

# Managing Anxiety in Children with Autism

Presentation by Dr. Evan J. Anderson

scared  
chest pain  
phobia  
panic attacks  
tense  
tension  
trembling  
stress  
headache  
desperate  
worry  
emotional  
restlessness  
symptoms  
mood  
fear  
feelings  
disorder  
angst  
jumpy  
sweating

# What do Brownies, Blue Eyes, and Bananas have to do with anxiety?

- Why do we crave fats, sweets, and salts?
  - These were limited resources long ago.
- Why do we prefer blue eyes?
  - Blue eyes allowed us to read deception.
- Why does a banana look yellow everywhere else but a parking garage?
  - Our eyes adapted to recognize colors in different lights. Parking garages use a brand new frequency of light.



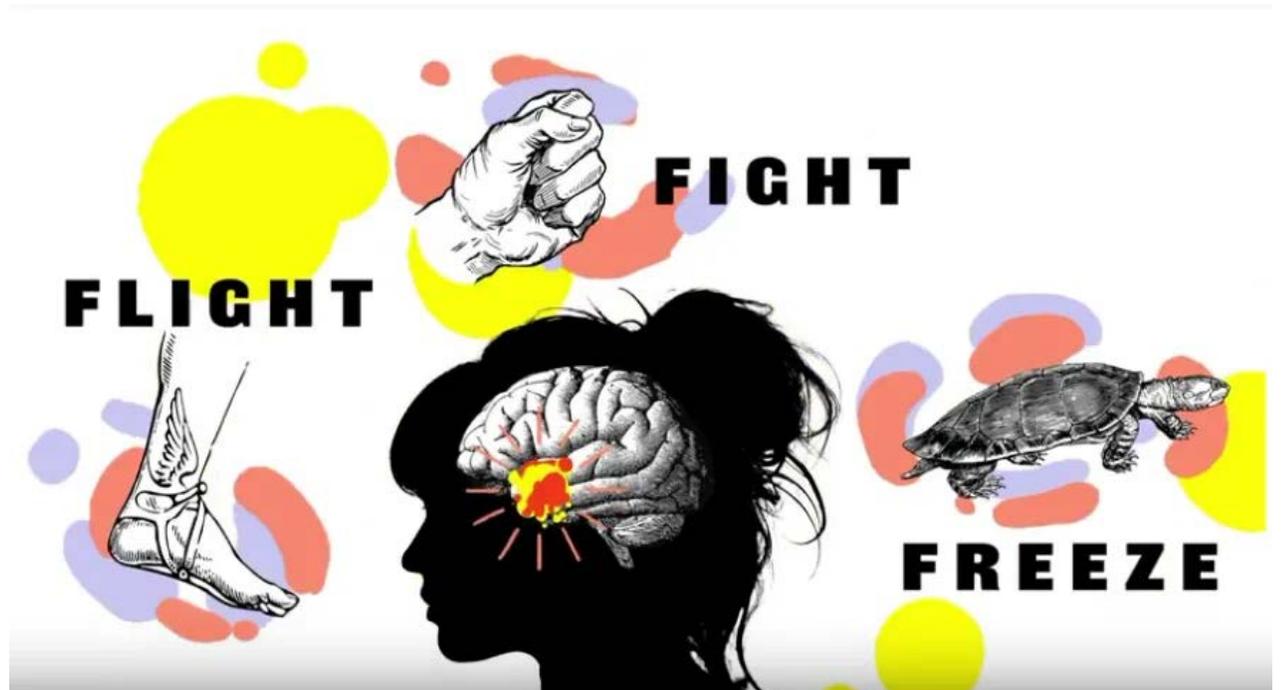
# Parasympathetic Nervous System

- The parasympathetic system conserves energy:
  - slows the heart rate
  - increases intestinal and gland activity
  - relaxes muscles



# Anxiety and Our Sympathetic Nervous System

- SNS: Prepares the body for intense physical activity
  - **Fight-Flight-Freeze**
  - SNS Activation:
    - Increase Heartrate
    - Inhibits digestion
    - Relaxes Bladder/Contracts Rectum
    - Pupils Dilate
    - Dry Mouth



# STRESS RESPONSES

## FIGHT



Anger  
Crying  
Clenched Fists  
Screaming

## FLIGHT



Get Away  
Fidgety  
Nervous  
Need to Move

## FREEZE



Numb  
Indecisive  
Feel Stuck  
Short of Breath

# What Anxiety Looks Like in Children

- Complaints of racing heart
- Complaints of muscle stiffness, muscle pain
- Sweating when not active
- Stomachache
- Fidgeting
- Ripping and pulling at things
- Skin picking/hair pulling
- Negative thoughts



