



## **Fall Speaker**

Monday & Tuesday, October 22 & 23, 2018

National Presbyterian School

### **Preventing Anxiety and Depression:**

### **Skills We Can (and Should) Be Teaching Our Children**

**Lynn Lyons, LICSW**

This year's Fall Speaker Event featured Lynn Lyons, addressing approximately 500 parents, teachers and administrators at National Presbyterian School. Susan Newell, President of the Parents Council of Washington (PCW) and Malcolm Lester, Head of School at National Presbyterian School welcomed the audience. Lynn Lyons was introduced and welcomed by PCW Event Co-Chair, Catherine Scott.

Lyons is a licensed clinical social worker who has been practicing for 30 years. She is the co-author of two books on anxiety including, *Anxious Kids, Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous & Independent Children* and *Playing with Anxiety: Casey's Guide for Teens and Kids*.

Worry and anxiety are normal, both an undeniable part of our lives. There are many contributing factors such as genetics, temperament and various life stressors. Lyons focus is on the generational cycle of worry. In fact, she does not see children alone for therapy (unless they are old enough to drive themselves to the appointment). Parents must also attend therapy to understand and to implement strategies. The goal is to learn and to help children learn how to expect, externalize, and experiment with and manage the anxiety.

Not trying to blame parents but rather promote awareness of the worry and anxiety that exist within families, Lyons lightheartedly stated "parents, if it's nature it's you and if it's nurture it's you." Parents model anxious thinking for their children. In the same way that children eat with a spoon because their parents eat with a spoon, children can develop anxiety because their parents model anxious thinking. This means what parents do matters and that is good news! Parents can model positive expectancy or the belief that things, including anxiety, can change. Lyons then discussed strategies for proactively addressing anxiety and worry.

She defines anxiety under one umbrella as opposed to dividing it into separation anxiety, specific phobias, etc. Regardless of the diagnosis the process of worry is the same, which makes it more treatable. When she meets with families she tries to determine their strengths to use in treatment.

Much of the presentation focused on how anxiety and the brain/body work, and why it is often necessary to retrain the worried brain to create different responses. Lyons described the relationship between the prefrontal cortex (our thoughts and cognitive processes - “the thinking part” of our brain) and the amygdala (our sensations and physiological processes – our body’s “alarm system”).

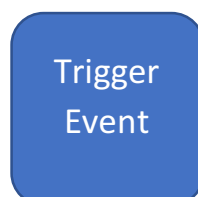
The prefrontal cortex (in the front of the brain behind the forehead) is responsible for much of our human functioning and allows us to regulate our behavior. It takes in data through our bodily senses, analyzes it and determines subsequent action. When the prefrontal cortex decides an event is a threat (real or imagined), it sends danger and worry messages to the amygdala (a small, almond-shaped structure in the base of the brain). The amygdala then activates emergency responses to the real or imagined threat, firing up the alarm system or pushing the panic button so to speak. Next, it makes us feel anxious by sending messages to our body which trigger defense systems or the fight-or-flight response (i.e. digestive system shuts down and tummy starts to hurt).

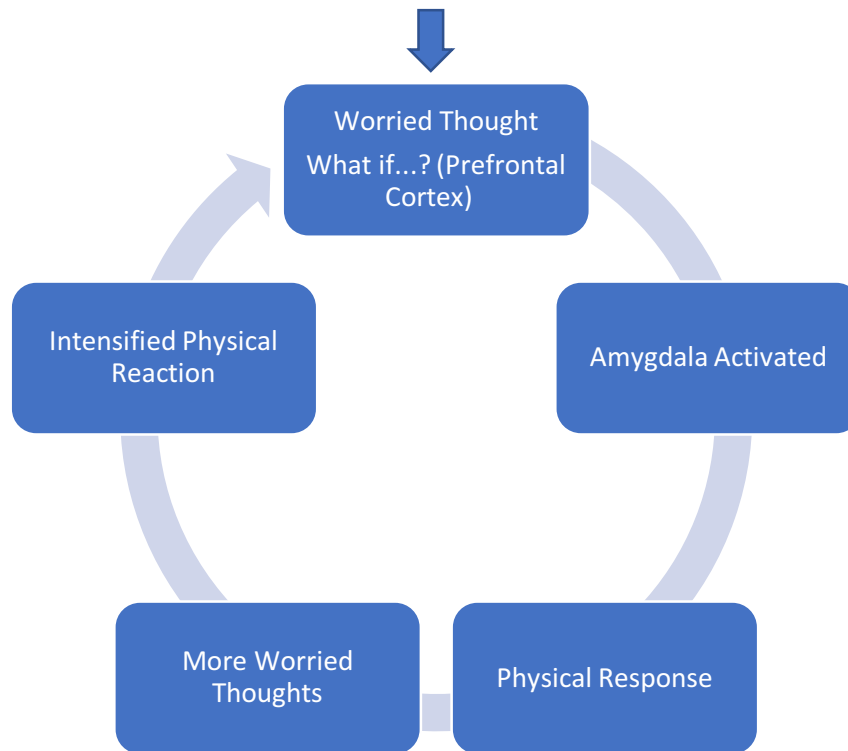
Lyons stated that anxiety (a physiological process) and worry (a cognitive process) interfere with social connection and can lead to isolation and depression. In fact, untreated anxiety is the leading predictor of depression in teens and young adults. To diminish patterns that support anxiety and depression Lyons focuses simultaneously on prevention and treatment using an intervention that builds the following critical cognitive skills:

