


Worried & Distressed

Dealing with Anxiety Disorders in School Age Children

Dr. Caroline Buzanko, R. Psychologist
www.drcarolinebuzanko.com
info@koruppsychology.ca






Emotional Disorders are on the Rise...

Anxiety is the most common mental health problem in kids K-12

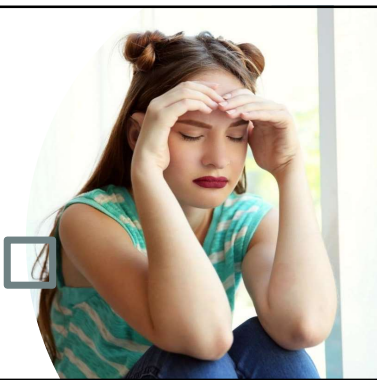
70% of all mental health problems begin in childhood and adolescence




Not something
they outgrow



Untreated anxiety is
the leading predictor
of depression in teens
& young adults



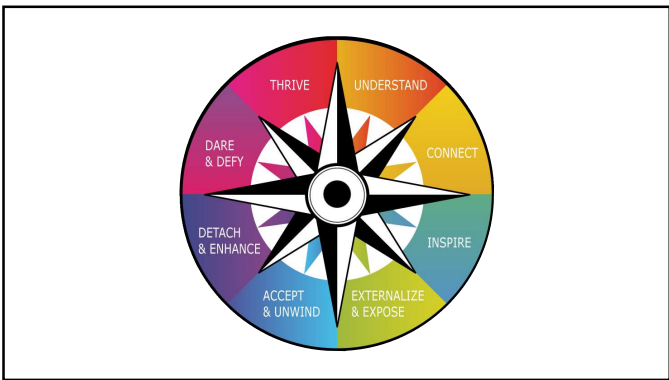
In the classroom, anxiety
is an exceptionality that
affects how students learn
in your classroom.



Limits Executive Functioning

- Attention
- Impulsivity
- Organization
- Planning
- Prioritizing
- Initiation
- Working memory
- Decision making
- Self-monitoring

**Inconsistent performance



Worries are here to stay

- Normal, protective feeling
- Necessary for survival
- Its ok!
- Temporary in the moment
- Not dangerous
- Not to be eliminated or avoided
- Can help motivate & energize us

Worries to be expected

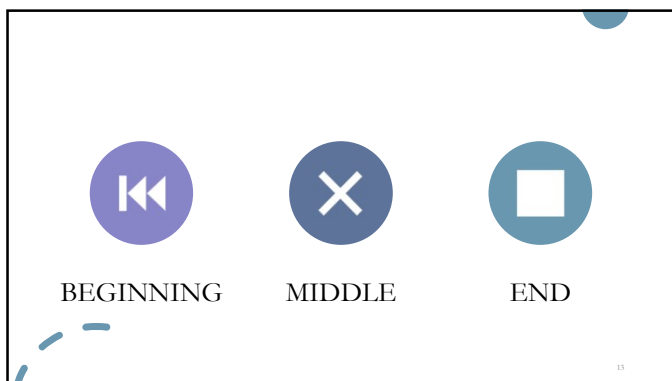
- Developmentally appropriate fears
 - Survival: separation, danger
- Life transitions
 - New school, graduation, change in family composition, teenage years
- Stressful experiences
 - New or unfamiliar situations

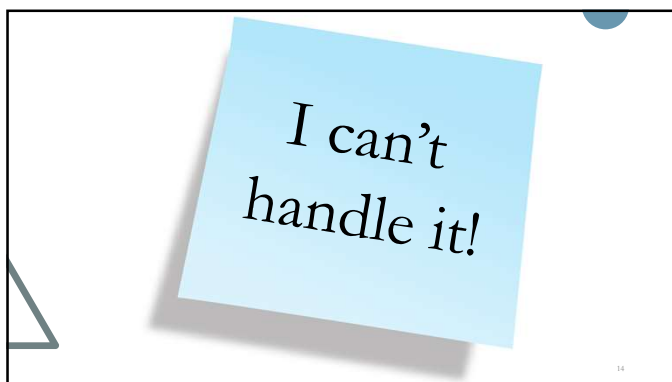
Worries to be expected

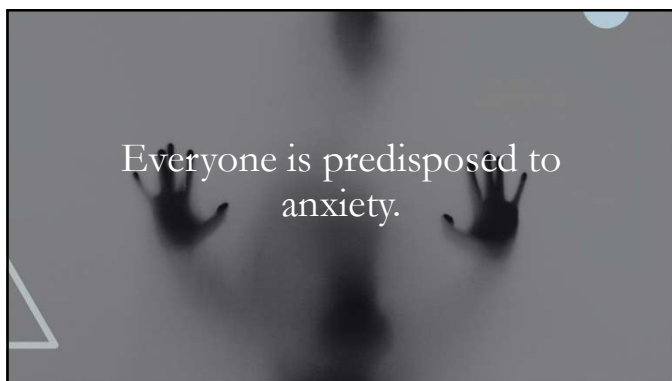
Infant/Toddlers	Preschool	Early Childhood	Elementary	Pre-Adolescence	Adolescence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Separation Novelty Loud noises Shyness, fear of strangers Santa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animals, dark, thunder, fire Nightmares Monsters & shadows Novelty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear of death or ghosts Separation Dark Getting lost Thunder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes Performance Getting sick or hurt Animals, monsters, ghosts Natural disasters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Home alone Family or pets Rejection Mortality, health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social What others think Family getting sick School performance World events After high school!!!!

