

I'm scared:

Help for anxious youth

by Catherine Lee

Do you ever feel afraid? Of course – we all do. Worry and fear are normal parts of life; and most of us are successful in overcoming them. With experience we learn to tell ourselves that the thing we fear probably won't happen, and even if it did, it would not be so terrible. However, a significant minority of children and adolescents become anxious easily and experience anxiety so intense it gets in the way of their normal activities. This is called an anxiety disorder.

There are many different types of anxiety disorders; including worry about being separated from home or a loved one, about something catastrophic happening, about being judged, or looking foolish in a social situation. Children and adolescents with anxiety disorders are unable to control or stop their worries, are upset because of them, and may have physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, muscle tension, or sleep problems. Some children develop behaviours to try to control their anxiety; such as repeated hand-washing or checking items. Their fear may be so overwhelming that they try to avoid going to school: some stop going altogether. Serious anxiety problems affect 8-12% of children and adolescents and are as common in boys as in girls.

Children and adolescents with anxiety disorders require help from mental health professionals to overcome their fears and worries. Treatments in reducing anxiety are very effective in helping young people to cope.

Some Scouting activities are scary when you're learning them – but what a challenge.

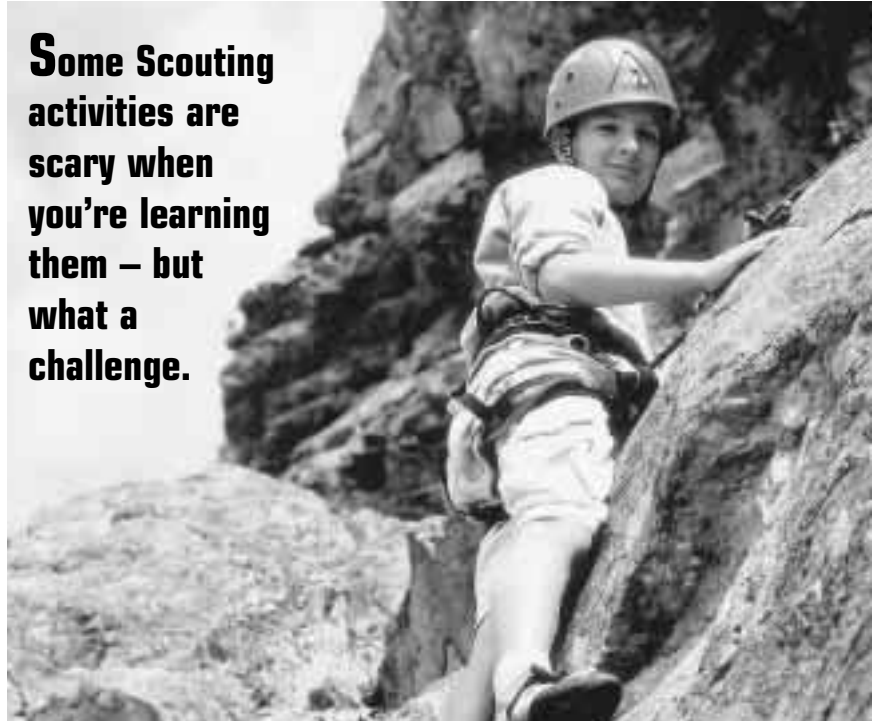


Photo: Dennis Power

How does anxiety affect Beavers, Cubs, or Scouts?

We probably do not see the most anxious youth in our programs as they are too fearful to sign up. At registration night, we catch our first glimpse of those courageous youth who are considering joining the Scouting Movement despite feelings of shyness, embarrassment and worry. These young people may be checking out the friendliness or approachability of the leaders and noting whether there are other children they recognize from school or their neighbourhood.

The first meeting is another hurdle for anxious youth. They may have been worrying about looking silly, not knowing anyone, or not knowing what to do for some time, and may even have had sleep problems, headaches and stomach aches as they think about coming to the first meeting. We see anxious youth in the doorway or parking lot, huddled in conversation with a parent who is attempting to encourage, bribe, or shame them into staying.

To the anxious youth, the exciting program leaders have carefully prepared may seem like a menu of opportunities to be embarrassed, make a mistake or get hurt. Their fears are out of proportion to the actual risk of the situations. Anxious children may not express their fears directly. They are more likely to say they do not feel like doing an activity, they don't have any ideas for songs or skits, or they don't like camping. They may be sulky and complain they don't feel well or are tired. They may react to encouragement by becoming irritable.

