# Understanding Anxiety in Children: The Value of Leaning into Discomfort

JICS Parent Talk

Trina Epstein, Psy.D., C.Psych.

February 3, 2026

# Do any of these resonate with you?

- *Anxiety is harmful*
- *Your job as a parent is to make your child's life as comfortable as possible*
- *You want people to go easy on your child because of anxiety*
- *You try to move obstacles and challenges from your child's path*

- *Your child just needs to get a grip*
- *Your child shouldn't be making such a big deal of things*
- *Your child shouldn't let fear control them*

From *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety And OCD* by Eli Lebowitz

# Outline

- Prevalence & breadth of anxiety
- The relationship between anxiety & other challenges
- Ways anxiety can be manifest
- How anxiety works
- Potential traps
- How to help

# Prevalence

- As a group, anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in children/adolescents
- Rates used to be stable (for decades) but in the last while, there has been a steady increase
- 2018 study found increasing anxiety among children in Canada [1]
  - 6% in 2011
  - Almost 13% in 2018
- Anxiety was already on the rise pre-pandemic but things have greatly increased since then—with over 20% of youth worldwide experiencing symptoms of anxiety[2]

1-Wiens K, Bhattarai A, Pedram P, et al. A growing need for youth mental health services in Canada: Examining trends in youth mental health from 2011 to 2018. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci* 2020;29:e115

2-Benton,T.D. et al. Addressing the Global Crisis of Child and Adolescent Mental Health. *JAMA Pediatrics*. Vol 175, No 11, 2021

# ***Why*** is anxiety on the rise?

- Modern times are very different than the times when our ancestors evolved but we still largely have our ancestral brain
- "Bad news" is a source of anxiety and we now have constant access to the "bad news" of the world
- Us adults are more stressed and our children may be picking up on this
- Children spending more time on screens; less time for outdoor, unstructured, social time
- We may be doing too much for our children (inadvertently sending messages that they're fragile or incapable)

# “Normal” anxiety…

- Some anxiety is typical and adaptive
- From an evolutionary perspective, we would have ceased to be without the protective factor of anxiety
- A little bit of anxiety helps us to be prepared. This is why we:
  - look before we cross the street
  - study for tests
  - prepare for performances
- Some fears in childhood are developmentally appropriate & expected

# …or clinical concern?

- Anxiety should be investigated further when:

1) child is expressing significant distress

and/or

2) anxiety interferes with functioning

and/or

3) there's a worsening of other issues (e.g., tics, stomach aches)

# Types of clinical anxiety

- Social anxiety
- Separation anxiety
- Generalized worries
- Specific phobias
- Panic
- Obsessions/compulsions
- Post-traumatic Stress

# Other words to describe anxiety

- Discomfort
- Stress
- Bother
- Worry
- And some you might be less on the lookout for:
  - Annoying
  - "I don't like…"
  - "I don't want to…"

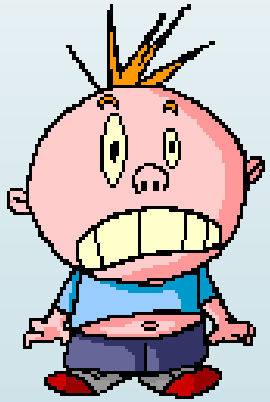
# There may be *other* challenges a child is facing