Worries to be expected

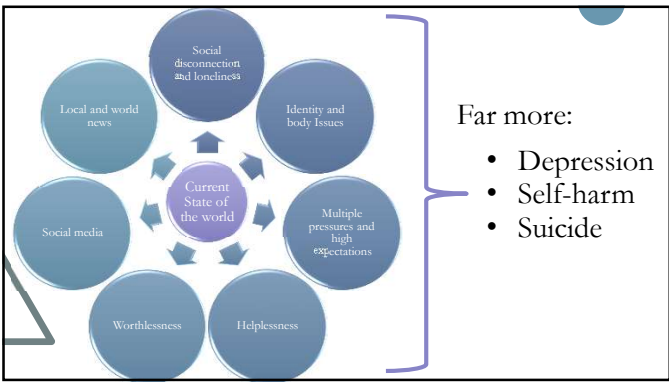
- Temporary
- Do not interfere with functioning
- Students still successful in achieving goals

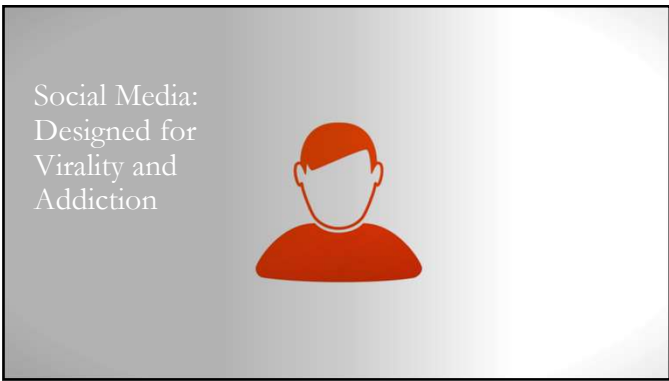




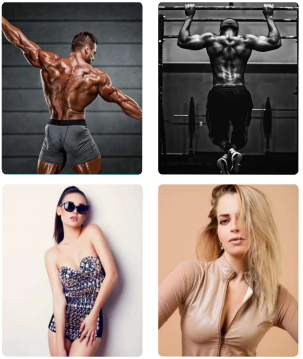




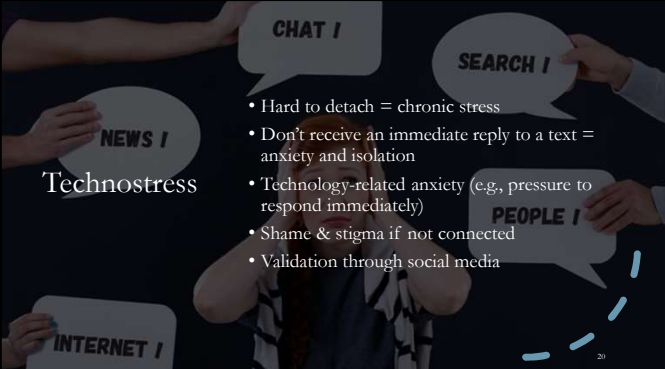




Pressure and expectations




Technostress

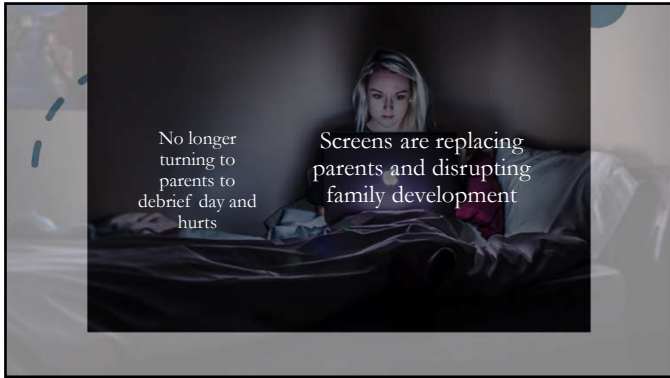


- Hard to detach = chronic stress
- Don't receive an immediate reply to a text = anxiety and isolation
- Technology-related anxiety (e.g., pressure to respond immediately)
- Shame & stigma if not connected
- Validation through social media

Massive-Scale Emotional contagion



- We begin to experience the same emotions as others without our awareness
- Long-lasting moods (e.g., depression) can be transferred through social networks







No exceptions:
ALL screen time is linked to less happiness.



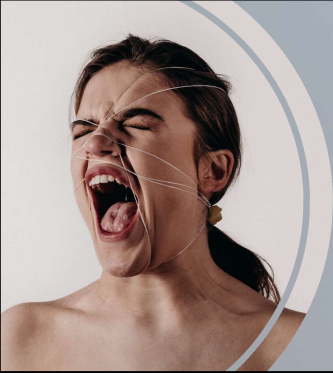
- More screen time =
- School struggles
- Loneliness
- Depression
- Suicidal thinking

A red arrow points upwards next to the list.

Technococoon



The image shows a woman lying in bed using a smartphone and a young child sitting on a bed also using a tablet.




Adult Traps

This alone can make all the difference in the world



Unsolicited Support

- Swooping in can:
 - Undermine the equity in the relationship
 - Create a sense of obligation
 - Independence and self-esteem threatened
 - Feel invalidating
 - Seem unsympathetic
 - Shut down communication

