Agenda

- Anxiety, Depression & The Pandemic
- Anxiety v. Everyday Worries & Symptoms in Youngsters
- Depression Symptoms in Youngsters
- Listening to Youngsters about Difficult Feelings
- Case Example & REBT Technique: Anxiety
- Tips & Strategies

Anxiety, Depression & The Pandemic

- Overall, research demonstrates the pandemic is affecting the mental health of children and adolescents and that depression and anxiety are prevalent (Psychiatric Times, 2020)

- For some youngsters, the psychosocial impact of the pandemic may be related to the onset or exacerbation of their current mental health problems

- Unmanaged anxiety over time can result in feelings of hopelessness and sometimes result in depressed mood and behaviors

Forshee, 2021

Anxiety v. Everyday Worries

- With anxiety, the individual finds it difficult to control the worry and to keep worrisome thoughts from interfering with attention and tasks at hand

- Whereas worries of every day life are not excessive, perceived as more manageable and may be put off when more pressing matters arise

Forshee, 2021

Anxiety: Symptoms in Youngsters

- Restlessness or feeling keyed up/on edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
- Irritability
- Muscle Tension
- Sleep disturbance (difficulty falling asleep, restlessness, unsatisfying sleep)

Forshee, 2021

Anxiety in Uncertain Times

- Youngsters may misinterpret what they hear and are frightened about things they don’t understand

- Provide information that is truthful and appropriate for the youngster’s age and developmental stage. Don’t offer more information than the child is interested in. If you don’t know the answer, it’s okay to say you don’t know

Forshee, 2021

Anxiety in Uncertain Times

- Explain anxiety to youngsters in a developmentally appropriate manner. This can sound something like, “Anxiety is a very natural human emotion that is there to protect us when we need protecting. It’s part of being human and we all have it. When our brain senses we might be in a situation that is uncertain, scary or challenging, it causes us to experience anxious feelings. Without anxiety, we would take unnecessary risks. Anxiety is not a bad feeling. It’s one we all learn to manage”

- Teach everyday actions of things that *are* within their control (hand washing, not touching their face, etc.)

Forshee, 2021

Depression: Symptoms in Youngsters

- Irritability or crankiness is possible rather than a sad or dejected presentation seen in adults
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, making decisions
- “Not caring anymore” attitude about things they previously found pleasurable such as hobbies, sports, socializing, activities (i.e., finds excuses not to play their favorite sport)
- Appetite changes significant increase/decrease)
- Sleep disturbance: difficulty sleeping or sleeping excessively
- Inability to sit still, pacing, hand-wringing, pulling/rubbing of skin, clothing
- Decreased energy, tiredness, fatigue
- Sense of worthlessness, guilt, or unrealistic negative evaluations of self
- Thoughts of death, suicide or suicide attempts

Forshee, 2021

Listening to Youngsters about Their Difficult Feelings

Accept, Listen & Empathize

- Accept and respect all of the youngsters' feelings. Listen quietly and attentively while being non-judgmental. Be mindful your body language is consistent with being actively engaged (eye contact, nodding your head on occasion, turn toward the youngster)

- Empathize with their feelings

Listening to Youngsters about Difficult Feelings

- Engage in the act of reflective listening. Occasionally summarize, restate or rephrase the core of what the youngster has told you; both his/her feelings and the situation that seems to have caused his/her feelings.

- Be mindful to always repeat back all three things; thoughts, feelings and situation, and use similar words the youngster used while capturing the same meaning and feeling. For example, “You feel worried {feeling} because soon you have to go back to school all day in person for the first time in a year {situation/thoughts}

Forshee, 2021

Listening to Youngsters about Difficult Feelings

- The youngster's *actions* or *behaviors* do not need to be accepted-- just the feelings.

- For example, the youngster can express how upset they are, but he/she is not permitted to express upset by {insert observable behavior here}

Example: Anxiety

Be Curious

- Inquire about the youngster's concern(s) directly by pointing out an observable behavior, or something you know. For example, "Your mom/dad said you've been feeling {insert feeling here} about returning to school and playing outside with your friends. Tell me more about that". Or, "I've noticed since we have returned to in-person school, you've been absent quite a bit. Tell me about this".

- Probe for hidden concerns. Ask the youngster, "If I were to ask kids your age to list their top three worries, what do you think their answers would be"?

Forshee, 2021

REBT Techniques & COVID

- Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) was founded by Albert Ellis in 1955 and is considered the first form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- From an REBT perspective, beliefs and self-talk primarily cause our feelings and behavior. Unpleasant situations and events such as COVID-19 do influence our feelings; however, what a person tells themselves about these events (silent self-talk statements), has a greater influence on feelings

Forshee, 2021

REBT Technique & COVID

- REBT uses the ABCDE model to conceptualize the role of thinking process in emotional upset.
- The A stands for Activating events or Adversity, the B stands for Beliefs (beliefs can be self-helping or self-defeating), and the C stands for emotional, behavioral and cognitive consequences (emotional consequences can be positive or negative). Basically, our beliefs (B) regarding adversity (A) largely determine how we feel and act (C)
- Through the process of therapy, individuals learn to actively and vigorously dispute (D) their irrational beliefs in order to generate effective new beliefs (E), based on healthy, functional and adaptive beliefs

Forshee, 2021

REBT Technique & COVID

The main goal of REBT is to identify, dispute and modify rigid, irrational and unhealthy beliefs based on absolutistic *demands*, and a lack of unconditional acceptance of self, others and life/world into a flexible and healthy philosophy based on *preferences* and accepting the things we cannot control