sensory problems

learning problems

motor problems

social problems



language problems

mood/irritability

attention problems

cognitive rigidity

executive function problems

tics

# How anxiety is manifest

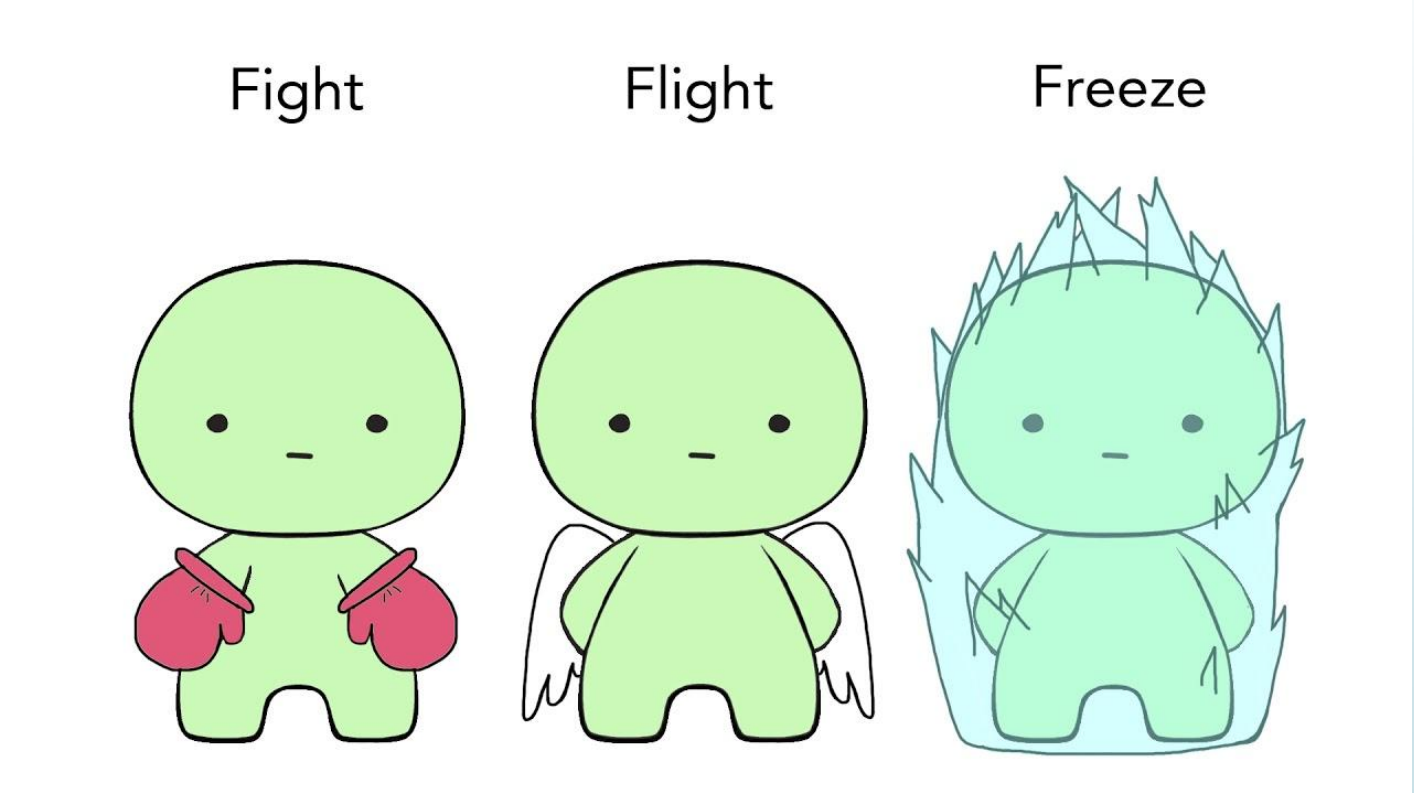
- Emotionally

- Physically

- Cognitively

- Behaviourally

# When at its peak, anxiety presents as



# Physiology of anxiety

- Brain responds to stress by sending a message to the limbic system which houses the alarm (amygdala) and the alarm starts to sound
- Hypothalamus (central command centre of limbic system) sends a message to brainstem for fight, fight, or freeze
- Hypothalamus releases stress hormones (increases heart rate, blood pressure, & breathing and reduces a number of metabolic processes like digestion)
- These physical changes use up energy so being anxious can be tiring

# Internalized anxiety

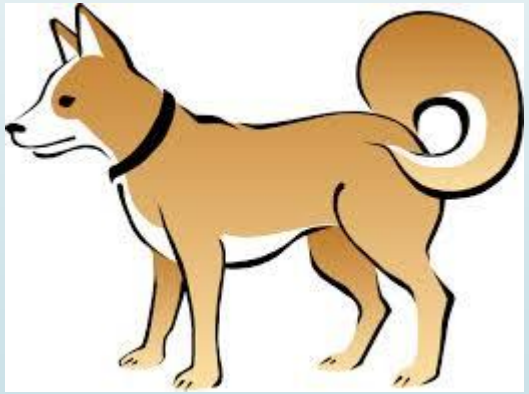
- "Flight" or "freeze"
- This is often how we think of anxiety. Examples:
  - Young child with separation anxiety who clings to parent
  - Needle phobic child who cries at doctor
  - Socially anxious teen who hides behind their phone
- May directly seek support from adults and this often elicits sympathy