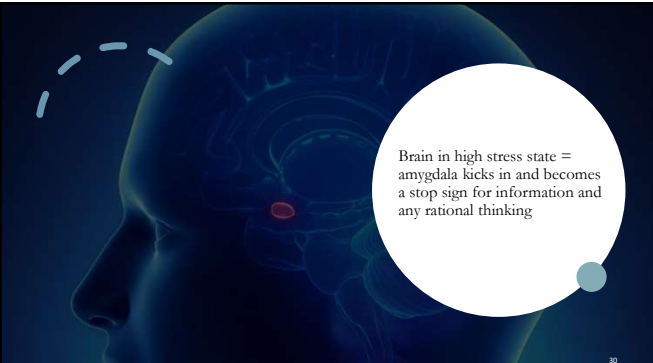


Saying
“Don’t
worry”
doesn’t work

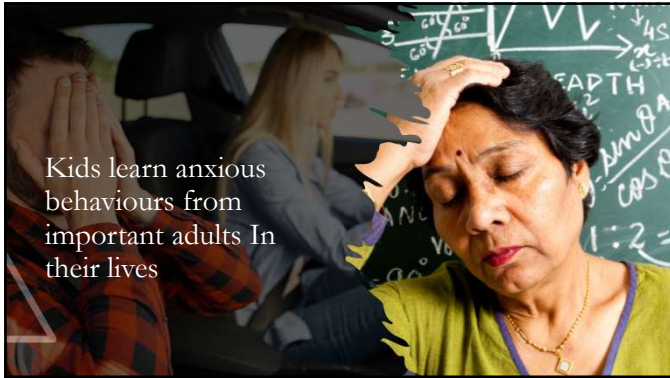
Minimizing

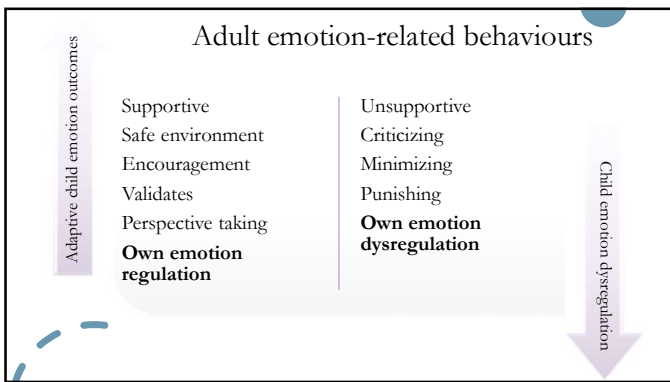
Get stuck in constant
need for reassurance

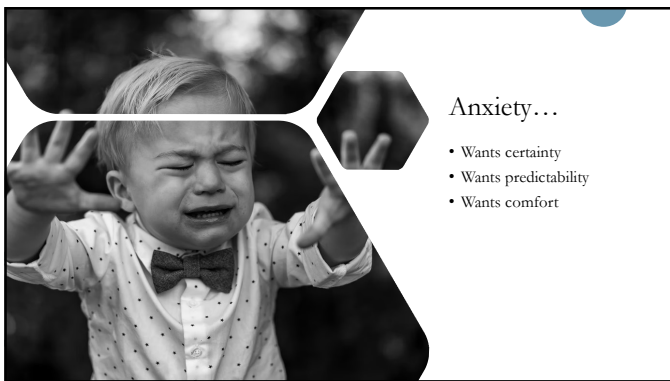
No skills developed

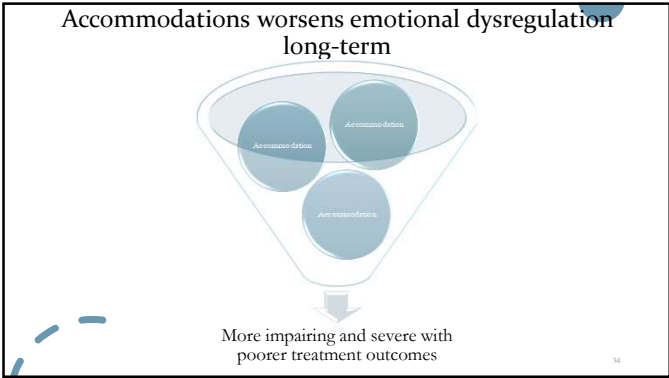


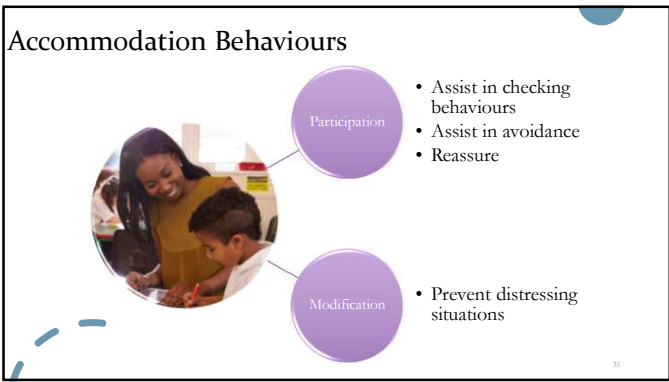
Brain in high stress state =
amygdala kicks in and becomes
a stop sign for information and
any rational thinking











Speaking for the student	Allowing students to be excused	Ensuring predictability	Avoiding outings	Sitting out of anxiety provoking situations (e.g., gym)
Only having one substitute	Participating in rituals	Not throwing away unnecessary items	Not opening windows	Rigid routines
Seeing school nurse unnecessarily	Leaving lights on	Checking homework	Accompanying the child to certain parts of the school	Distraction
Adjusting routines	Alternate place for lunch	Fixed schedules	Pre-warnings and Transition warnings	Stress balls

Consider IPP's

Does it accommodate anxiety? Or prevent it from showing up?

Are skills being taught?

- How do breaks/office visits help?

Is there a transition plan?

Does the plan address physical symptoms?

Does it document how to maintain contact between home and school?

Ensure skills-based goals (vs. avoidance based)

Skills IN the class

- If leaves, plans for quick return
- No pick-up plan
- Alternatives to phone calls home

Consistent language with home

- Name of worry
- Same responses
- Parent coaching (e.g., how to respond to texts/calls)
- Stipulations about home-school communication

Detailed and specific

- Everyone's role and response
- Minimal reactions – anxiety is so annoying
- Weaning off plans

Your Big But

Deprived Kids



Critical for developing:

- Resilience
- Competence
- Confidence
- Maturity
- Mental health

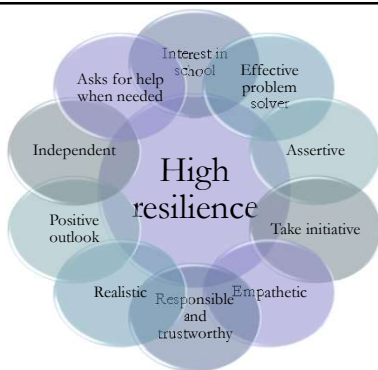
Stunted Resilience

Kids develop patterns of behaviour/ways to respond to stress and other emotions depending on whether they believe they can manage....

