

The numbers keep climbing! Both adults and students are suffering from anxiety levels that are worse than any period we've ever seen, including the Great Depression. More than 8 in 10 students admit to struggling with anxiety or depression on a regular basis, and adults report numbers have jumped from 11 percent in 2019 to 41 percent in 2021. More than 8 in 10 adults say that COVID-19 was causing significant stress in their lives. Further, 87 percent say the economy is a source of high stress and anxiety for them.

Approximately 26 percent of males and 40 percent of females will develop an anxiety disorder during their lifetime. One anxiety victim described it: "When it's bad, it feels like an electric current building up inside of me and it's going to shoot out of me, except it doesn't, which is worse."

Science and social science have made great strides toward addressing anxiety. These two elements may just be our solution to successfully treating our anxiety. In September, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force created a list of recommendations to address anxiety.

Anxiety Thermometers: We must evaluate our level of anxiety. Some anxiety is normal. An anxiety thermometer is simply a questionnaire to assess our level of angst and see how close to normal it is. It's only when worry impairs your ability to function that trouble surfaces.

Anxiety Foundations: We must recognize our family history. Science has uncovered the fact that our DNA origins can give us a predisposition for battles with anxiety or depression. Something inside of us makes us vulnerable. Kids can be sensitive, worrisome or inhibited, and then challenged to act and address those fears appropriately. This lowers the risk levels of anxiety attacks.

Anxiety Inhibitors: We must practice reciprocal leadership. Science has discovered that how parents raise an anxiety-prone child can make a huge difference in how they mature. An amazing study by Dr. Nathan Fox found that just placing shy, inhibited kids in preschool can help them grow out of their anxiety disposition. Nine in 12 kids whose parents exclusively cared for them at home during the first two years of life remained shy and inhibited as they aged. Caring adults must help kids grow by addressing their fears, not playing into them.

Anxiety Conquerors: We must run to the roar. Leading doctors are not quickly resorting to long-term therapy or medication as the treatment of anxiety. They now recommend a relatively shorter-term therapy that enables kids to confront what makes them anxious, rather than shrink from it. Caring adults should lead with a combination of empathy and encouragement, helping kids to face their fears. As for medications, most experts now advise against so-called "anti-anxiety" drugs because of their side effects. Antidepressants work far better. Most of the solution is actually facing fears methodically and overcoming them.

The bottom line? Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Exposure Therapy (ET) are science's first line of defense. Learn to think differently and move toward what makes you anxious. Wayne Dyer, internationally renowned author and speaker in the field of self-development, said it succinctly: "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." The only way out is through.

Information in this article has been adapted from Dr. Tim Elmore, founder and CEO of Growing Leaders, a non-profit organization that partner with schools, colleges, athletic departments and organizations to develop today's emerging generation of leaders.

Contact 4-H Youth Development Agent, Patsy L. Maddy, at your local Twin Creeks Extension District office in Decatur, Graham, Norton or Sheridan counties to take advantage of the benefits of positive youth development as a participant of our 4-H program. We welcome both youth participants and adult volunteers to help lead our program. (pmaddy@ksu.edu, 785-877-5755)

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“A Fresh Strategy for Students to Beat Anxiety”

“Chasing Clovers”

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