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Practical Strategies to Support Anxious Children with School Attendance

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Agenda

- What is school refusal and how does it impact kids?
- How to set kids with heightened anxiety up for success
- Identifying supports and building a team
- Concrete steps to support your child's school attendance



What is School Refusal

Child motivated refusal to attend school and/or problems remaining in class or school for an entire day

Attends
regularly
with distress

Misses full or
partial days
once in a
while

Regularly
misses full
or partial
days

Misses
multiple full
days or weeks
at a time

Hasn't
attended
for months
or more

There's a Spectrum

Continuum of behaviours

A top-down view of children sitting around a large sheet of paper, drawing various school-related items. The drawings include a school building, a calculator, a computer, a globe, a pair of scissors, a pencil sharpener, a glue stick, a compass, a ruler, and a pencil case. The children are using colored pencils and markers to create their drawings.

Four Primary Reasons Children Refuse School

Avoid School Related Stimuli That Provokes Negative Affectivity

Escape Aversive Social and/or Evaluative Situations

For Attention (Positive or Negative)

Tangible Rewards Outside of School

Anxiety

- Something bad
- Socially anxious

Rewards

- Parental Attention¹
- Fun Stuff at Home

Fear of Something Bad

Characteristics

- Most often children 5-10 years old
- Difficulty articulating what the source of the fear is
- Some parents can easily tell what causes the fear
 - Bus or car ride
 - Entering the school building or classroom
 - Particular teacher or staff member
 - Fire alarms

Common Behaviours

- Crying or tearfulness
- Nervousness
- Sadness or withdrawal
- Trouble concentrating or sleeping
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, nausea or other)
- Voice or hands shaking
- Pleas with parents for home schooling

Socially Anxious

Characteristics

- Usually older, about 11-17 years of age
- Because of a social (joining a conversation, asking a teacher for help, working with others) or performance situation (speaking or reading in front of others, taking tests, phys-ed class, volunteering to answer a questions) at school
- Worry about making mistakes or being embarrassed or humiliated in front of other people
- Worry about being teased or laughed at

Common Behaviours

- Excessive worry about making mistakes, or being embarrassed
- Nervousness when around others or when expected to do something in front of others
- Skipping classes
- Skipping or missing class on a test day, oral presentation
- Asking for course changes
- Avoiding situations that involve interacting with others
- Failure to hand in homework or assignments

Parental Attention

Characteristics

- Usually, 5-10 years of age
- Not distressed about school but are much more concerned about being home from school to get attention from their parents.
- May want to help parents care for a baby, complete chores around the house or go to work with them

Common Behaviours

- Defiance about going to school , often in the form of tantrums
- Stubborn, willful, manipulative, guilt inducing
- Desire for parents to attend school with them
- Constant telephone calls to parents during the day
- Constant questions about when parent will pick them up
- Running away from school building to get home

Fun Stuff at Home

Characteristics

- Typically age 11--17
- Attendance pattern includes skipping individual classes, half days or full days
- Not particularly distressed about school
- Do not want attention from parents or even want them to know they are out of school
- Little regard for consequences

Common Behaviours

- Sleeping late
- Watching videos, playing video games
- Riding their bike
- Hanging alone or with friends
- Breaking curfew
- Boredom or lack of motivation with school
- Constant requests to drop out or get a job

Medical First

Physical complaints are often real and should ALWAYS be checked by a physician

WHAT IS ANXIETY?



- a **NORMAL & NECESSARY** human experience
- Uncomfortable (sometimes **VERY** uncomfortable) but not **HARMFUL**



False alarm!

Anxiety during Elementary School-Age

Common types of worries include

- Worry about friendships
- Difficulties being away from parents
- Worries about academic
- Difficulties speaking up in class

Which may be complimented by

- Sleep difficulties
- Social challenges or stressors
- Problematic screen use

ALL OF WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE



Anxiety during High School-Age

Common types of stress/anxiety include...