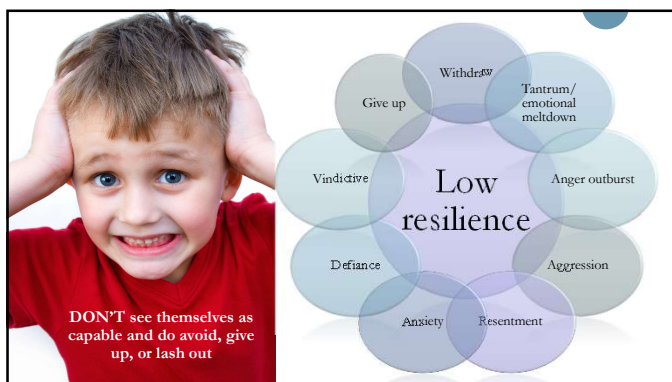
And when they don't think they can manage....



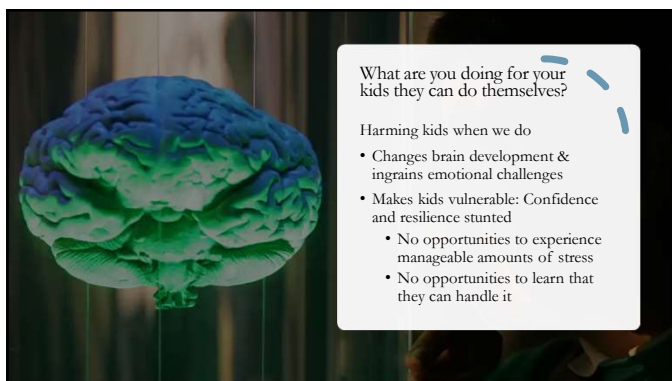
High resilience







DON'T see themselves as capable and do avoid, give up, or lash out



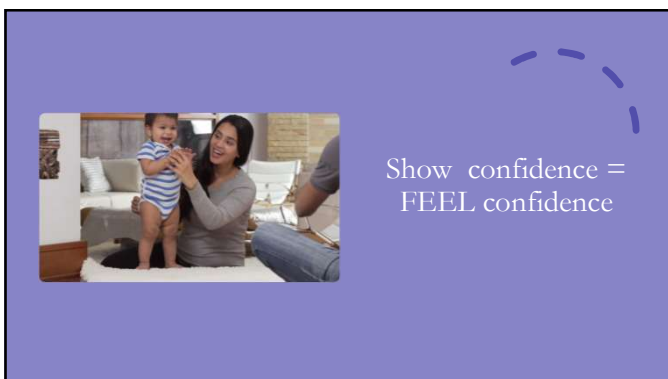
What are you doing for your kids they can do themselves?

Harming kids when we do

- Changes brain development & ingrains emotional challenges
- Makes kids vulnerable: Confidence and resilience stunted
 - No opportunities to experience manageable amounts of stress
 - No opportunities to learn that they can handle it







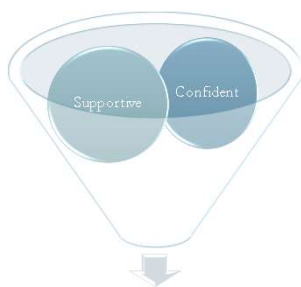
Emotion Coach



Big emotions disrupts their ability to stay present and connected

- We must create the space to do this

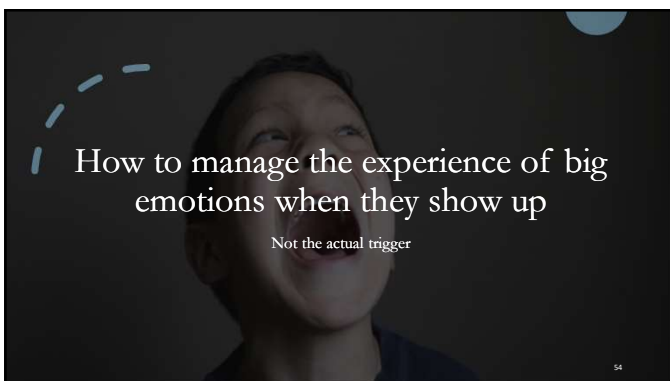




Effective Response









Emotions
Are Adaptive!

*Tell us something
about reality*

Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Alerts us to threats or injusticesProtect our well-being
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Alerts us to dangerProtects us from harm
Joy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Positive reinforcement for doing things that promote our well-being and survival
Shame	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Prompts self-reflection, processing, and changeMaintains social harmony
Sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Alerts us to loss, separation, or unmet needs and allows us to process the eventPromotes personal growth and deeper social connections
Excitement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Propels resilience and growthFosters curiosity, creativity, learning, and adaptability

Understand Functions of Emotions
and all that comes with it

MUST have physical reactions to alert us to what is happening

- Cannot change reactions without this understanding

A person in a blue jacket is talking on a phone. To their right, three blue circles are connected by lines to a central point. The circles are labeled "Disappointment", "Hurt", and "Fear".


Curiosity is a key response to emotional experiences



Expressing Feelings Adaptively


Kids need to know:

- All feelings are ok and important
- How to label feelings effectively & rationale
 - To make sense of them
 - How they can guide us
 - Foresight
- How to talk about feelings
- Their feelings matter
- What to do next



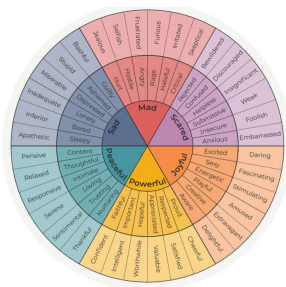
Labelling Emotions & All that comes with it

- With no words comes behaviours
- Name it to tame it
 - Calms nervous system
 - Builds confidence



Labelling Emotions

- Model
- **Build emotion vocabulary – the more specific, the better**
- Foresight



How do emotions show up?



