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&

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Counsellors' Corner

Separation Anxiety & School Refusal

Can look like (not all profiles are the same)

Strengths

- Sensitive
- Listens to their body signals about potential dangers of unfamiliar situations
- Relies on close attachments for safety
- Prefers consistent routines and expectations to help feel safe

Behaviours

- School refusal
- Somatization – tummy ache, headache, etc.
- Defiant behaviours – arguing, not following adults' directions, ignoring, bolting, fighting
- Blaming, "I hate my teacher," "I'm being bullied"
- Emotional dysregulation – crying, yelling, tantrums, withdrawal
- Developmental regression – acting like they did at an earlier age
- Clinginess
- Over-attachment to peers (particularly with teens)
- Increased reliance on technology (phone use, gaming, social media, etc.)
- Lack of sleep

What's happening for the student

- "Faulty neuroception" - brain is detecting danger when there is no real danger. Brain is triggering child to shift involuntarily into a defensive position which can result in refusal or over-attachment to a familiar, safe person.
- Brain is in fight/flight/freeze mode. This occurs in the brain stem and is "survival brain." When the brain is in survival mode, it is perceiving that there is a real threat, and it needs to protect itself. Logical thought, reasoning, and negotiating don't work in survival brain (logical thought is called executive functioning and can't work when the brain is trying to protect the body)
- The brain has the body engage in the above behaviours to protect itself, even though the behaviours might not seem logical. Punishment/consequences will often send the child further into survival mode. Furthermore, attempts at reasoning with the child in the stressful moment will not work (remember, the "frontal lobe" or "executive functioning" of the brain shuts down with the "brain stem" or "survival brain" are engaged).
- A generation ago, one of the biggest motivators of going to school was to **connect with our peers**. Today, social media has replaced that motivation. A child/teen can remain at home and still be connected to their peers through social media. Often, they don't feel as though they are missing out on anything; rather, they can have more influence and knowledge of the peer dynamics by staying on social media all day.

Ways for Home and School to Work Together to Achieve Success

- Routine, **predictability**, and consistency are key; both for staff and parents
- Relationship with trusted adults – encourage the teacher/counsellor/helper to get to know your child outside of the classroom in a familiar and fun setting (for the teen this might look like texting, a walk off the school grounds, a phone call, etc).
- Remember that consistency provides a "boring" routine and "boredom" and "anxiety" rarely exist at the same time (have you seen the movie, "Groundhog Day?" The main character is stuck in a repetitive loop which, although frustrating, provided predictability and "sameness" that results in safety & security about the day. When we can provide the same

predictability as parents and teachers, we can reduce the perceived threat of separation or attending school.