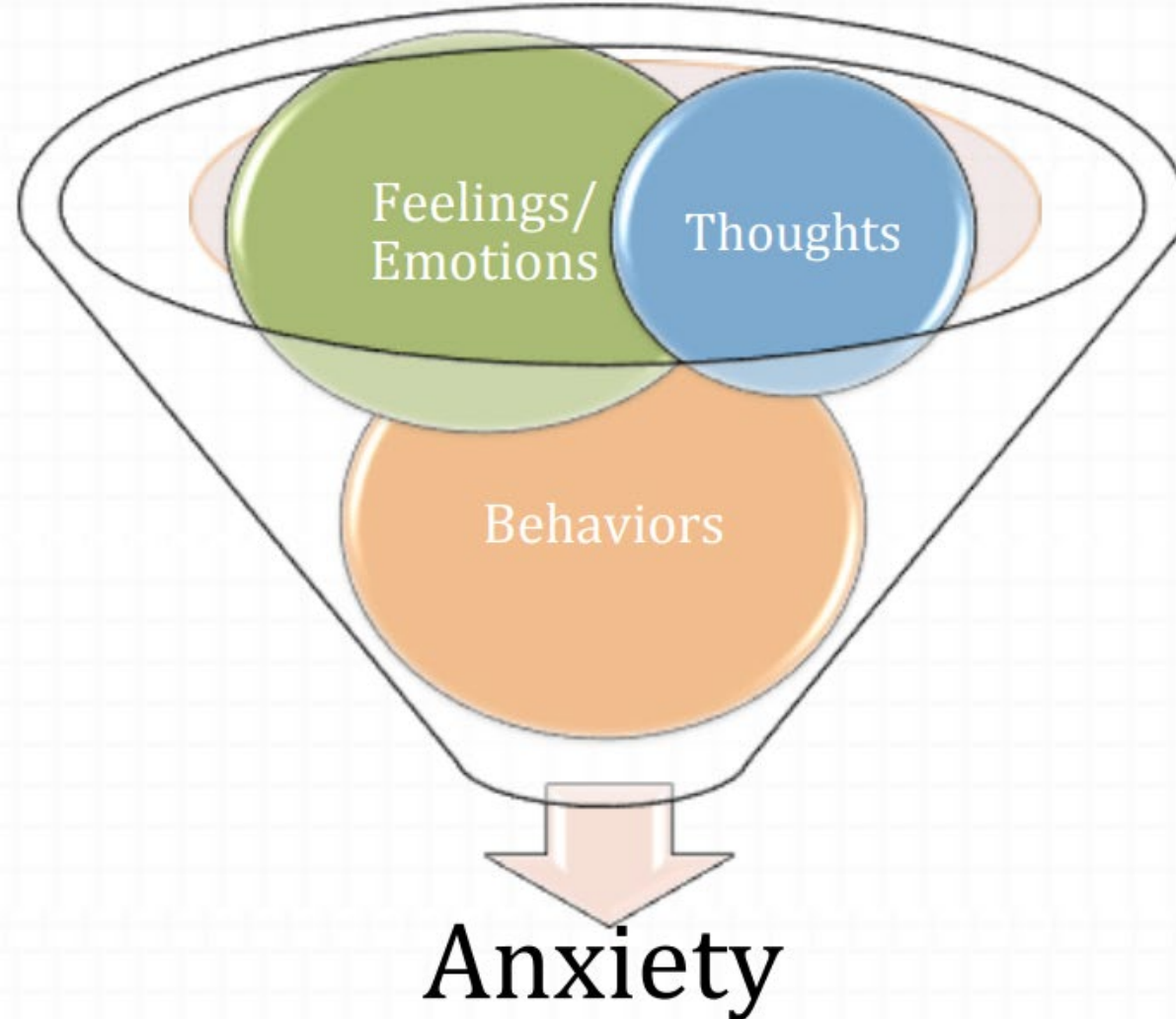
- Worries about peers and fitting in
- Concern about academics
- Worries about the future
- Difficulties speaking up in class/presenting

Which may be complemented by...