# Externalized anxiety

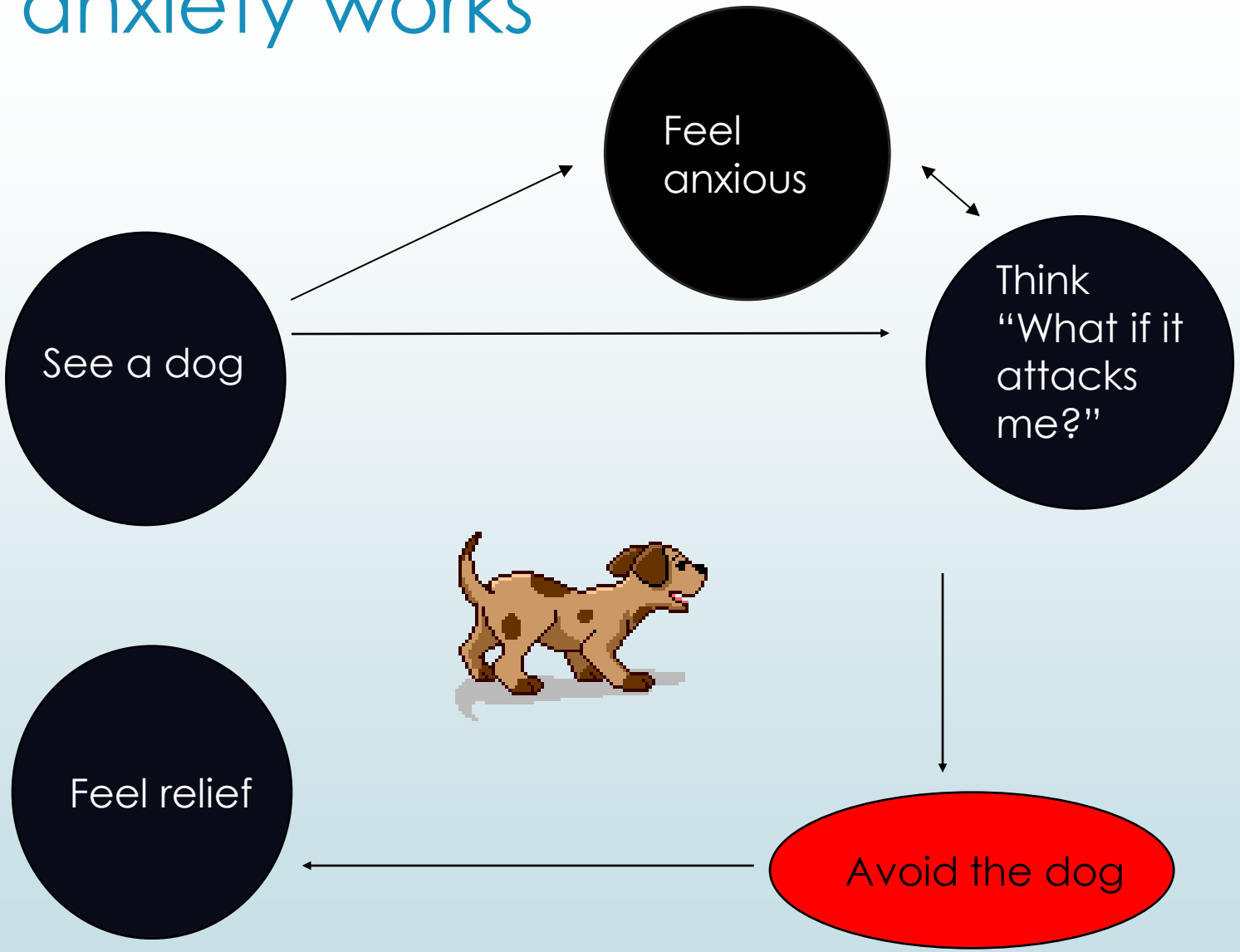
- "Fight"
- The underlying experience may be the same as what occurs in "flight"/"freeze" but it looks different on the surface
- Doing dramatic things to get out of the situation
- Though it can look oppositional, acting out/arguing can be due to high stress