- Recognize that when stress, worry, or anxiety are present, a child/teen is often not **intrinsically** motivated to push through those uncomfortable feelings. By linking an **extrinsic** motivator to the plan, we can often see buy-in from the child/teen. Consider your child's currency; **what is their motivator?** For many teens and pre-teens, it is their cell phone or video games. For younger children, it is often a preferred activity, such as an extra book at bedtime, extra playtime at the park, a playdate after school on Friday, etc. *Note: we don't propose that these incentives/motivators should have a financial cost to you (e.g.: "I'll pay you to go to school," "I'll buy you...". Also, removing quality time or attachment activities should not be used as a consequence (e.g.: "You won't get story time tonight if you don't go to school.")
- We need to help our children build **distress tolerance**. Protecting our child from uncomfortable situations (e.g., stay home from school, avoid trying new things, hide in their phone, etc.), we are shrinking their comfort zone and not encouraging them to build resilience. A great formula to remember is **Discomfort + guided support = Resilience**.
- **Start by developing a plan** with your child and your child's teacher and/or counsellor.
 - Script a goodbye word for word – how many hugs, what words will each person say, how long will the child stay for, what will they do as soon as they get to class/soft start (e.g.: a familiar activity on their desk to start the day). With teens, it is appropriate to request: preferred seating in the class (child's preference for comfort, not social reasons), not to be called on (to avoid any shame), adapt class presentations, etc. Your school counsellor will have more ideas on how to streamline the day so that it can be predictable and comfortable for your child.
 - Have a visual of the plan: write out the plan and consider adding pictures "pics" for children or teens. Your school counsellor and/or teacher can help you with this.
 - Communicate the plan to everyone on the team.
 - Negotiating the plan should never be done in the moment of stress. Reconnect with the team outside of the transition to discuss what did/didn't work and make adaptations to the plan. Let your child/teen know that decisions lay with the team. This will help to avoid conflict at home.
 - Start small. Sometimes the best we can do is a healthy goodbye, enter the classroom for 5 minutes and then leave. Practice the separation and build on the success. Every day, increase the exposure to the uncomfortable setting by 5 minutes. Don't allow your child to "cherry pick" their preferences (e.g., "I will go all day when it is Hallowe'en, but only a few minutes on other days"). This goes against consistency, and we miss using motivators such as Hallowe'en to encourage the child to work towards increasing their distress tolerance.
- Keep the emotion out of it; Gordon Neufeld, child psychologist, says, "Personalize the relationship and depersonalize the discipline." With respect to school attendance/separation, this means:
 - It is important to act as though you are okay with either choice given; let the incentive be the lesson. Avoid power struggles and trying to convince your child what you want them to do. For example: "Follow the plan and you earn your preferred activity; don't follow the plan and we will try again tomorrow. Your choice." Avoid lecturing, threatening, or getting emotional as this will only complicate the issue. Make sure the situation doesn't impact your relationship with your child. Have close connection outside of the plan and don't use your relationship as a threat to motivate (e.g., "If you don't go to school today, we can't...." e.g., spend time together).
- Consider that with child/teen's affinity to screen time and phone use, school has become less desirable, and home tends to be the preferred place. Home can't be the "fun" choice. It needs to be their safe place, but not their Disneyland. A day in the classroom can't compare to a cozy day at home, gaming in front of the fireplace. It's good to make home boring!
- Make sure your child's "bucket" is being filled with positive experiences and relationships.

Strategies for Students

- Recognize that *resilience* (ability to deal with uncomfortable things) gets stronger when you face and accept uncomfortable moments.
- Do a “fact check” – is school really dangerous? Acknowledge that your brain might be sending you a false alarm and trying to engage your “fight/flight/freeze” mode. You can train your brain to challenge these thoughts of danger so that you stay on course and follow the plan.
- Breathe, breathe, breathe! [Breathe!](#)
- Practice for breathing, [Practice breathing](#)
- Self-talk. You can be your own coach, encouraging yourself to keep moving forward. Say to yourself, “I am safe, I can do this, just a little bit longer. I have support. I have people who are cheering me on and here to help me.”
- Ask for help from your teacher, EA, or school counsellor when it gets really challenging.
- Say what you need! If your biggest fear is having your teacher call on you, try to communicate that to someone who will help your teacher know that. Teachers are there to help you and want to know how to make school doable for you!
- Do your best to get a good night's sleep that doesn't involve screen time or social media. Elementary school students should be getting an average of 9-11 hours of sleep per night and high school kids should sleep on average 8-10 hours. Here is some more information about sleep: [Sleep](#)
- As hard as it is (for us too!) we recommend not having your phone, tablet, tv, video games in your room at night. Screen time impacts your deep sleep (REM) which is essential for being able to be okay!!
- A balance diet is important. Not eating your greens, iron, and other important nutrients can make you tired, lethargic, and sad.
- Face-to-face friends are important! A lot of stress can come from relationships that are mostly over social media.
- Exercise will help, it will also help you to step outside of your comfort zone. For teens, join a gym, a running or cycling club, the swim team, martial arts, etc. It will help to build your self-esteem and you will probably make some great friends. When we become an “expert” at something, it is easier to socialize because we have something to talk about and be proud of!
- Self-compassion! You are not broken! Anxiety is a natural function of our brain and is designed to protect us. We understand it is uncomfortable and people will tell you it will be okay. We understand it can be overwhelming. Sometimes, our brain does its job too well and starts assuming that safe situations are dangerous. We need to retrain it and there are people who can help you with this. Be open to the supports. You are awesome and we want you to be patient with yourself as you figure this out. Use your people around you to help you!



You've got this!
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