- rather than the emphasis on marks

Understanding anxiety and its background can be insightful to teachers in the classroom. For example, many students are not handing in work in on time or not at all. One of the many reasons, could be procrastination often due to lack of confidence, or fear of failure. Procrastination is often a symptom of perfectionism. It is part of a cycle of stress and anxiety, in which people procrastinate because they are stressed and then become more stressed and anxious as they have less time to complete their homework. As teachers, we can teach students to break down tasks/assignments into smaller manageable parts as one effective way to avoid procrastination. Another effective way, is to have students start an assignment at school. Once students get started, then completing it at home could be easier.

Overall, the workshop was interesting and meaningful to classroom teachers, guidance counselors, parents and mental health workers. If you are interested in this topic, you may want to read his books, *The Worried Child*, and *Dancing With Fear*.

Ruth Pino