

Parental Anxiety



Topics Covered

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Wellness Wednesdays

05/04/2020

A little late to welcoming you all to Meh (May), but here we are. I've seen so many comments about how all this uncertainty has changed the way we all perceive time, and how collective the feeling has been. Would you agree that March was endless, and yet April was over in a blink of an eye?

April ended on quite the anxious note for me, it honestly prompted some of the content in this newsletter.

A week or so ago, I had my first experience watching jumper cables melt. **JUMPER CABLES.** Imagine my dismay after turning away from something I've done to my fiancé's car numerous times without issue. There was smoke, there was black goo, red goo, and don't let me get started on the neighbors staring out the windows. Luckily, the damage was minimal, I pretty much killed an already dead battery, so my actions confirmed what we both knew was already coming our way. "Time to replace the battery", she said. I disgruntledly agreed (that's probably putting it politely, I was still pretty riled up).

For a few hours after, I was consumed by this odd, overwhelming feeling that this was my fault in some way or another. How could such an easy, monotonous activity end in smoke and goo? It didn't take long to learn that I made a mistake that ultimately led to the smoke, the goo, and the dead battery. Naturally, I wanted to find the answer as to why the mistake occurred. That answer was anxiety.

I felt rushed. I wanted to get my fiancé on the road in time to get to work. I also wanted to get my day started so I too could begin my work. I won't go into the details about the specific worries that were present, but the point remains that anxiety controlled that experience from start to finish. It blocked my mind from functioning at its best and from making sound decisions in a stressful moment. Anxiety led to the mistake and ultimately to purchasing a new battery, something I'd prefer to not spend money on at this point.

In honor of mental health awareness month, the next few weeks will be dedicated to talking about Anxiety, strategies to use to help alleviate the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings it can bring into our lives, and decision making processes families can rely on to address anxieties and other family needs as society begins to reopen its doors in the coming weeks.

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Anxiety

- **According to the American Psychological Association (APA), Anxiety is “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure”**
- **Anxiety can present as generalized worry or specific worry**
- **Anxiety serves an evolutionary purpose of preparing and protecting us from perceived threats or negative outcomes**
 - Often has a negative connotation to it due to its association with stress, neuroticism, etc.
- **Can be a beneficial emotion when controlled, or when in a tolerable range**
 - Procrastinators often benefit from anxiety pushing them to complete their work as they get closer to specific deadlines
- **Anxiety can present in one member of a family, or present in all members of a family**
 - It can unintentionally be passed and projected onto others as the individual with anxiety seeks ways to neutralize and rid themselves of some of their uncomfortable feelings

Parental Anxiety

- **Parents are dealing with a lot of stressors right now, and it is likely that their own anxiety is being compounded by the stress and anxiety of their children.**
- **Parental anxiety is often in relation to the responsibility and duty parents have to foster and aid in the growth of our next generation.**
- **What are parents to do when that growth has been stunted by uncertainty?**
 - “How will this impact my son or daughter’s future? College? College savings?”
 - “Will my son or daughter have the strength to cope with this, when I, myself, am having a hard time?”
- **We naturally tend to worry most about the things that we have the least control over**
 - This response typically helps us feel a sense of control as we anticipate worst outcomes and prepare for them, or by preparing us for the preferred outcome
- **However, this thinking can also lead to harmful patterns of behavior and thoughts that prevent us from being at our best during stressful times, especially when trying to take care of children!**
- **Implications**
 - Kids take their cues from you:
 - Adults and parents are sometimes the only point of reference for a child to interpret information that is unknown to them or not yet understood

Strategies for Parents

- **Know what you can and cannot control during these uncertain times**
 - Make a list
 - Strategize how you may handle/cope with specific items that you cannot control
- **Catch yourself when you are in a “fear” or “fact” mode**
 - Are your parenting responses the result of facts, or are they the results of fears?
 - Ask yourself if your responses are supported by evidence?
- **Self-reflection**
 - During uncertainty, especially when highly stressed with ongoing duties as a parent, partner, professional, etc. it becomes difficult for us to communicate, let alone identify, our feelings and thoughts
 - Let yourself notice where you’re experiencing discomfort in your body, it’s best to start with the feeling first
 - Once identified, move to begin developing an understanding of the thoughts that are related to that feeling of discomfort. Is there a specific theme, or need, that appears to be reoccurring in your thoughts? Are the thoughts supported by evidence? Are they based off of fact or fear?
- **Know where your boundaries are**
 - Yes, your children are an extension of you, but they are also growing and working to develop their own independence
 - They have developmental tasks they need to work towards, but we as adults do too. Focus on areas of personal growth and work towards them during down time
 - Important to balance your identity as a parent, and also as an individual
- **Instead of “what if...?” consider “I am....”**
 - It is important to not get caught up in the future of this uncertainty; remaining in the present can help reduce our anxieties
 - “What if I get sick?” vs. “I am healthy”
 - “What if my child’s grades are affected?” vs. “I am proud of where their grades are”
- **Know what keeps your lid on**
 - What is your stress management plan? Do you like to exercise, practice mindfulness, build things, etc.?
 - There are two rewards to engaging in stress management:
 - A reduction in stress and anxiety
 - Modeling appropriate stress responses to your children (show them how to tolerate, reduce, and thrive in stressful times)
- **Debrief after anxious moments**
 - It’s okay to speak with a child or teen about your anxiety
 - Validating for the child
 - Modeling appropriate discussion about stress and anxiety
 - Shows them how to talk, reflect, and respond
 - When we don’t debrief and avoid discussing our feelings we communicate:
 - That children need to be protected from their emotions
 - That they (children) should protect us from their emotions
 - That kids don’t have permission to feel or express emotions, since we ourselves don’t do it
 - That there isn’t a way to manage emotions when they do happen

- **Plan and Prepare**
 - Get ahead of the anxiety, know what to do and when to do it
 - Think about what you would do if you noticed smoke coming from your car while driving. You'd pull over, turn the car off, and explore what was going on and remedy the problem if you are able
 - The same goes for our mental health, and especially with anxiety. Know your signs of mental/emotional strain and act on them in ways that help reduce that strain
 - Sticking with the car metaphor, when you get to a point where the problem becomes more difficult to fix, or starts to become recurrent, seek out professional help. Access is widely available through telehealth.
- **Rely on your support systems/Find a support system**
 - Call your friends, call your family
 - Speak with a neighbor or a coworker
 - It is okay to express when you are feeling overwhelmed, and conversations with others can feel validating while also enhancing our feeling of connection with others

Final thoughts:

For those of you who are Parks and Recreation fans, and for those of you who aren't (I'd suggest watching, especially their recent episode to raise funds for charities addressing the pandemic), Ron Swanson highlighted an important aspect of all of this craziness while trying to help a friend in need that truly speaks to human nature and our desire to connect and support one another.

"It was easy, I just called all of your friends and told them that I thought you may need a little help. They cleared their schedules."

It's easy to let our thoughts and our minds tell us "they're too busy" or "they won't answer" when we need support, but I believe, especially during these uncertain times, that whoever it is you're reaching out to will clear their schedule for you.

When everyone is getting off the zoom call but you're struggling to find the leave meeting button so then it's just you and the host



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