How to Help Children and Teens Through Anxiety at Bedtime

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The relationship between anxiety and sleep is a complicated one. Sleep strengthens the brain against anxiety, but anxiety at bedtime stops sleep. Anxious thoughts will intrude at bedtime when the world is still, and bodies are still, and when young minds are meant to be still – but – a lack of sleep will make anxiety worse, which will make sleep the next night tougher, which will make anxiety worse.

The part of the brain most sensitive to a lack of sleep is the amygdala – the seat of anxiety. When the brain is tired, the amygdala will be more likely to read non-threats as threats and ready the body for fight or flight. This fuels the physical symptoms of anxiety, which will fuel anxious thoughts – 'I feel like something bad is going to happen, so something bad must be going to happen.' This will then fuel anxious behaviour – fight (aggression, anger) or flight (avoidance).

The intrusion from anxiety into sleep can magnify its intrusion everywhere else. Sleep is such an important part of the foundation that gives children what they need to be happy, healthy, and brave.

Anxiety at bedtime – why it makes sense.

Sleep is an extended separation from a parent. Even though you might only be down the hall, when your children close their eyes they will feel the distance. This can set the brain to 'unsafe'. This is not a deficiency and it's not a sign of breakage. It's instinctive.

We are wired to feel safest when we are in the presence of our important people. This is part of our human heritage. Long ago, at the beginning of humans, our ancestors slept in groups as a way to stay safe. Leaving a child alone at night would have made them vulnerable to the environment or predators.

Fast forward thousands of years, and we are still wired to equate closeness with safety. The more anxious children are, the more that 'closeness' might need to be experienced as 'physical presence' for them to feel safe. The amygdala will remind them of their vulnerability every time they close their eyes. 'What if something happens to your mum and/or dad while you're asleep?' 'What if kidnappers break in?' 'What if the house burns down and nobody notices until it's too late because everyone is sleeping?'

Anxiety at bedtime makes sense. It's a strong, healthy brain working exactly as it should to keep them safe, but a little too much when there is no need. The good news is that we can change that.

But the fears might make no sense at all.

When fears feel too big, such as fear of losing a parent, or waking up to a burning home, children might turn this fear into something else, such as witches or monsters under the bed. It's a way to give voice to the feelings and fears that are too big for words. The content of the fears might not be valid, but the feelings will always be – so that's what we need to speak to.

'I can see how scared you are. I would be scared too if I was thinking about monsters under the bed! You are completely safe. I would never leave you if I didn't believe you are safe.'

First the feeling. Then the story – but the story won't always make sense.

We humans are meaning-makers. We need to make sense of our feelings – to contain them – and we do this by putting a story to them. 'I feel anxious/ angry/ sad/ scared because …'. First the feeling, then the story. Sometimes the story will be accurate. Sometimes it won't be. A feeling with a far-fetched story will feel more contained than an 'orphaned' feeling that has no story or context at all.

Children might not always be aware of what their anxiety at bedtime is about. It might just feel like something bad is going to happen, or there might be a general feeling of unease. This will especially be the case if children have been through a trauma or if they've heard news of a trauma which feels overwhelming.

With such wide coverage of the bushfires that ravaged Australia, for example, most children would be aware that other children like them and families like theirs are hurting, scared, grieving, or have lost their loved people, pets or homes. This taps into their common humanity, and it is very normal for them to start thinking, 'What if something happens to my family, or my pets, or my home? What if it happens while I'm sleeping? If this can happen to them, it can happen to me.'

When their fears are big, such as the death of a parent, being alone in the world, or losing everything, children might put this into something else – monsters, witches, kidnappers. This is a sign that there is a feeling of anxiety that needs containing, holding and soothing.

When children talk about their anxiety at bedtime, the content of their fear (the story) might seem irrational, but the feeling will be valid. The feeling needs to be seen, held, contained, and soothed, so they can feel safe again.

'I can see how scared you are. There are some scary things happening in the world at the moment, but my darling, you are safe. I promise. We are safe.'

If they have been through the trauma direction, the truth is that they have been through something awful, *and* they are safe.