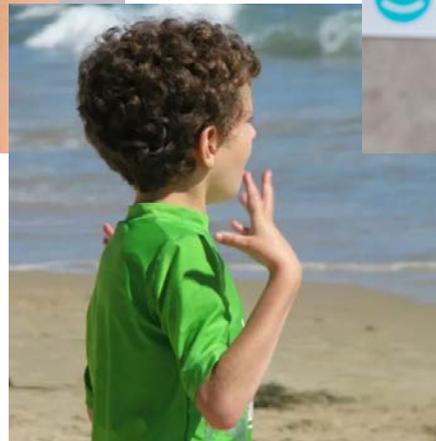
# What Anxiety Looks Like in Children with ASD

- Complaints of racing heart
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- Sweating when not active
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- **Fidgeting**
- **Ripping and pulling at things**
- **Skin picking/hair pulling**
- Negative thoughts



# Challenges with Identifying Anxiety in Children with ASD

- Fidgeting vs stimming?
- Often nonverbal or limitedly verbal so no way to express anxiety



# Stimming

- What is the purpose of stimming?
  - Regulates stress and can be an emotional output
    - While many people get stress relief from talking with friends, working out, or having a hobby, others get this relief from stimming
    - Many adults with ASD describe a sudden feeling of squirminess or dread that they can only cure through a stim
      - Think of your behavior in a boring meeting?
  - Can help with communication
    - What happens when someone does not have the words to convey how they are feeling?
      - They use their body to express themselves
      - Happy flaps vs distressed flaps



# Should a Parent Allow Stimming?

- What are the arguments for or against?
- Adults with ASD state that stimming both helps them cope with situations and communicate but can also make them feel ostracized.



# How Do We Help Our Children Through This?



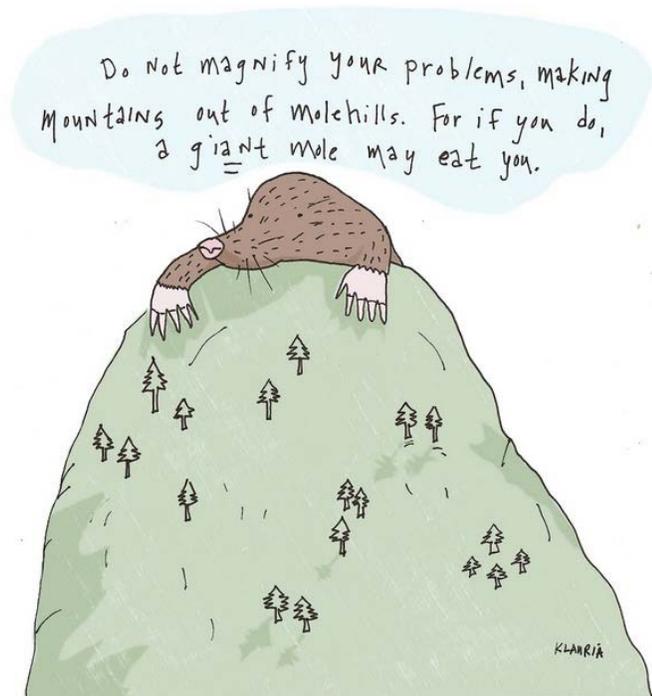
# Oxygen Mask Issues

- Take care of yourself to take care of your children
- When we are stressed we...
  - Have a shorter fuse
  - Talk fast, listen less
  - Feel the need to control situations
- Our heart often beats faster/get physically uncomfortable observing or anticipating our child's behavior. Breathe through this.



# Making Mountains Out of Mole Hills

- We all want to help our children get an early start but we need to keep perspective.
  - Your child is needing extra support for portions of their life, they are not destined to live in a box in the back alley.
- We think in always/never or everyone/no one terms.
  - We are always late; Of course this happened to me; No on this. LEARN FROM THE BRIGHT SPOTS
- We forget to see strengths and exceptions, kids update often



# Too accommodating

- It is not *bad* to accommodate but it has limits
  - - Do work for them
  - - Lower expectation of manners or emotional control
  - - Speak for them
  
- Worry Time?



# Too Avoidant

- Often a default strategy- avoid people, places, and things that trigger anxiety
- “We never fight”
- - Unspoken tension; confusing non-verbal communication
- Avoidance is an integrated and accepted part of our culture
- - Number 1 cell phone game endorsement is “Super addictive and a great way to kill time.”

# Implanting anxiety

- Be careful when:
  - Talking about work/school/church interactions
  - Complaining about politics/work/people
  - Road rage
  - Talking about adult problems-giving all the information
  - TV content
    - children will do anything for attention/acceptance



# How to talk to your children when they are anxious

- Acknowledge/validate concerns and fears
  - “That is scary to think about.”; “That thought would make me nervous too.”
- Explore where thoughts/feelings are coming from
  - “Is this because...”; “Where do you think that thought is coming from?”
- Discuss counterpoints to child’s fear
  - “How often do you think about other people?” “Have you ever seen the police on our block?”; “We just tested our smoke detectors.”
- Brainstorm healthy ways to reduce anxiety
  - “Let’s figure out a way we can calm down.”; “When I feel this way...”