Sounds like:

List the worried thoughts and images that come up:



Feels like:

List physical symptoms associated with worries:



Looks like:

List behaviours that result from the worries, including avoidance:

Externalize

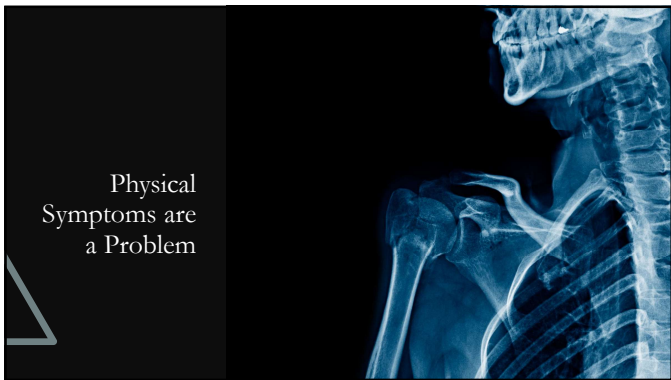
- You are not your worry

(Sneaky trickster trying to make you think there is something wrong with you...)

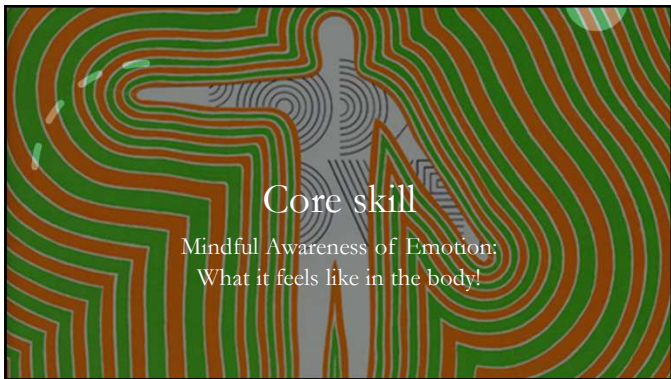


Saying it out loud gives us
more power

- ✓ To expose it
- ✓ To take control and use helpful coping strategies



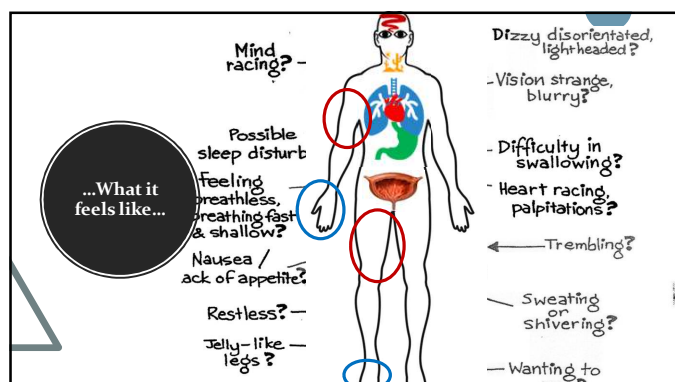
Physical
Symptoms are
a Problem



Core skill

Mindful Awareness of Emotion:
What it feels like in the body!

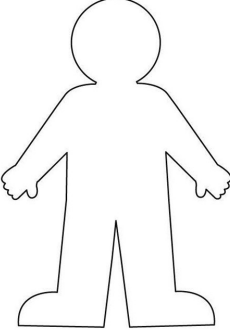
A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light blue and white striped shirt, hugging a young girl with curly hair. The girl is wearing a yellow shirt and a blue and red plaid skirt. She has her eyes closed and a peaceful expression, leaning her head against the woman. The woman is also looking down at the girl with a gentle smile. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a window or a doorway.




Dizzy	<p>Identify & describe where anxiety shows up. Stronger on left or right?</p>	Shivers
Racing		Increased heart rate
Tension		Weak legs
Achy		Ringing ears
Sore		Blurred vision
Hot		Muscle tension
Cold		Shaking
Tingly		Trembling
Numb		Chest pain
Sharp		Headaches
Breathless	Burning skin/sweating	
Shivering	Blushing	
Sweating	Changes in breathing	
Trouble swallowing	Stomach-ache/ Nausea	
Tired	Relaxed	


When we label the different parts of emotions and our experiences, we:

- Change our interpretation of them
- Change how our body responds
- Dampen amygdala's false alarm
- Turn on prefrontal cortex
- Make adaptive decisions
- Learn that we have control over our responses
 - I know what you are & I know how to handle you
- Avoid getting sucked in – it's just a piece of information





Can't just talk about it.
Practicing Emotional Awareness Key!



Excitation
and Settling
Activities

Physical games to release excess energy followed
by settling and body scan to raise awareness

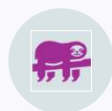
Nonjudgmental Awareness of the NOW is Foundational

- Without mindful awareness and acceptance of emotions, can't move on with any of the other work to strengthen more adaptive responses
 - Therefore, need **LOTS** of practice and experiences with **UNCOMFORTABLE** feelings



73

Mindfulness



Not about relaxing or getting rid of physical symptoms



Not about changing thoughts

74

Mindfulness

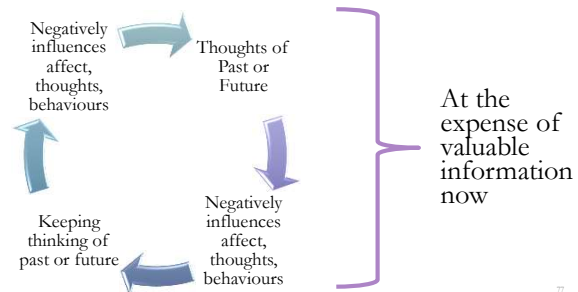


IT'S ABOUT NOT FIGHTING THEM

Mindfulness

- Active process
- Paying attention to the present moment in a non-judgmental way
 - Being detectives

Emotions Likes to Keep us Stuck!



Mindfulness

- Need to stay here and attend to the current context
 - To keep prefrontal cortex online
 - To attend to corrective information
 - To learn!

Versus getting sucked into worries, which intensifies the emotional experience and keeps us stuck

Acceptance & Tolerance of Emotions

- Confront emotions
- Sit with emotions
 - NOT resist, control, or eliminate emotions.