# How does anxiety work?

## A simple example: dog phobia

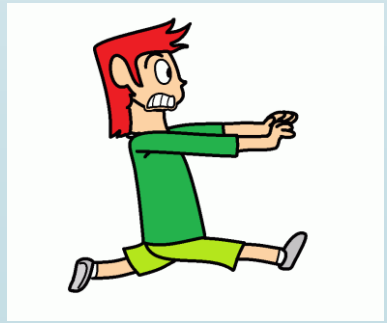


# How anxiety works

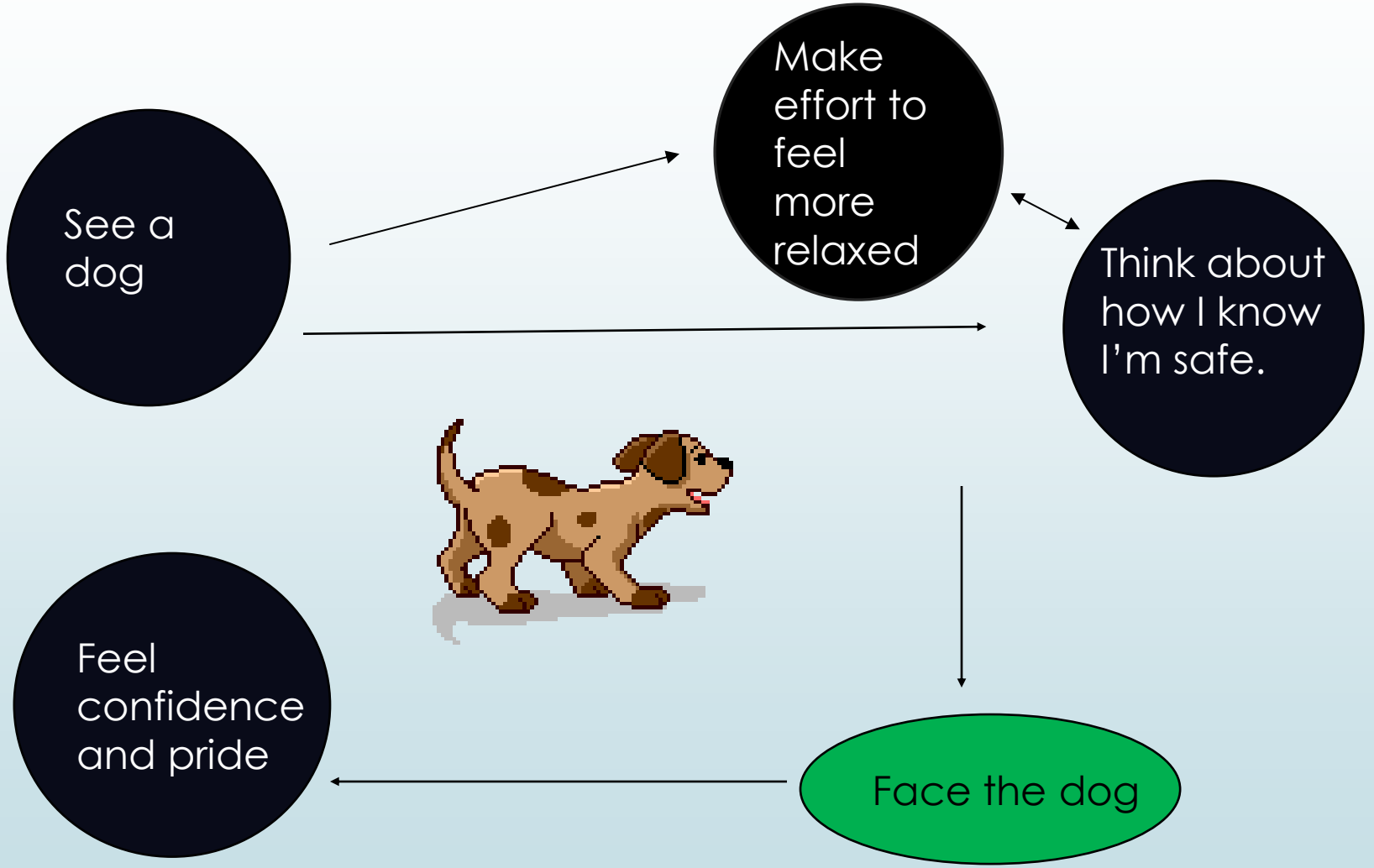


# How anxious patterns can become set

- The relief is very reinforcing
  - Next time you see a dog, you are more likely to use the same strategy (avoidance) since it produced relief
  - The more you avoid, the more likely you are to avoid the next time
- You are not challenging the anxious thinking/unrealistic fear
- You are not teaching yourself that you can cope
  - There is no chance to learn that you would be safe if you did not avoid the dog
- This is why left untreated anxiety often gets worse