- Sleep difficulties
- Social challenges or stressors
- Learning differences or academic difficulties
- Problematic screen use / social media
- Challenges with attention and/or concentration
- Substance use
- Language and/or cultural considerations

All of which can contribute to school nonattendance!

Identifying the Chain of Behaviors



- I feel sick that I have to go to school
- My head/stomach hurts

Physical

Cognitive

- I will be embarrassed
- I am going to vomit at school
- I don't want to go

- Tantrum
- Crying
- Refusal to move
- Running away
- General avoidance

Behavioral

- I hate school!
- I don't want to go!
- NO!
- They can't make me!

Cognitive

- I have to use the bathroom
- Now my stomach hurts and I feel sick!
- I'm shaking/angry

Physical

- Crying
- Hiding
- Tantrum
- Not getting on bus/out of door

Behavioral

Cognitive

- I don't want to go!
- Please don't make me go!
- I want to stay home!

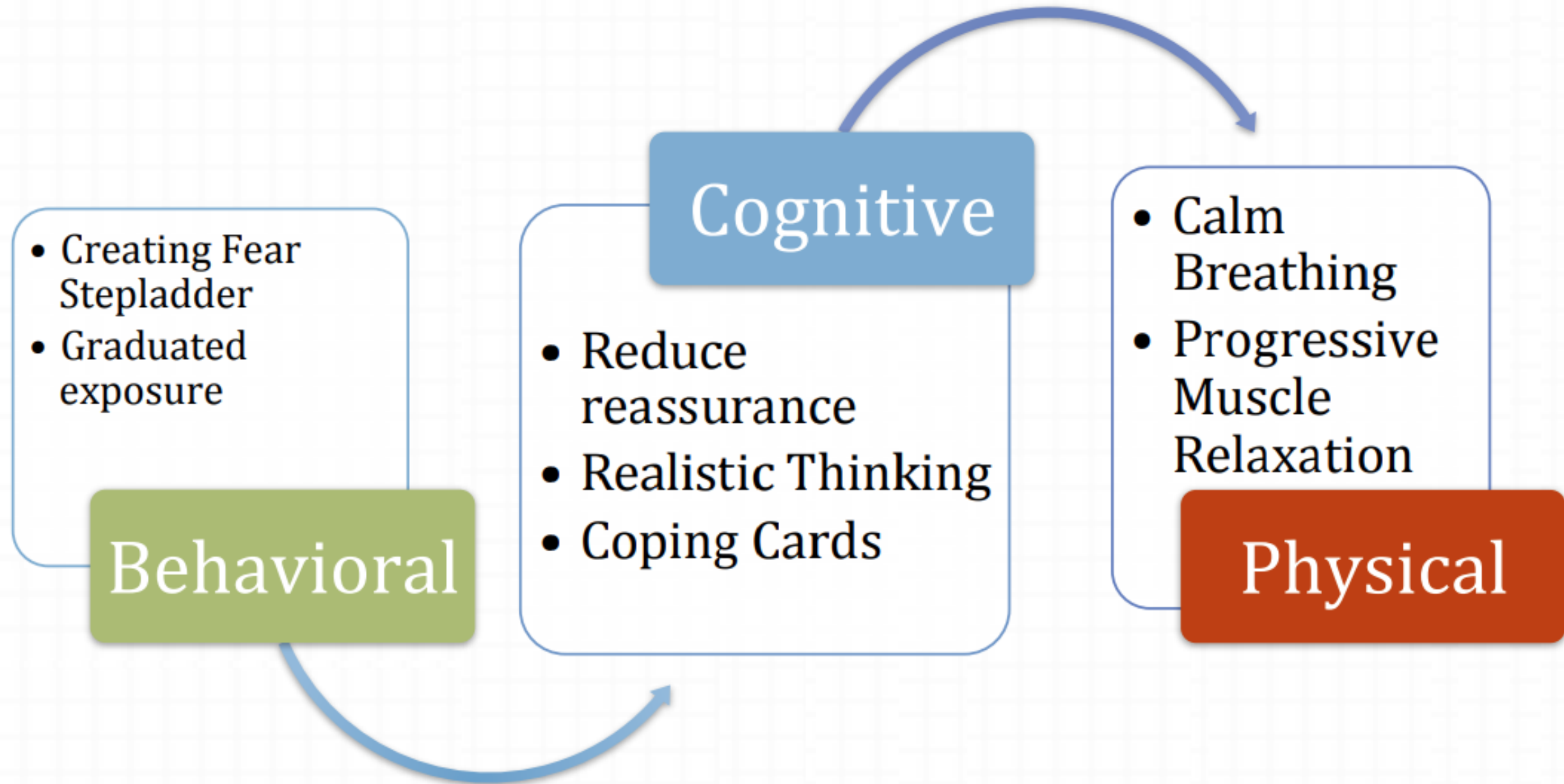
- Sick and nauseous on way to school
- Frequent urination/diarrhea