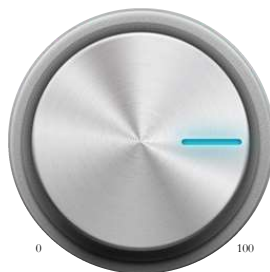
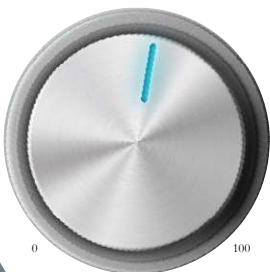
GOAL Acceptance & Tolerance

- Normal part of being human
- Temporary, not fact
- Sit with them until they subside



Emotion Dial

Acceptance Dial



Sit with, accept, & acknowledge whatever comes up

Focus on raising awareness to emotions

Recognizing them	Acknowledging them	Disentangling from them	Accepting them
------------------	--------------------	-------------------------	----------------

vs. trying to change the experience

Mindful Awareness & Acceptance of Thoughts

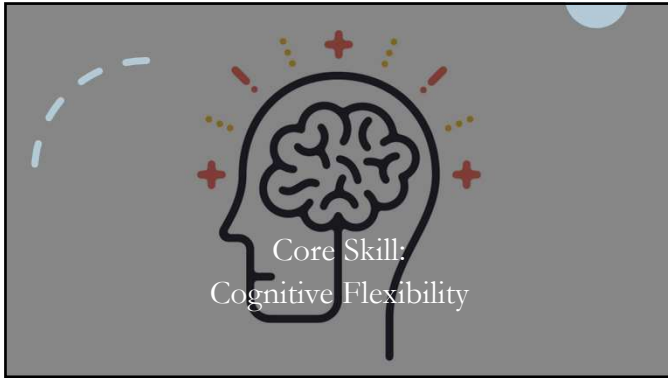
- Infinite amount of thoughts
 - (4.617×10^{61}) potential thoughts= four hundred sixty-one duodecillion and seven hundred decillion)



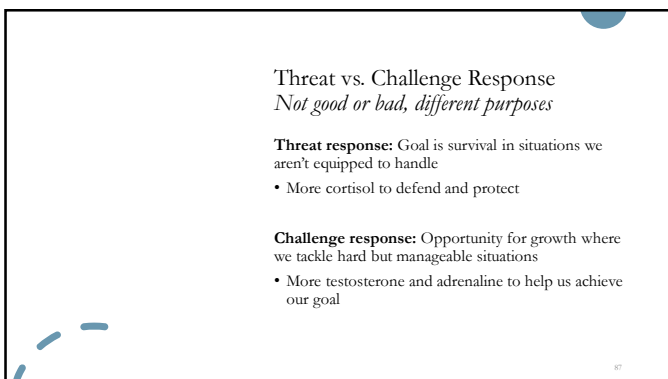
We can't control our thoughts – only our response to them

Be aware and accept it for what it is: A random thought





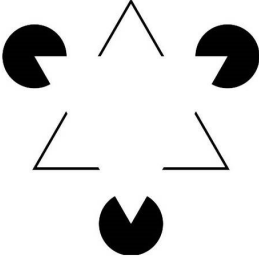






Stretch

Make a list of things you or others have believed that you do not believe anymore




- Information from our eyes and ears only loosely connected to what we experience
 - Fragmented
 - Ambiguous
 - Lots of effort to change them into 3-D

Knowledge Influences Sensory Information


(e.g., all faces are always convex)

- Our knowledge/ experience misleads us into seeing the mask as convex

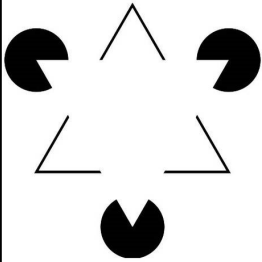
Bottom-up sensory information is overridden by top-down knowledge



Illusion of Emotions
 (and all that accompanies it)



The first draft



These are only guesses!!
 Wrong 99% of the time

Get Unstuck: Detach

Distancing

- “___ is noticing ___ is having the thought that...”
- Use third person language

Train, balloons, bubbles clouds, or leaves on the river

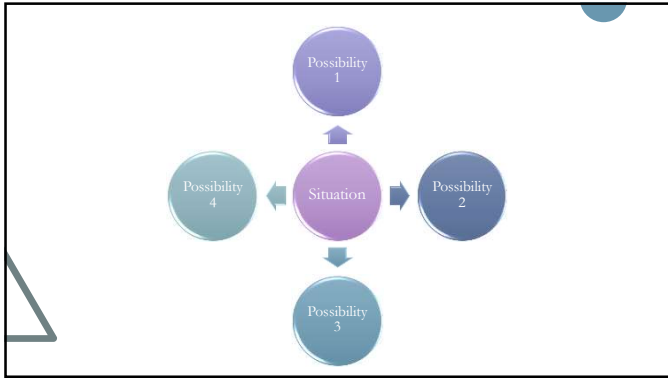
Thank them

Objectify

- What colour? How big? What shape? What texture?
How would it move if it could?

Name that Story

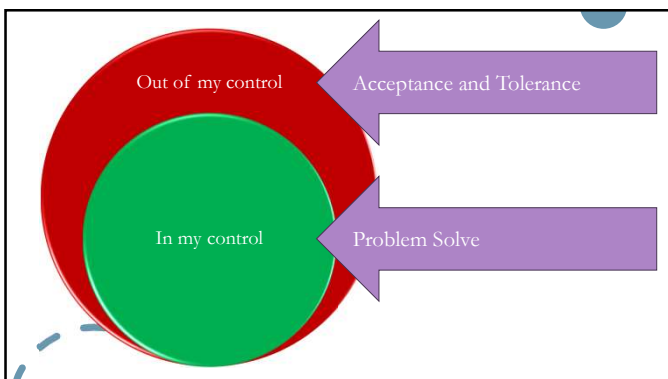






Build Awareness! Externalize & Get Meta

- When does Stuck Stan show up?
 - What is easy to get stuck on? What is easy about it?
 - What is easy to avoid getting stuck? What is easy about it?
 - What helps you get unstuck? What worked before? What do you say to yourself to get unstuck?
- Identify obstacles to getting unstuck
- Collaboratively develop strategies to overcome them