'We have been through something terrible and it's been really scary. We are going to get through this. It's okay to feel scared or sad or angry. Whatever you feel is so okay. I'm here and I've got you and we are safe. We can get through anything together. We are safe.'

Why does behaviour get so difficult at bedtime?

If children can't put words to the feeling, the feeling will still push for action. If the feeling is anxiety, it will push for safety – through fight or flight. Anxiety at bedtime might look like anger, aggression, arguing, restlessness, defiance, tears, clinginess, ignoring you – so many things. It's not bad behaviour – it's anxiety. It's a brain that feels unsafe because it's away from the important big person who has been assigned the very important job of keeping this young person safe.

Sometimes children might become especially controlling at bedtime: 'I want/ I won't/ You can't make me …'. Again, this isn't about being difficult, but about trying to control the environment so they can feel safe. they might do this is by trying to take the lead – they might defy you, resist you, try to control you, or scream at you when things don't go their way. Aside from the potential to bring the most loving, patient parent to their knees (we've all been there), there are two problems with this.

The first is that eaders never rest. As long as your child is taking the lead, they will not be able to relax and find the rest they need. The second problem is that children do not tend to make great leaders, especially when they are tired, and especially when they are trying to

lead adults. The more we surrender the lead, or aggressively assert the lead, the more we feed the problem.

So what do we do?

Difficult behaviour at bedtime is not because children want to make your life hard, but because their brain has registered that things are about to get unsafe. An anxious brain won't rest until it feels safe, and to feel safe it needs to feel connected and contained. We can facilitate this by taking the lead with as much warmth, strength and love as we can muster. Here are some ways to do this:

> Set the boundary, but lovingly.

'Love, it's going to be bedtime in four more songs. Would you like some warm milk so you're ready for bed when the songs finish?'

> Validate their feelings, then give them in fantasy what they can't have in reality.

'I know – bedtimes can be so annoying. You want to keep playing, don't you? I wish we didn't have to sleep – ever. I wish we could stay up and play all night. I wish we could play soccer and go to the zoo and eat popcorn – all night – in our pyjamas! But right now, it's bedtime my darling.

> Try to get there first with an offer of connection to make things safe.

This will help to bring safety and lessen their need to chase it themselves.

'It's going to be bedtime in three more songs. Before you go to sleep, would you like two stories and a five minute back tickle, or one story, one mindfulness meditation and a five minute back tickle?'

This doesn't mean they will immediately soften and do everything you ask. We're building behaviour, and that takes time. When things turn ugly, it will be tempting to shout or get tough, and there will be times that, despite our most loving intentions, this will happen. We're only human. For our children though (or any of us for that matter), tough-talking, separation (as in time out), or anything that shames them or disconnects them from us will only cause the brain to feel even more unsafe, which will make their challenging behaviour worse.

The more you can look at their behaviour with compassion and curiosity (and my goodness I know how hard that can be) the more you can give the brain exactly what it needs – safety. Then, your child will more likely be in a position for you to lead and guide him or her to feeling safe and eventually, to rest.

There will be a time to respond to the behaviour, but in the middle of the mess isn't it. The time will come when the brain is open to our influence, which will happen when it feels safe and calm. To address their behaviour at any other time is useless. The brain can't learn or

take in information when it is in big emotion. Manage the incident first, then deal with the behaviour when things are calm. You'll get less resistance and they'll be more likely to listen to you on how to do things better next time.

How to manage anxiety at bedtime.

1. Shift the focus from the separation to their next connection with you.

Given that bedtime is a time of separation, tilt the focus to the next point of connection. Rather than focusing on the night, as in, 'Night my darling, have a good sleep,' (which might be perfect for children who don't have anxiety), shift their focus to when they will next see you. This can be done by finding rituals to tie bedtime to morning.

• Invite them to choose a book at bedtime that you will read together in the morning.

• Let them know that as they fall asleep, you will be writing down something they did today that you especially loved and that you will read this together in the morning.

• Give them something of yours, and have them give something to you, then return them to each other in the morning. Smell is a really strong emotional trigger. If the smell is associated with safety, it will have an enormous capacity to trigger calm. Perhaps let them use your pillowcase for a while, or let them take your shirt to bed with them.