Anxious youth are likely to withdraw from participation in new activities, with unfamiliar people, or when they are the centre of attention. They may avoid volunteering to sing a song, lead a skit, or demonstrate a skill. Anxious children can easily be overlooked and may drop out of the program. Anxious youth who remain in the program might seem to demand a lot of attention by persistent requests for help and reassurance.

Natural Reactions To Anxious Behaviour

Experienced leaders may be tolerant and understanding of the initial reluctance and fears of new members. But it's also quite natural to feel some frustration when children do not respond to your exciting and carefully planned program with enthusiasm. When considering becoming a leader, most of us think of facilitating young people's participation in special activities rather than spending time on the sidelines with a child who is worried and uncertain about whether to sit on the float for the Santa Claus parade. Adults usually expect that older youth will take on challenges easily – and it can be frustrating to reassure a 9- or 10-year-old about activities that some younger children take on with ease.

Youth can be intolerant of the fearfulness of their peers. They have a hard time imagining themselves in the shoes of the child who does not want to go in the pool, who has no ideas about which song to sing around the campfire, or who is afraid of the noises heard when sleeping in a tent. Youth can easily develop the habit of teasing and excluding their anxious peers. An anxious youth feels uncomfortable about what is asked of him/her. S/he is sensitive to the taunts of peers, and is all too aware when adults are becoming frustrated with this lack of involvement.

How can participation in Scouting help a youth with anxiety?

The philosophy of *do your best* allows each child to work at his/her own level. Youth learn by observing others; watching another fearful child take on the responsibilities of being a Sixer or Second can inspire a fearful Tenderpad. An anxious youth who faces fears in a supportive environment will experience the exhilaration of overcoming challenges. Picture the face of a child who feared the dark after their first time playing *Burning Bridges!* Imagine the pride of the shy child who has just introduced a skit during a campfire!

A team approach

If a child has special needs, such as anxiety problems, parents and at least one leader should exchange information at the beginning of the year. Parents need to know what is involved in the program and how they can help. Leaders need to know more about the child and how they can make things easier. Throughout the year parents and leaders can touch base informally at the end of meetings to share information on the youth's challenges and triumphs.

The general principle in helping anxious children overcome their fears is *graduated exposure*. This means that the best way for a child to overcome their fears is to face them. The key is to do it *gradually*. The process of facing fears is made up of hundreds of tiny steps. Just getting in the car and coming to the gymnasium for a first meeting is a big



Everybody needs a little strong support sometimes!

ordeal for an anxious child. To remain for all or part of the meeting sitting securely on a parent's lap may be a big accomplishment the first week. The next week, the child may participate with the parent. Gradually, the parent will withdraw more, finally dropping off the young person and picking him/her up after the meeting. The parent who may be an essential support to the child at the beginning should gradually fade out their involvement as the child becomes more at ease.

A three-year program offers the possibility that leaders and youth may get to know one another well. Youth may be motivated by encouragement about what will be expected of them as they move through the program and take on increasing responsibility. A first year Cub may be almost glued to a supportive leader or parent at his/her first Kub Kar rally; a bit overwhelmed by all the unfamiliar faces, concerned about whether the wheels will stay on the Kar; and worried about

where s/he left their lunch. At the year two rally, the same Cub may require support on the initial runs, but will do nicely seeing leaders only occasionally during the morning. At the year three rally, this veteran Cub may be asked to help a first-year Cub who is a little shy.

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Photo: Harrison Grant

A model of flexibility

Children with anxiety have little tolerance for the “less than perfect” and unknown or new circumstances. It is important to model an easygoing approach, openness to new situations and people, and ability to adapt when things are less than optimal. If adults encounter a glitch, rather than get upset, they can talk out loud so the child can hear them saying things like, “Okay, this isn’t going according to plan. What can I do to make things work out for me? How can I solve this?” This is a great opportunity to show children how to manage stress.

Leaders

Planning the Program

All the regular planning activities you learned about in Woodbadge training become even more important if your group includes an anxious child. As you plan your program, think about activities and outings that may pose a special challenge to a young person who has a tendency to be fearful, to worry or be easily embarrassed. Contact the parents to let them know and ask for their help in preparing for investiture night, an outing to a Halloween farm, or for a camp. Consider in advance ways to pair the anxious child with a more even-tempered and all-round good kid; to do some small activities or errands together. This will help the anxious child become more comfortable with peers and the Scouting program.

