

# Summary Notes for the June 24<sup>th</sup> Teleconference Presentation on Eating Disorders and Anxiety

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## **What do our patients say?**

“Anxiety is like worrying all of the time.”

“Anxiety prevents me from thinking and concentrating at school”

On the other hand ...

“Anxiety helps me to avoid what is really bothering me. When I am anxious about my eating disorder I can focus on feeling fat, on avoiding bad food or on losing weight. I would rather do that than think about feeling sad.”

Some patients say that they become very good at hiding their anxiety but in the end it makes them feel worse.

## **What so we do in our program about the problem of anxiety?**

Firstly, we discuss the seriousness of the eating disorder with the patient and family. This will initially raise the anxiety of the parents but then we help the parents understand that they are the main support for their children and that we will support them as they help their children to recover. We always want to instill hope that the children can recover 100 percent although it takes a long time.

In the program, we provide therapeutic meal support as well as groups and sometimes individual therapy to help children and youth work on reducing their anxiety. For instance we have a DBT group in which they learn things to help them deal with stressful situations and in turn decrease their anxiety. (assertiveness training, dealing with bullying, dealing with emotions). We do a lot of role playing so to provide hands on practice.

We help the youth to become aware of their stressors and to look at helpful alternatives. When kids are dealing with extreme anxiety, troubling images or bad memories, one-on-one counselling is often indicated.

In the program we also have recreation and leisure groups such as snack outings to have some fun but to deal with making difficult food choices. We also provide groups to deal with every day issues such as body image and the negative effects of media.

We provide time to practice relaxation techniques. Some kids love this but others find it difficult because they can feel more anxious at first. Sometimes, they hate the quiet time because they start thinking bad thoughts and are not able to concentrate on the relaxation techniques themselves. We talk about how that is natural at the beginning. The same is true for the yoga group. Some love it and others find it stress provoking.

## **What can parents do?**

- Seek professional help to help deal with the anxiety and the eating disorder. Help determine whether or not medication is going to be useful along with other treatments.
- Help your child understand that anxiety is part of everyone's life and that there are ways of decreasing the worries. Instill hope.
- Investigate getting a manual for the parent and child to understand how to cope with anxiety (e.g. "Taming the Worry Dragons: for teens" or "The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook" by Edmund Bourne.
- Take advantage of books and CD's in the public library system as well as the Family Resource Library at the BC Children's Hospital if you live in Vancouver
- For children with Panic attacks, help them understand that they are frightening and uncomfortable but not dangerous and can become less

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- Help your child become aware of the stressors that increase anxiety e.g. school, bullies, food, the internet, TV, magazines ...
- Help your child investigate what things are maintaining the anxiety ... what is keeping it going. For example:
  - Avoidance of stressful situations all the time will not help the child learn to live with the stress or to become de-sensitized to situations which he or she eventually needs to deal with. For instance, if you allow your child to never eat food with fat, you will be feeding their fear of fat and perpetuate the problem. Instead you have to support them as they learn to eat and deal with the fearful thoughts and uncomfortable thoughts ... “I am fat, I am bad, I have no discipline”
  - Help your child to recognize anxiety-provoking self talk and change it to positive self talk ... “I am going to fail this exam” to “I don’t like writing exams but I know I studied so all I can do is do my best”.
  - Help your child recognize thinking traps such as “black and white thinking” or “all or nothing thinking”. Once they recognize that they are doing this they can change their thoughts. For example, if you think “One girl in my class told me I am stupid and boring therefore I must be stupid and boring”. Change it to “That girl seems to be unhappy ... that must be why she says I am stupid and boring ... I have other friends that tell me I am funny and fun to be with”
  - Withholding feelings: denying feelings of anger, frustration or sadness can contribute to anxiety. Think about the times that you allow yourself a good cry and think about how your body feels after ... relaxed ... calmer.
  - Practice self-nurturing. Help yourself or your child to realize that it is helpful to allow yourself to do pleasant things for yourself. Rely on friends, soak in a bathtub, treat yourself to a favourite movie.
  - Muscle tension: we all have it. We can reduce it by simple breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation techniques and or visualization or guided imagery techniques. There are many CD’s, DVD’s and books now to help us learn these simple techniques. Parents can benefit by practicing with their children. Just remember ... it is very individualistic as to what works best and that relaxing takes a lot of practice and patience. It can be very difficult for children, especially in the beginning.
  - Play! Laugh! Family time!
    - I know from many years of working with children and youth that kids want to spend time with their family. That includes just talking, walking, playing or eating together. Kids feel safe when they know that parents want to spend time with them.
    - Recreation ... help your child focus on an activity they love which will help them build their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. They may need to explore a variety of leisure opportunities to find out what they like and can feel good at.
  - Table time! Eating with a child with an eating disorder comes with a great deal of stress and anxiety at the beginning as the child is attempting to avoid eating or may be eating too much! Which ever the case, find what is going to be a supportive eating environment. Parents need to be firm about their expectations but their can be choices and a sense of control for the child when we ask what is going to be helpful. For instance:
    - Does your child want to help serve herself or does she feel safer if you do it? It will depend on the stage of her recovery.
    - Find topics to talk about other than food, that will help distract the child and provide a pleasant atmosphere for the rest of the family.
    - If purging after meals is an issue, let the child know that you will spend time after meals with them so that they won’t have the opportunity to purge. Remind them that you want to keep them safe.
    - Be a good role model ... eat well yourself. Your child will feel supported. Also try to be relaxed yourself!
  - Take time every day to listen to your child ... even if they don’t tell you much ... keep providing them the time to be with you so that they will eventually talk more about their thoughts and feelings.
  - Most importantly, do not minimize what they are going through. Understand and empathize with their pain but let them know that they will be able to cope and that you will help them get through the difficult time. Let them know that they are stronger than they think. Explain to them that you will do your best to provide a safe environment for them to fight the very long process of having an eating disorder.