Problem-solving


Identify the problem


Brainstorm all possible solutions



Evaluate pros/cons of the feasible ideas


Make a plan


Implement & Tweak as needed


Problem-solving

Help them be thinkers
Independent problem solvers to figure things out



The power of I Don't Know

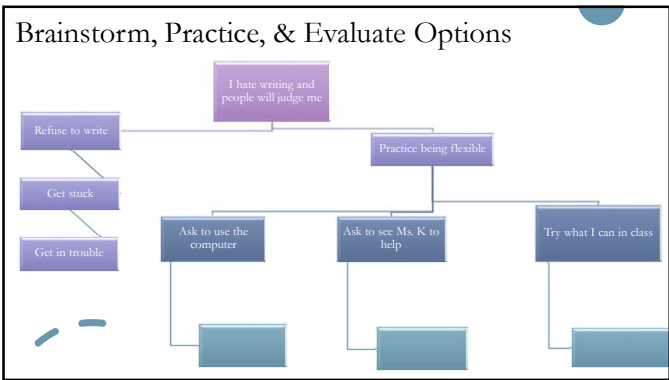
They can figure it out themselves



(We can't know, so avoid reassurance.)

Let's figure that out.


What could you do?




What I know	What I don't know
• We are going to the zoo	• If I have to go to the bathroom
• We are going by train	• Where the bathrooms are
• We are leaving at 9:10	• Who will be in my group
• We will get back at 2:55	• I will get lost
	• Where to go if I get lost
	• What parent will be in our group
	• if we will see the gorillas
	• if I will fall down and get hurt
	• If I have an allergic reaction

Model!

- I feel frustrated. I need to take a minute to think what to do next.
 - Can you help me brainstorm ideas?
- That's a tight timeline. I am going to plan this out.
- I am a little nervous; I have no idea what will happen. Let's figure this out.







Practice!

- Problem-solving
 - Start with emotion free problems
 - Move toward emotionally charged situations


Be Creative!




Mixing up the day



Find three ways to learn about a topic



Find three ways to show what you know about a topic



Stop and Switch (e.g., dribble, switch to math, back to ball activity)





Unexpected event/mistake of the day & how you handled it

Perfectionism is the most serious thinking trap & root of depression

Focus on core concepts



- **Unrealistic expectations**
- Rumination
- Need for approval
- Concern about mistakes
- Doubts about actions
- Additional traps like circumstantial thinking, quality/quantity






Break into Parts

Ex: Perfectionism

	
Helpful parts of perfectionism	Unhelpful parts of perfectionism
Helps us prepare Helps us strive for excellence	Become paralyzed Procrastinate & create more stress Stifles learning and growth Narrows our world Makes us perform worse

Perfectionism likes to work with Pals



Henchmen Guesses

- You never do anything right
- No one likes you
- Everything you do sucks
- You always fail and will continue to fail

Break into parts

- Good and not so good
- This part is hard
- I will focus on one step at a time

**All or nothing:
I can't do anything**

I can't write

Math is easy

I can brainstorm

I can follow a template

I can edit

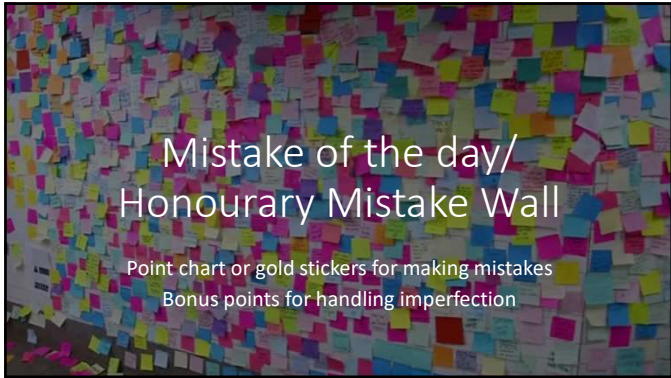
Reading: Easy

Gym: easy

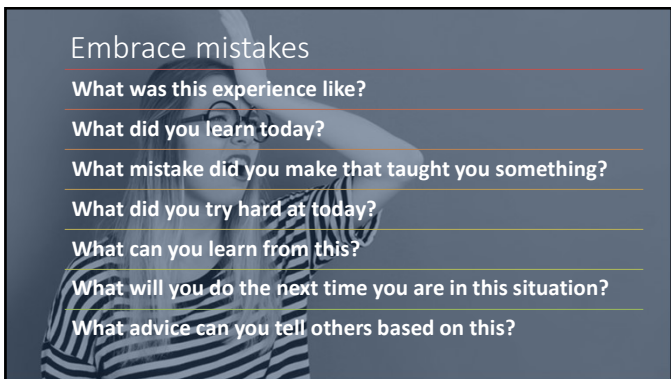


The Importance of Mistakes and Failure

- Talk about your own mistakes and failures as adults
- Talk about others' experiences
- Talk about their own - what have they learned?







It is not what they did wrong that counts, but *what they do next*.



Build Procedural Thinking!

- Strive for excellence, but address unrealistic standards
 - Emotions related to expectations
- Focus on what's next (vs. circumstances, rumination, should's)



What's next?



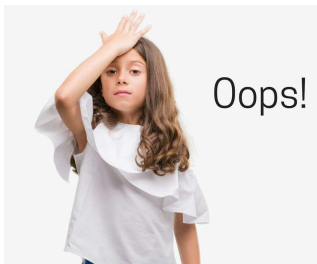
What's next?



What's next?

Forging ahead

- Avoid getting stuck
- No need to ask why, lecture, or explain the problem
- Have THEM think of the *hows*
 - How will they fix this mistake?
 - How will they move on?
 - How will they handle _____?



Core skills

Identifying and modifying unhelpful emotion-driven behaviours

Important!