# Mindfulness for children

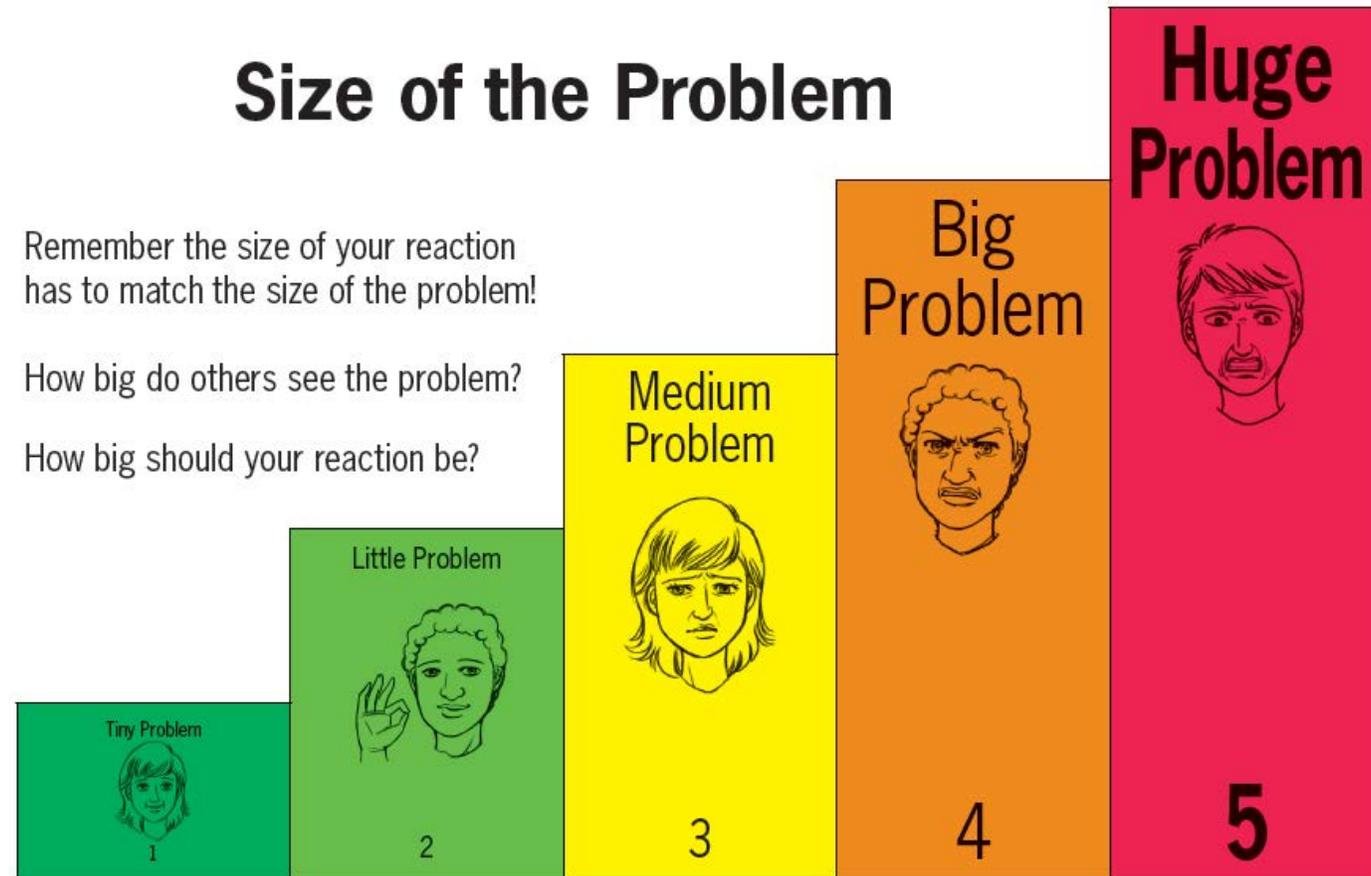
- Deep Breathing- Count your breaths
- Mindfulness Eating- Pay attention to the appearance, upset, feel, and stays of the snack
- Nature Walk- Help them be mindful of the nature around them.
- Notice Body Sensations- Heart beat, relaxed feeling when happy, tightness when nervous.
  
- Teach them your process

# Help them identify Emotions

## The Zones of Regulation



# Help them identify magnitude of issues



# How to structure your home for your anxious child

- Routines and plans for everyday
  - Use picture schedules
- Have a clean organized house
- Give them opportunities for success
- Have traditions
- Limit screens
  - If screens are an issue then consider eliminating them