# One way that anxious patterns can be changed



# Another way that anxious patterns can be changed

See a dog

Face the dog

Nothing bad happens

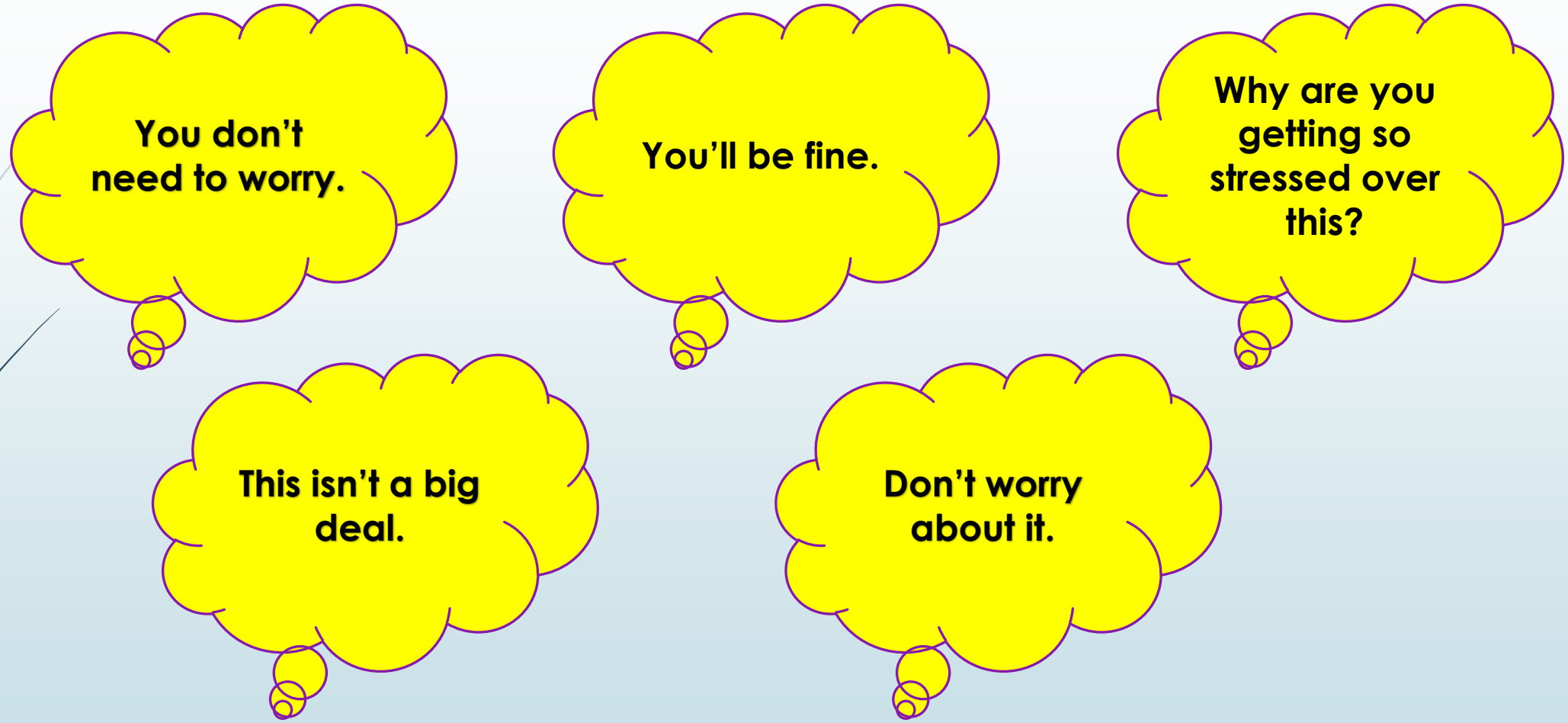
Think about dogs differently

Feel more relaxed

Feel confidence and pride

# Potential Traps

# 1: Negate your child's experience




Even when offered with the best of intentions, these kinds of comments/questions can feel invalidating to children.

# 2: Provide excessive reassurance

- "We have a strong lock and a burglar alarm….and your room is very close to mine….and you can come get me if you need me"
- "You'll probably do great at the recital because you've always done well… and you practiced a lot… and you are naturally talented when it comes to music"
- Constant reassurance is problematic because:
  - it reinforces the idea that your child's anxious thoughts are serious threats (that merit all the discussion)
  - it prevents your child from handling discomfort & uncertainty
  - your child remains reliant on external soothers instead of developing their own coping tools
  - it can become a vicious cycle, exacerbating anxiety. Since reassurance provides temporary relief (much like behavioural avoidance), when the anxiety resurfaces, the drive for more reassurance is greater.

# 3: Accommodate

- Doing things that actively support your child's avoidance
- Changing family activities in response to your child's anxiety
- It's easy for accommodations to grow over time
- Some examples:
  - Looking up/reporting the weather to a young child who's worried about thunderstorms
  - Repeatedly checking in with a child who's anxious when left with a babysitter, or canceling your plans and staying home
  - Spending excessive time working on a school project with a perfectionistic tween
- Ask yourself: "**Am I serving the anxiety or am I serving my child?**"

# Do any of these resonate with you?

**Protective Trap**

- *Anxiety is harmful*
- *Your job as a parent is to make your child's life as comfortable as possible*
- *You want people to go easy on your child because of anxiety*
- *You try to move obstacles and challenges from your child's path*