- Tolerating (and normalizing) discomfort
- Externalizing and reacting differently to thoughts
- Learning by doing, failing, and succeeding
- Handling the uncertainty of life
- Being flexible (malleability)
- Problem solving (not ruminating)

According to Lyons, anxiety has figured out how to be overwhelming, but is not that complicated. Anxiety demands TWO things: certainty- “I have to know what’s going to happen next...and I want to control it!” and comfort- “I want to feel safe and comfortable...or else I want out!”

### **The Process of Anxiety**





Lyons discussed four Critical Concepts as we face anxiety...

1. The **CONTENT** of the worry is far less important than the **PROCESS** of how we worry or how worry operates. Lyons differentiated between **CONTENT**-based interventions and **PROCESS**-based interventions. Content-based interventions focus on and talk about how to fix a **SPECIFIC** problem, reassure about that **SPECIFIC** problem, give data, stats, rationale, and information, and go over plans and specifics repeatedly. In contrast, **PROCESS**-based interventions focus on **HOW** worry operates and what it is up to. Worry-managing strategies may include such techniques as externalizing and naming the worry (i.e. “that sounds like worry to me...”) and prompt, independent and internal reassurance and problem solving (i.e. cognitive skills rather than external crutches or accommodations). Lyons favors process-based interventions.
2. We are eliminating **NOTHING!** It is a paradox. The more you try to get rid of a worried thought or symptom, the **STRONGER** it gets! We are **NOT** eliminating or avoiding physical symptoms. We are perceiving and managing them through a different lens. We are stepping into worry and allowing it to show up. She cautions about the use of external Safety Crutches (such as cell phones, over-the-counter medicine, water bottles, thermometers) which reduce, mute or prevent anxiety symptoms and increase perception of personal control, making the child feel more secure. Lyons suggests that safety crutches can serve useful functions and be developmentally appropriate (i.e. night lights), but that excessive reliance both strengthens anxiety through avoidance behavior and limits range of functioning. Safety crutches shift focus away from internal reassurance toward external reassurance.

3. We have to teach an OFFENSIVE rather than a DEFENSIVE position. Lyons suggests choosing action over avoidance. Worry says STOP. Worry is not a big fan of moving forward. Anxiety demands a defensive stance. BUT...we must learn to take action when we are worried...BRING IT ON! If you will stop telling your alarm center that there is danger, it will learn on its own not to push that danger button. We must make a CRITICAL ATTITUDINAL SHIFT! If I'm uncomfortable or unsure or nervous as I am learning something new, I am on the right track.
4. Playful CONNECTION is the opposite of what anxiety demands. Playful connection means openness, parents acknowledging their own patterns when possible, modeling of connection by other adults, humor, warmth, and consistency.

### Key Points from the Question and Answer

- Anxiety is strengthened by two internal processes: rigid perfectionism and an imagination that focuses on worst possible outcomes.
- Lyons ironically uses the acronym Really Good Coping Patterns In Action to remember the seven symptom *patterns present in anxious thinking*: Rigid or demanding certainty, Global black and white thinking, Catastrophic, Permanent, Internally focused (on thoughts, feelings) and Avoidant.
- Dealing with anxiety and worry . . . Expect it: it is a normal part of development. Externalize it. Step back and learn to recognize its patterns and stories. Experiment with it: do stuff! The brain learns by doing and anxiety is strengthened through avoidance.
- If a child is having a panic attack, remove him/her from the classroom, have him/her breathe and wait it out. Don't talk too much.
- Seek help for anxiety when it interferes with school and academics or sleep.
- When treating anxiety, avoid avoidance (of possible failures, negative affect, physical arousal, new experiences, social contact). Treatment plans based on accommodation and avoidance alone will fail. Treatment plans need to build skills. You cannot rid your life of trigger events. Treatment must retrain the amygdala. If not, "are you doing the disorder?"
- Anxiety is like a cult leader. When you obey the cult leader, the price is high because you fail to develop the skills necessary for dealing with the unpredictability and uncertainty of life.

Go to [www.lynnlyonsnh.com](http://www.lynnlyonsnh.com) for additional resources. A takeaway handout can be found [here](#).