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## Family Focus

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



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The recent news about some wealthy parents making unethical and illegal decisions to ensure their children would gain admission to a top college reflects in part the extent of parental anxiety in our competitive society. Most parents would not break the law to help their kids succeed like this. But setting this type of extreme behavior aside, many in this day and age are experiencing extreme anxiety about their parenting and their children's well-being. Being responsible for children who are so dependent upon them can trigger unanticipated feelings and reactions.

Natalie, a married mother of two boys, ages 6 and 2, had a high level of anxiety over keeping her children safe. She had difficulty taking her children to parks and public areas for fear of germs and kidnapping. Natalie refused to hire a babysitter so she and her husband could have alone time together. She described the huge pressure she felt to safeguard her children and to always be a wonderful and protective parent. When it was time to send her older son to kindergarten, she thought seriously about home schooling, but wanted to make a decision that was not based on fear and worry.

Natalie grew up in a loving family in a small community where she felt nurtured and secure. She had never experienced this type of debilitating anxiety before she had children. There was no history of extreme anxiety in her family. In working with Natalie we looked at many factors: her shaky confidence in herself as a parent, her distrust of others, her heightened fears each time she heard about a tragedy involving a child, and her tendency to be obsessive-compulsive. Over time, we were able to help Natalie overcome many of her fears on a step-by-step basis through cognitive therapy, which gently challenges existing belief systems. When she saw that she could master challenges like leaving her children for just a few hours at first with a highly recommended babysitter, Natalie grew more confident that she could continue to tackle roadblocks that were sabotaging not only her happiness, but her family's as well.

Most parents are lower on the anxiety continuum than Natalie. But many have worries and anxieties that interfere with their sense of happiness and well-being. Almost every parent I work with expresses concerns for his or her child, even if the child is currently doing well. They worry about future issues that could arise or they compare them to other kids who are doing better in school or in sports.

In this era of social media and 24-hour news, stories spread quickly that can easily arouse anxiety. We all see how the proportion of tragic or disturbing news to positive news has increased significantly these past decades. Constant exposure to trauma can derail our ability to cope healthily and interfere with our ability to return to a relaxed state. Stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline are released in continuous streams, resulting in heightened stress, anxiety, and/or pessimism.

When parents experience this kind of shock to the system, the tendency is to want to protect themselves and their loved ones, and to control all that they can. If they can't trust the world we live in, they try that much harder to ensure that their children will be safe and able to thrive.

The result of this escalation of anxiety among parents unfortunately can filter down to our children. The incidence of child and teen anxiety and depression is higher now than in past generations. When children look to their parents for ways to behave and handle situations, they need calm guidance that comes from a place of confidence and strength.

Emotions of those close to us can be contagious, even if not directly expressed. We absorb the sadness or anxiety of our loved ones, and it is hard to shake off. We know that dogs pick up on emotional states of their owners, and children, of course, can be even more susceptible to our moods.

When you are in a social setting with other parents who express anxiety about whether their children will do well on their high school final exams or SATs, or get into a college they want to attend, it is possible that you will become more anxious after listening to them, especially if you have a child in the same situation. Once a potential problem is implanted in our minds, it can be hard to dismiss.

In order to be the best parent you can be, it is important to address any anxiety or depression you may

experience. Taking an active approach can be beneficial. You can limit your exposure to the news and social media. You can avoid prolonged anxiety-producing sessions with friends by changing the subject after a while. We all need our venting time with friends, but you want to set some limits. Or, alternatively, you can suggest doing fun activities together. Many self-help strategies can help: Massage, yoga, exercise, healthy eating, getting enough rest, and having a good social network are all proven stress-relievers. In addition, finding distracting pleasures such as reading uplifting articles and books and watching entertaining movies and television shows can provide relief.

But if you are struggling and nothing is working, it is important to get professional help for yourself. You deserve to be able to reduce and manage anxiety and stress, and your family will benefit as well.

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