Forshee, 2021

Anxiety: Case Illustration

Danielle, is a 10-year-old who has been virtual learning for the past year or so was informed that she must return to in-person classes. There is no option for either virtual or hybrid learning. Throughout the pandemic, Danielle has been anxious to go to public places with her family, socialize with friends, and these activities are oftentimes accompanied by crying and avoidance

Forshee, 2021

Case Illustration

- (A): The requirement to return to in-person schooling
- (B): *“My life is going to be over! I can’t go back to school* and be around everyone. I can’t deal with this- I’m so freaked out I can’t even think about it. I like virtual learning and don’t want to go back. There’s no way I’m going back to school in person, and no one can make me. I don’t care if I get in trouble. No one understands that I can’t do it”! (Belief is generally, that she cannot tolerate this situation)
- (C): Feelings of anxiety and fear. Potential for school avoidance.

Forshee, 2021

Case Illustration

- (D): Disputing this belief would sound something to the effect of “This is terrible and your life being over would mean everything is 100% bad for you right now---so your whole life is ruined because you have to go back to in-person school”? “Would your entire lifetime be over if you had to go to in-person school, or would going back to in-person school be really difficult”?

Forshee, 2021

Case Illustration

- (E): A new effective and self-helping belief is: “I wish I felt more confident and less upset abou returning to in-person school. The thought of going back to school is *concerning* and *difficult*, but my life isn’t over. I can face the challenges of the world and live with them, even if I don’t *prefer* them”.

Forshee, 2021

Case Illustration: Processing

- In this illustration, Danielle's healthy negative emotion is *concern*, whereas the unhealthy negative emotion is *anxiety*

- *Concern* is functional because it enables us to help ourselves in constructive ways and allows us to get out of our comfort zone and do what we can do to address a problem or do what we need to do, even if those actions may be uncomfortable. Concern allows us to face reality, make the best of a difficult situation, adapt and prevail. Concern allows us to acknowledge the threat and possible consequences when it's clear not much can be done to ward off the inevitable.

Case Illustration: Processing

- We want youngsters to feel emotions that will result in a functional and healthy self-helping way when they are faced with moments of adversity in life. The goal is to get to a *healthier negative emotion* while acknowledging the adversity being faced

Case Illustration: Processing

- By adjusting to the *non-extreme attitude*, this will help youngsters begin to change what they can change and accept what they cannot. It is a realistic, flexible and meaningful way of thinking that is likely to help reduce distress, enhance resilience and generate growth by promoting acceptance and perseverance

Forshee, 2021

From Avoidance to Action

To really help youngsters make lasting change with the way they think, we need to help them purposely experience what they've been avoiding through exposure of fears by facing them.

This is done though creating a hierarchy of situations beginning with the least anxiety- provoking exposure situation on the most, working all the way to the top goal which would be attending in-person school. Each situation is given a rating of 1-10 on the anxiety scale.

Forshee, 2021

From Avoidance to Action

An exposure ladder in this scenario could look something like:

- _____ (10) Attending in-person school
- _____ (8) Inviting a group of friends to the Trampoline Academy for a party
- _____ (6) Inviting one friend over to the family home to play
- _____ (2) Running errands with parents

Forshee, 2021

Tips & Strategies for Pandemic-Related Anxieties

- Turning worries inside out: Suggest to the worried youngster that we practice “turning worries inside out”. This is another place for the ABCDE’s of REBT to come into play. Have the youngster tell you the thing they are most worried about now. Help them turn worries inside out by gently disputing and challenging self-defeating statements and helping them practice this skill

- Flip the script: Suggest to the youngster “Let’s practice. I’ll think of a few things to get anxious about and you try to turn my worries inside out”

Forshee, 2021

Tips & Strategies for Pandemic-Related Anxieties

- Encourage youngsters to give their anxiety a funky name. The purpose is to help them see this way of thinking is not *who they are*, but a part of how they think/their humanness. This differentiation oftentimes helps youngsters with managing self-defeating thoughts and feelings of anxiety in a healthier way

Tips & Strategies for Pandemic-Related Anxieties

- Encourage youngsters to tell themselves “I’m just having thoughts. Just because I think them doesn’t mean they will happen”

- Find ways to regularly praise their child for reducing and managing their worrisome thoughts

Forshee, 2021

Tips & Strategies for Pandemic-Related Anxieties

- Remind the youngster as often as possible of times they successfully managed anxiety and self-defeating thoughts so they could do the thing they wanted or needed to do

- Regularly ask “What went right today? Let’s think of as many things as we can”. The more positive expectations adults possess, the easier it will be for an anxious child to think positively

Forshee, 2021

Tips & Strategies for Anxiety & Depression

- Teach self-soothing strategies: Diaphragmatic breathing; guided meditation; guided imagery; journaling; talking to a friend; engaging in a physical activity; engaging in a creative activity

- Reinforce and encourage self-helping beliefs and feelings

Forshee, 2021

Additional Strategies: Depression

- Walk with the youngster or have them get up and move around on their own
- Numerous studies has shown the effectiveness exercise and movement have in increasing serotonin production and release
- Serotonin = neurochemical of happiness

Forshee, 2021

References

- Wagner, K. MD, PhD. (2020). New Findings About Children's Mental Health During COVID-19. *Psychiatric Times.*
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). *American Psychiatric Association.*
- Russo-Netzer, P., and Ameli, M. (2021). Optimal Sense-Making and Resilience in Times of Pandemic: Integrating Rationality and Meaning in Psychotherapy. *Frontiers in Psychology (12),* 1-7.