MUST understand how their behaviours are maintaining, or even worsening, their emotional discomfort

- The behaviour is reinforced in the moment, increasing the likelihood of using this strategy again in the future

```
graph TD; A((Emotional Discomfort)) --> B((Behaviour)); B --> C((Feel better in the moment)); C --> D((Brain is rewarded)); D --> A;
```


Remember! Short- and long-term outcomes of maladaptive vs. adaptive coping strategies

```
graph LR; subgraph Maladaptive; A1[Maladaptive Coping] --> B1[Feel better in the moment]; B1 --> C1[Worsens emotional discomfort in the long run]; C1 --> D1[Ingrains emotional pathways]; end; subgraph Adaptive; A2[Adaptive Coping] --> B2[Feel distressing in the moment]; B2 --> C2[Tolerate & manage emotions in the long run]; C2 --> D2[Create new healthy pathways]; end;
```

Resilient kids

Effectively respond to and cope with everyday challenges

- This is where we are going!

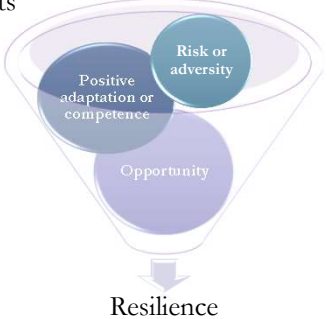


Resilience

Ability to adapt well to **adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress.**

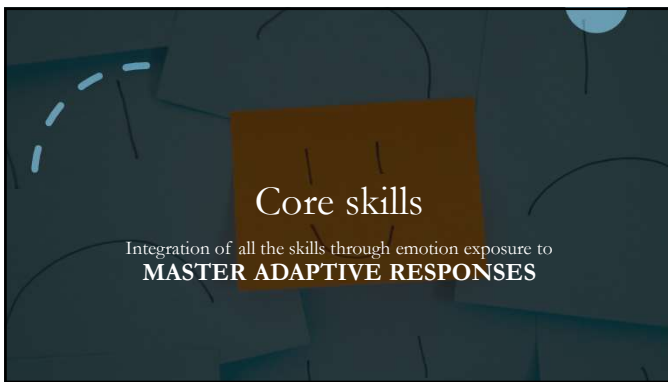


Key Ingredients




Resilience





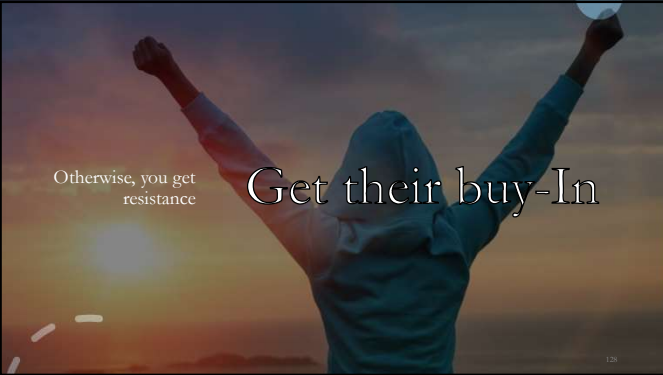




Integrate Skills through Emotion Exposure

Integrate skills to master adaptive responses

- Talking not enough to change the brain!
- Doing makes stronger memories
- Doing gives us experience
- Quicker progress
- Provoke STRONG EMOTIONS - MUST show up for learning to happen



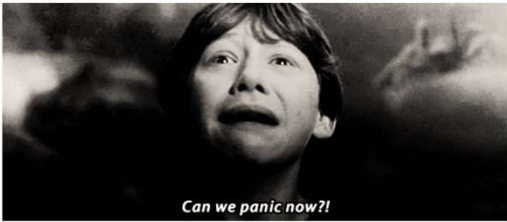
Otherwise, you get resistance

Get their buy-In

Real bravery is not fearlessness.

Bravery is acknowledging when something is hard and not pretending it isn't

- With an honest appraisal, we can respond productively




Can we panic now?!


Hypothesis Testing


Lots of experiments and experiences needed!


- What do you think will happen?
- How sure? (1-10)?
- Was the hypothesis right?
- What did you learn?




Willingness Action Plan

Goal:

Big why:

The steps I need to take are:

I will take the first step on date at time.

The discomfort I am willing to have to achieve this goal:

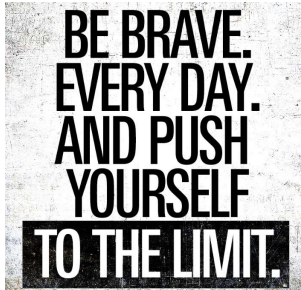
Thoughts:
Feelings:
Sensations:
Urges:
I can reward myself for:

Resilience is About
Creating the Right World:
Stress Inoculation



Work on it everyday

- Focus on what skills the student needs to develop specifically
 - Problem solving
 - Making mistakes
 - Asking for help
 - Frustration tolerance
 - Persistence
- Change it up
 - Length of time
 - Distance
 - Time of day
 - Places
 - People



133

Exposure to LEARN:

Emotions are safe,
tolerable, & temporary

When I don't do anything to try
to make myself feel better, the
amygdala learns: This is not
dangerous! (**And stops
sending the false alarm.**)



Exposure to LEARN

Despite feeling anxious, I
still did it

And... I can still live life and
do anything, even while
feeling anxious!



134

Exposure TO LEARN

No matter what happens, I can handle it!

On my own

- Without others
- Without safety behaviours

Our job is not to convince:

Learning happens through experience

They need to:

- Test the accuracy of their predictions
- Make their own conclusions
- Create new expectations

Let them Be Independent

- Give kids the chance to do, think, be, and make their own decisions and mistakes
 - Check their own homework
 - Solve their own conflicts (even during soccer at recess)
 - Make their own friends
 - Make important decisions in the class
 - Hold important jobs
- Encourage kids to try new things, even when scared
 - They need to know you support and trust them!
- Teach kids to be comfortable in the world

