



TRY TO DO THE THINGS YOU ARE AFRAID OF (A LITTLE AT A TIME).

This is also called facing your fears, being brave, or exposure therapy. One of the very best ways to beat anxiety is to get closer and closer to the thing that we fear. When we do this, we learn, in an experiential way, that the thing that we fear is actually not so fearful. If we continue to avoid the thing that we fear, our fear actually gets stronger. When we gradually put ourselves in the situations we fear, and nothing bad happens, our alarm system turns off, and our anxiety goes down. When we repeat this, it decreases the likelihood that our anxiety alarm goes off in those situations and shrinks our fear. Below are some helpful tips on how to help your child do this with their unrealistic fears. Using the story of the worry cloud is especially helpful with this tool. You can remind the child that when they avoid the things they are anxious about (that you recognize as irrational), their worry cloud gets bigger. When they do the opposite of what they are anxious about, their worry cloud gets smaller.

- 1. In doing any of the steps below, be sure to talk about it with your child beforehand and make all plans for bravery practice together.** It is very important that this experience is as positive as possible, not in any way coercive and within the control of the child. So consider yourself team members where you can act as a coach or cheerleader to help your child shrink their worry cloud. By targeting the worry cloud, you don't blame the child for behaviors that may come as a result of the anxiety. By being a team member, the child feels supported, and as a team you can target behaviors and not the child. Allowing your child to make some decisions on where to start and what fears to face first and how much or how quickly you proceed (you can use gentle encouragement to move them along) empowers them, and reduces the likelihood of making the fear worse (which can occur when you push too hard too quickly). Remember, you can use encouragement and positive rewards (like social praise and mini celebration) for every little step your child makes towards their fears.
- 2. Talk about anxiety with your child as described in the previous section.** Then talk about levels of anxiety and how some things make us a little bit afraid and other things very much afraid. Teach them about how to rate their anxiety on a scale from 0 to 10. Using visuals to relay the level of their anxiety, such as the size of their worry cloud, can be helpful and anchor the ideas in their minds.
- 3. Next create a Fear Ladder or hierarchy.** This means creating numerous steps to facing the biggest fear. This can be done by breaking the feared situation down into small steps or listing the things we fear in order of least feared to most feared. For example, if a child is afraid of dogs, the lowest step on the ladder might be watching movies about dogs, next seeing a dog from across the street, then in a pet store behind a window, then petting a dog on a leash and finally petting a dog off of a leash. As you create the steps together, have them rate their imagined level of anxiety if they were in that situation. Then write the steps on the ladder from the lowest to the highest feared situation. Consider having some type of reward or party for when your child reaches the top. Social praise is one of the best reinforcers.

4. Now your child is ready to practice being brave. Start at the bottom of the ladder and plan how and when you will practice doing that step. The more often you can practice, the quicker the fear will shrink. Keep track of the practice situations using a chart. This chart should include a place to put a sticker to reward the practice, as well as a way to track the anxiety level at the start, during and at the end of the practice. Again, examples of charts can be found online (check our Build Your Team section for ideas.) The practice ends when the anxiety level has come down. It is very important for your child to not leave the practice at the height of their anxiety, as this is a type of avoidance and will actually increase the fear to the situation. Your child is ready to move up the ladder when their highest fear rating during the practice is no more than a 2 or 3 out of 10. Then you practice facing their next highest fear. Working in this way helps your child to develop a sense of confidence in themselves and in their ability to face their fears and be brave. Praise them each step of the way. Social praise is one of the best ways to reinforce behaviors. Have fun with this step, play with how you face your fears. Remember your reaction also models a reaction for your children. If you're having a little fun with it, but are sensitive to their emotions, they will feel understood but not as scared about facing their fears.