Physical

- Crying
- Whining
- Refusal to get out of bed or ready

Behavioral

Anxiety Based Treatment



Step 1: Take Stock



What area is my child doing well in? (e.g., sleep, physical activity, friendships, academics) Are any of these areas ones that my child is struggling in?

- How often is my child getting to school?
- What is / was going on around the time that it was harder to get to school?
- How distressed am I / is my child when it's time to go to school?
- What am I / my child doing when they're not at school?
- Who is on my and my child's 'team' (i.e., school staff, friends/family, mental health clinician [if applicable], doctor, etc.)

Core Areas of Teen Well-Being

- Social connection
- Family/ caregiver or mentor connectedness
- Physical activity
- Academic growth
- Leisure/unplugged time
- Hope
- All of which create meaning and belonging



Step 2: Setting the Stage



What are those areas that I can address in advance to set my child up for success?

- Sleep
- Physical activity
- Screen use
- Anxiety-management tips



Setting the Stage

Sleep

- When is your child starting their bedtime routine, falling asleep, and waking up?
- Consistent sleep and wake times (within 30-60 minutes on the weekends)
- 8 –10 hours of sleep each night

Strategies to support healthy sleep

- Environment is cool, dark, quiet, free from electronic devices
- Bed only for sleeping (i.e., not play-time, homework)
- Wind down time is 1 hour before bed
- Avoid stimulation before bed (intense physical activity, screen)

Sleep Challenges

How to Help

Bedtime tickets

Reward system

Collaborative problem solving

Removal of devices





Setting the Stage

Physical Activity

- Elevates mood
- Decreases anxiety
- Elevates energy
- Helps teens regulate their bodies
- Recommendation = at least 1 hour/day of

Examples include

- walking with friends
- participating in a sport, etc.



Setting the Stage- Screen & Social Media Use

First, understand your teen's usage

- How much time is your child on screens (TV, phone, computer, other electronic device) each day?
- How are they using screens? Social media?
- Do you have family guidelines about screen use (amount and type)? Social media?

If usage is problematic, develop a plan to help

- Develop a tech contract
- Setting limits
- Set 'no tech' times
- Model healthy usage



- Gentle encouragement for facing fears in small steps

- Practice, practice, practice!

- Rewards for following the plan

- Stickers, small amount of \$, special activity

- Praise and positive reinforcement for “successes” (e.g., being brave)

- Be specific!

- ‘Ignore’ mild anxious behaviours

- Regular & predictable routines, structure, and consistent responses

Setting the Stage

Tips to Manage Anxiety

1. Reach out as soon as you identify a problem
2. Personnel involved in supporting students include teachers, resource teachers, youth counsellors, social workers, attendance counsellor, administrators
3. Information is helpful to the school to provide appropriate context and supports
4. The school will determine what level of support is needed while teachers use universal classroom strategies that support emotional well being.