Running the Meeting

Designated leader. Throughout the meeting, one leader can be responsi-



What do you think about this guy...

ble to greet the anxious child on arrival, to monitor his/her involvement and to notice progress towards participation. After the meeting, the designated leader can touch base with the parents to let them know of triumphs and challenges: “Chris did a great job leading the cheer tonight”. “Tony was worried about the progress made on the Kub Kar—he would be ready to start painting it next week if you could work together on sanding during the week.”

No teasing. It is essential that neither youth nor leaders make teasing or hurtful remarks about a child’s fearfulness. This may require an explicit rule as well as reminders.

Be good “coaches” for courageous behaviour. The leader can approach the child as a “coach”. A good coach praises effort and gives opportunities to practice a skill. Every step towards active participation counts; an anxious Beaver who begins meetings sitting on the parent’s lap may be complimented on their careful attention to what is going on. As the child ventures towards active involvement, by

sitting in the circle, singing a song, or taking part in a craft, find opportunities to compliment the child. Focus on his or her **efforts**, rather than on actual **results**. Encourage participation, and when necessary, demonstrate and assist the child in practicing these tasks and involvement in activities. Give nods and smiles of reinforcement whenever you notice the child coping and participating.

Parents

Prepare for the Meeting

The day before the meeting, the parent can help the youth to set out all s/he will need (e.g., uniform, book, dues). An anxious child can become panicky if they fear that they have forgotten an important item. Parents need to be good detectives - noticing the youth taking responsibility and complimenting him/her for getting ready and having things prepared.

Participation in the Meeting

The parent’s job is to provide support as the child makes the initial

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transition to the program; gradually fading out their involvement as the child gains confidence. Parents with anxious children offer the best support by remaining calm, breaking the challenge into small steps and confidently helping the child to take the next step. Shaming, threats, or bribes are not helpful. Genuine acknowledgement of progress towards courage is invaluable.

After the Meeting

All parents should arrange to pick their child up on time. Parents with anxious youth know that if they are late, the child may worry that something has happened to them or that they will be left alone at the hall. Parents can also check quickly with a leader how the meeting went. On the way home, parents should ask about the activities, making sure they receive from the child any forms, newsletters or special requirements for upcoming meetings. The drive home is an opportunity to compliment the young person on accomplishments, new songs and games learned, crafts completed, or badges and awards earned.

With help, compassion and encouragement, we can work as a team to



Photo: Cheryl Smith

help the anxious child enjoy the fun and great experiences of Scouting.

More information:

www.anxietycanada.ca

- contains provincial web sites

www.aboutourkids.org/articles/about_anxiety.html

- contains a variety of articles λ

- *Dr. Catherine Lee is a psychologist and professor with the University of Ottawa, and a former leader with the 3rd Aylmer Cubs.*

Note to Leaders:

It is not your job, as a leader, to diagnose the youth in your programs or to decide who needs mental health services. However, if a child is extremely fearful or worried, it may be useful to let the parents know. You may also wish to pass on the web sites listed in this article, so that parents can investigate themselves.

Adult support makes all the difference

All too often youth/teens who express fear, extreme caution, or avoid experiences situationally or regularly are labelled as worry warts, lazy, weak, lethargic, wimps, crazy, nuts, etc. These labels in themselves not only add to the youth's fear and lessen their self-esteem, but create even further barriers to attaining the confidence it takes to face their fearful feelings, thoughts, or situations.

Anxiety conditions are real and have existed for as long as recorded history. It is only in the past few decades, however, that they have been appropriately mentioned and researched. Panic alone, did not make it into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as a distinct condition (disorder) until the early 80s.

An anxiety condition that is not appropriately treated when in childhood or adolescence can have serious consequences. Long term quality of life depends on early identification and prevention.

The adult acknowledgment of symptoms in an individual youth is one of the first steps to healing. Youth may not acknowledge their own symptoms for fear of being judged or showing any signs of weakness. Anxiety conditions are not about weakness. They are like any other condition or illness such as diabetes, and are as real and in need of constructive support and treatment.

When the adult supports the youth with this understanding, they are more likely to respond similarly. The adult courage and commitment to positive support, encouragement and treatment will allow the youth freedom to heal within a comfortable environment and to explore the levels of their own determination and courage.

- *Anxiety Disorders Association of Ontario www.anxietyontario.com*

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