**Demanding Trap**

- *Your child just needs to get a grip*
- *Your child shouldn't be making such a big deal of things*
- *Your child shouldn't let fear control them*
- *There's nothing to be scared of*

From *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety And OCD* by Eli Lebowitz

# These are easy traps to fall into

- It's hard to see any children suffer, let alone our own children
- On a biological level, our brains get activated when their brains are activated
- Children are hardwired to look to you for protection & reassurance
- You are hardwired to help your children feel safe
- We have the power to make our kids feel better (and this feels great!)
- In those moments, it seems harmless to reassure and accommodate

# What should you do to help children with anxiety?

# Helping children understand anxiety

- Even young children can learn about how anxiety works
  - "Hey Warrior" by Karen Young
  - https://www.anxietycanada.com/ (Fight/Flight/Freeze videos)
- Creating an expectation that some anxiety/stress is normal and *not* something we need to run from
- Children need to learn that it's totally normal for anxiety to make us want to avoid but that we can instead learn to:
  - recognize/label anxiety
  - catch the instinct to avoid
  - do something different—**lean in**

# Anxiety leads to avoidance but **exposure** is the remedy!

“If you feel uncomfortable, you're doing it right!”

“The only thing to avoid is avoidance.”

# So how can we best support children?

# SUPPORT= ACCEPTANCE + CONFIDENCE[1]

**“Support means accepting that your child is really scared – But knowing she can cope”**

1-From *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety And OCD* by Eli Lebowitz

# Acceptance

- Acceptance means acknowledging and validating that your child's feelings are real (and possibly big and scary)
- What's key is validating their feelings *without* validating their potentially skewed anxious thoughts & beliefs

# Confidence

- Confidence means expressing a belief that your child is capable and can handle the discomfort that comes with anxiety
- You're trying to help them believe that they're resilient