Step 3 – Working with your Child's School

Working with Schools: What to Expect

- Collaboration with family, school and other mental health professional is critical to supporting school attendance
- Creation of an individualized plan for appropriate supports like environmental and academic changes
- Development of realistic attendance and academic goals



Step 4 – Make a Plan

And Follow Through

Make a Plan

- Coordinate with the school on a good plan to slowly increase your child's time at school
- Tailor to your child's specific strengths and stretches

- Initial goals may include
 - Visit the outside of the school
 - See a friend during recess
 - Connect with a trusted school staff member
 - Join class for 30 minutes

Speaking with your Child about Goal Setting for School Attendance

- Identify components of school that your child is motivated to attend (e.g., to see friends, participate in gym class)
- Collaborate with them to set goals for attending school (realistic, non-negotiables)

What to Say

- Thanks for telling me you don't want to go to school – I hear you that you really don't like it! Remember when you told me that you wanted to decorate your holiday craft with your friends? How about we work together to being there for that?
- I hear that you feel really anxious at school—that sounds incredibly hard and I'm so impressed you've been able to go the days you have. I know you want to get back to school to see your friends but that feels impossible right now. Why don't we start by planning a first step together?

Example Ladder for School Attendance

1

Visit school grounds and meet with trusted staff member or a friend

2

Attend school for 30 minutes with expectations to complete schoolwork

3

Attend school for 45 minutes with same expectations

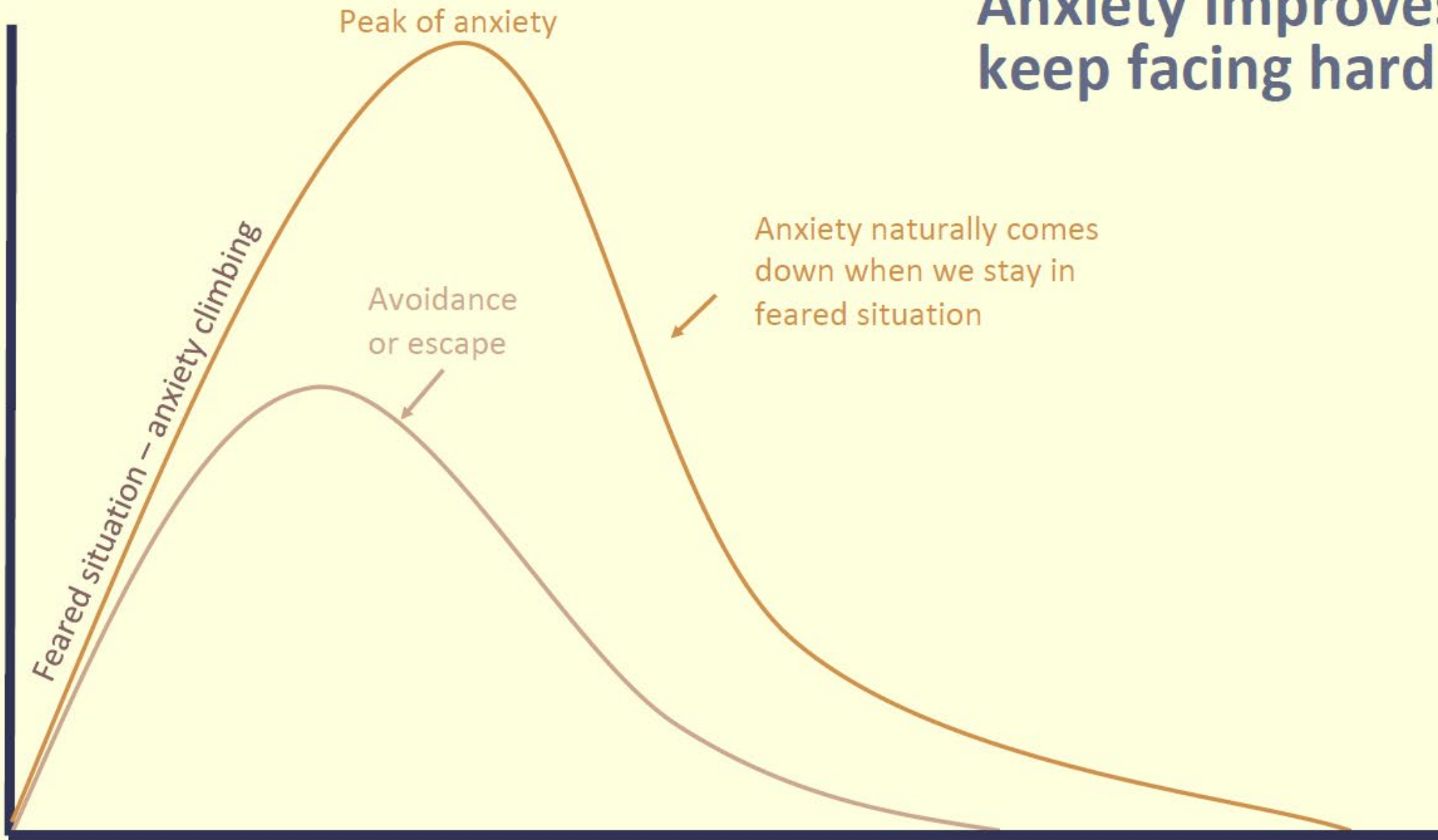
4

Attend school for 1 hour with same expectations

5

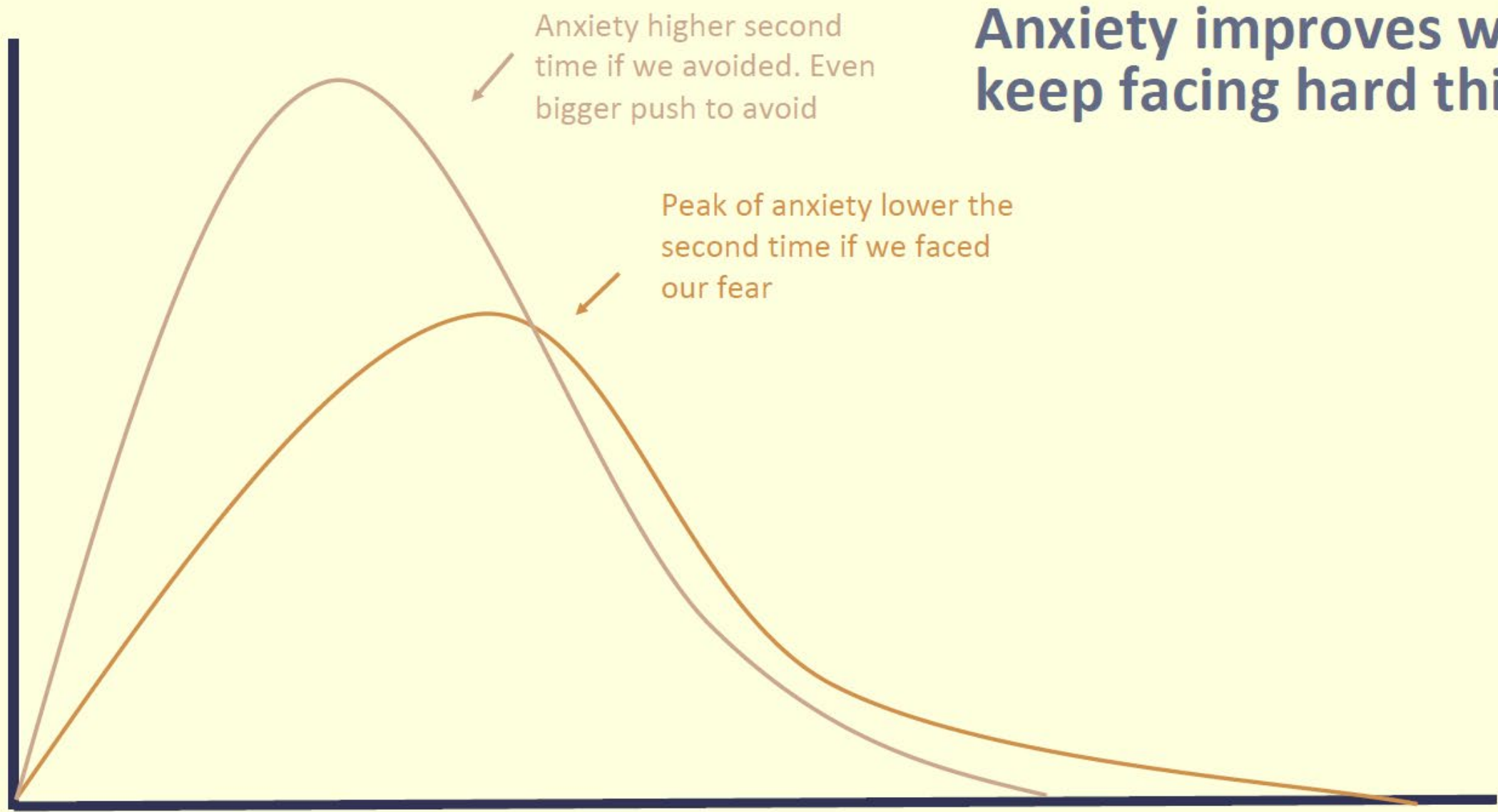
Continue to build up to full amount of expected in-person schooling