2. Rework the association – bedtime is rest.

The brain learns from experience, so the only way for the brain to learn that bedtime is safe, is to 'reassociate' bedtime with safety. If there has been a lot of anxiety around bedtime for a while, their bed and bedtime probably won't feel safe. It will feel like the space that makes them stare at the ceiling with thoughts of everything that could go wrong, the space that gives them the wriggles, or a sick tummy, or where they miss you the most. 'Re-learning' can happen in little steps. Here's how it works. First, have the conversation.

'I know it feels scary for you in your own bed. I also know that you are completely safe there. I know that eventually you will be able to spend the whole night in your own bed, and that your room can feel cosy and safe and beautiful for you, but I know that isn't how it feels at the moment. Let's work towards that in little steps. We'll do it together.

Let's start with five minutes in your bed, then you can come in with me/us for the rest of the night. Then, when that feels okay enough, let's try ten minutes. Then we'll keep taking braver steps from there. I know you can do this, love. I know you can.'

You are still in control, but you've 'got there first' to make things feel safer. This will reduce their need to take the lead and behave in ways that are geared to take control (to make things feel safer), but which are exhausting for everyone.

If the reconnection with you is in their hands, they are more likely to relax because they won't be worrying about when or if you're coming back. This will slowly rework the association so their room, their bed, and bedtime start to feel calm – because they know they are about to be with you.

As your child feels okay with a level, work towards the separation being longer before coming in with you. If they are unwilling to move to the next stage, try this,

'Okay, I can see it feels too big to go from 10 minutes to 20 minutes, so what would feel brave? What can you do that was more than last night?'

After a few nights (or weeks) move to a bigger separation but don't go back to the level they have been on. Once the separation gets to, perhaps 20 minutes or 30 minutes, it's likely that your young one will fall asleep on their own. This might take weeks or months, and that's okay.

If there is a middle of the night waking, let them come in with you but in the morning celebrate that they were able to fall asleep in their own bed. They will probably then say, 'Yep. But there's no way I'm staying by myself for the whole night tonight.' That's okay. On the next night, stay at the same separation time as the night before, but don't go backwards from there. Your child might fall asleep for the night, or might not – but they are getting closer to spending the night in their bed. Look for progress towards the goal, rather than the goal itself. One thing is for certain. They aren't going to be wanting to spend every night in your bed when they are fifteen – but you won't need to wait until then.

3. With you, then away, then back again.

Do your usual bedtime routine – story, cuddle – then let them know you will return in five minutes. When this feels okay, step up to ten minutes then work up from there.

This will work beautifully with some kids, but if your child is really anxious, and if they have already been spending a lot of nights in your bed, they might not be able to rest for fear you might not come back. This is where the previous strategy (reworking the association) can be more effective.

4. And if bad dreams are causing trouble …

If your child is worried about bad dreams, talk about the dreams they would like to have. Dreams and nightmares come from our own thoughts, feelings, and memories, so we have the capacity to influence them. Harvard researchers have found that the content of a dream can be changed by talking about that dream just before bedtime. Spend about ten minutes before bedtime talking about a story you and your child might dream about. The brain dreams in pictures, so talk a lot about the images – colours, size, what's around. You might want to use the same story every night, tweaking or adding as you go along. The more you talk about it, the more vivid it will be, and the easier they can call on it when they need to.

And finally …

For children to thrive, the foundations need to be strong. Sleep is a vital part of this. When their world feels fragile, anxiety will often stir trouble at bedtime. This can be exhausting for everyone. It can bring the most loving parents to our knees. We need sleep as much as our children do, and if there are nights when it all gets too much, that's okay. It won't break them.

The more they can feel the connection with you at bedtime, the safer they will feel and the more they will be able to rest. It might take time for the safety they feel in your presence, to expand so they feel it in your absence too. You have a profound and wonderful capacity to ease their anxiety at bedtime and help them into calm, restful, restorative sleep. It's okay if this takes time. The strengthening you are working on is a long-term one. Focus on the progress rather than the outcome, and know that little by little, the strengthening is happening.