# Putting it all together

- "I can see this is very scary for you. I know that you can get through it."
- "You're having some really big feelings about this. I believe that you can manage them"
- "Anxiety is really hard. Good thing you're made of tough stuff"
- "I know this is feeling overwhelming. You're going to come out the other side of it"

# Once you've added more support, you can consider scaling back on accommodations

# The value of transparency

- Part of explaining anxiety to children can include explaining the problem with constant reassurance provision and accommodation
- Once children understand the vicious cycles (how these behaviours actually feed anxiety and make it bigger), it can help them to appreciate why you're less willing to reassure and accommodate

**"I know you're feeling uncomfortable. The thing is I don't want to do anything that's going to grow the anxiety"**

**"I know it feels hard when I don't tell you what you want to hear, but I understand how anxiety works and I don't want to make it worse"**

# Other strategies that can help you support your child to gradually face their fears

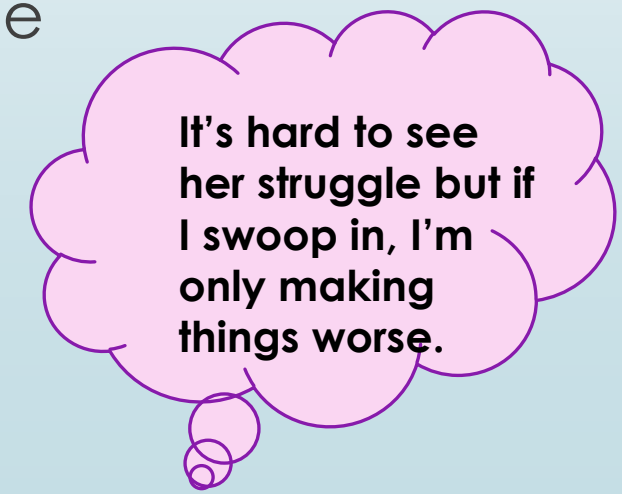
- Cognitive: questions to elicit child's ideas for how *they* can challenge their worries
- Behavioural: encourage approximations
- Physiological: tools to self-regulate (e.g., deep breathing)

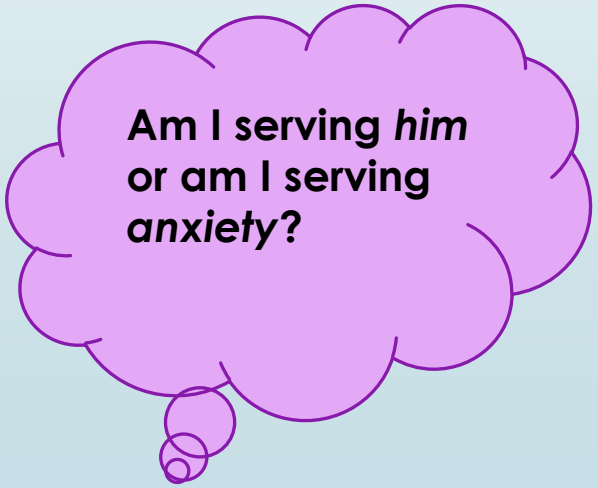
# What else can you do to help?

- Make sure you're helping your child to have a strong foundation (e.g., eating well, sleeping well)
- Support your child with whatever other issues might be driving anxiety (e.g., LDs, motor difficulties, social skills gaps)
- Be proactive: plan for anxiety (expect it!) & problem-solve with your child in advance
- Model healthy anxiety management/share your experiences

# Self-care

- Parenting is hard and parenting *an anxious child* is particularly hard
- Reminding yourself you didn't cause this
- Remembering those traps (protective and demanding) are easy to fall into and can surface in the context of your best intentions
- Show yourself grace
- Mantras can help



# Resources

- Lebowitz, E.R. (2021). *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD: A Scientifically Proven Program for Parents*. Oxford University Press.
- https://www.spacetreatment.net/
- Young, K. (2017). *Hey Warrior*. Hey Sigmund Publishing.
- https://www.heysigmund.com/
- https://anxietycanada.com
- https://childmind.org/topics/anxiety/
- https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/mentalhealth/anxiety-and-anxiety-disorders
- https://ffew.ca/anxiety-stress/reassurance-trap-nurturing-resilience/

# Questions?