Anxiety improves when we keep facing hard things



The first time we try something hard...

Anxiety improves when we keep facing hard things



The second time we try something hard...

Spectrum of School Attendance

Attends regularly with distress

Misses full or partial days once in a while

Regularly misses full or partial days

Misses multiple full days/weeks at a time

Hasn't attended for months or more

Spectrum of Intervention/Support

'Setting the stage' strategies and speak with school

AND implement a prevention plan with school

AND implement an intervention plan with school

AND consider involving other professionals

Coordinated and intensive approach with professional support

Helpful vs. Unhelpful Things to Say

Helpful/Outside Voice

- I know how difficult this is for you, AND I know you can do it. Let's walk to the car together.
- I can see you're really trying – I'm so proud of you for getting your backpack ready.

Unhelpful/Inside Voice

- You were able to go to school yesterday. I'm really late and need to go!
- I'm disappointed that you've been missing so much school... when I was in school that wasn't even an option!

Remember: Validate child's concerns about school attendance **AND** communicate confidence in their ability to attend



What if My Child is at Home

- Home environment should NOT be fun during school hours
- NO access to electronics, treats, special privileges, extra attention
- If you child continues to be motivated to stay home be vigilant for inadvertent reinforcers (e.g., parent working from home sharing a lunch with child, child allowed to play quietly with toys in their room)

Household chores are a suitable activity while your child is at home

- sweeping the floor
- vacuuming
- cleaning the cat litter
- folding laundry
- shoveling snow
- raking leaves

Who's Responsible for What?

Caregiver

Communicating confidence in their child
Making sure the home setting is BORING during school hours
Ensuring youth is getting enough sleep and awake in time for school

Youth

Being brave and going to school

School

Identifying best program for your child
Supporting and developing a school re-integration plan
Setting up school team meetings

Mental Health Clinician

Providing individual therapy/parent training
Consulting with school team

Parents may want additional support from a mental health clinician to help manage challenging school nonattendance such as:

- Setting appropriate expectations
- Setting contingencies for attendance and avoidance of school
- Limiting any reinforcement for nonattendance (no wi-fi in the day)
- Responding to anxiety-driven behaviour effectively

Step 5 – Getting Additional Support

When Does my Child Need Additional Support?

Additional mental health challenges

Reach out to your local child and youth mental health agencies

Individual support may include CBT for anxiety

Medical management of mental health challenges (severe anxiety, OCD, depression and ADHD)

Medical Support for physical health conditions that led to school nonattendance (chronic pain, asthma)

Take Home Messages

Facing fears is hard but not harmful.

Identifying your team members is key.

You are an essential part of supporting your child's school attendance.

Expect some anxiety!

It can and it will get better!



Resources

Anxiety Canada

Pathstone Mental Health

Step Niagara

Getting Your Child to Say “Yes” to School, Christopher A. Kearney