School Anxiety & Attendance Challenges: Practical Strategies for High School Professionals

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& Dr. Rosalind Catchpole

January 25th, 2021

Welcome! We will begin the presentation shortly. Please note that your microphones have been muted automatically.
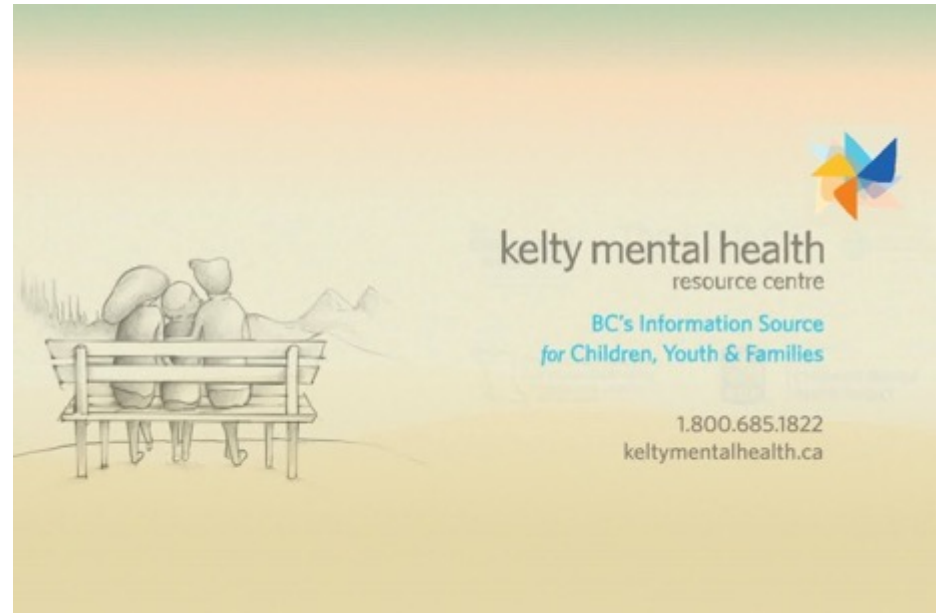
Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre

We help families across the province by:

- Helping with understanding and navigating the mental health system

- Listening and offering peer support, and

- Connecting families to resources and tools.

kelty mental health
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BC's Information Source
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Housekeeping

- Attendees are automatically muted and cameras are turned off.

- Please submit questions for the speakers through the "Q&A" function. There has been an option enabled where you can vote for questions that you want answered.

- Please submit technical questions or comments through the "Chat" function.

- The webinar will be recorded and made available on the keltymentalhealth.ca website.

- At the end of the webinar, a survey will pop up that we invite you to complete.

- A PDF of the slides will be posted following the webinar.

- This information applies to the context in British Columbia. If you are in another jurisdiction please consult local health and school authorities for further information.

Speakers

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Land Acknowledgments

We acknowledge with immense gratitude that we live, work, and play on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation
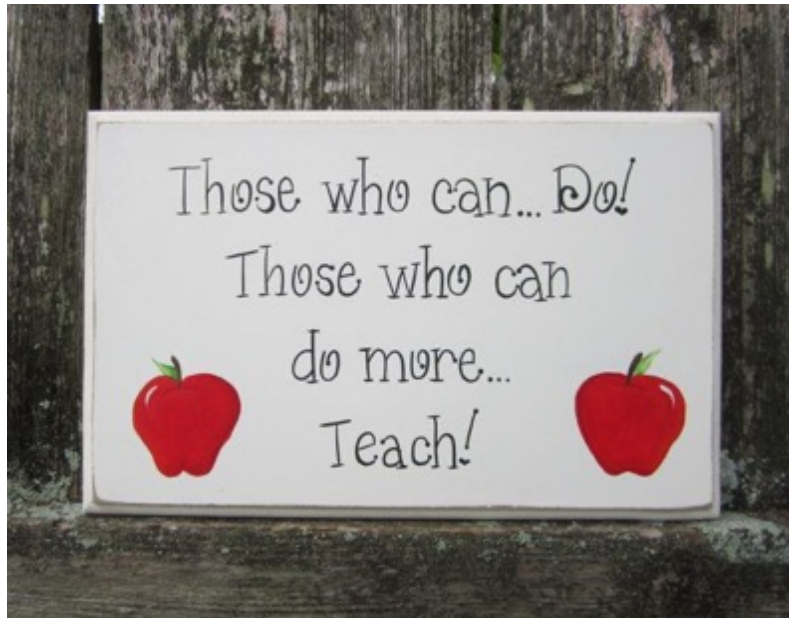
WHAT ARE WE COVERING TODAY?

- Theoretical foundation of school avoidance

- Practical strategies to assess the nature of student struggles

- Concrete steps for coordinating successful school attendance & troubleshooting common traps

But first, thank you.

Our goal:

to support YOU

as you support your students with school anxiety & school attendance challenges

What's behind the struggle?

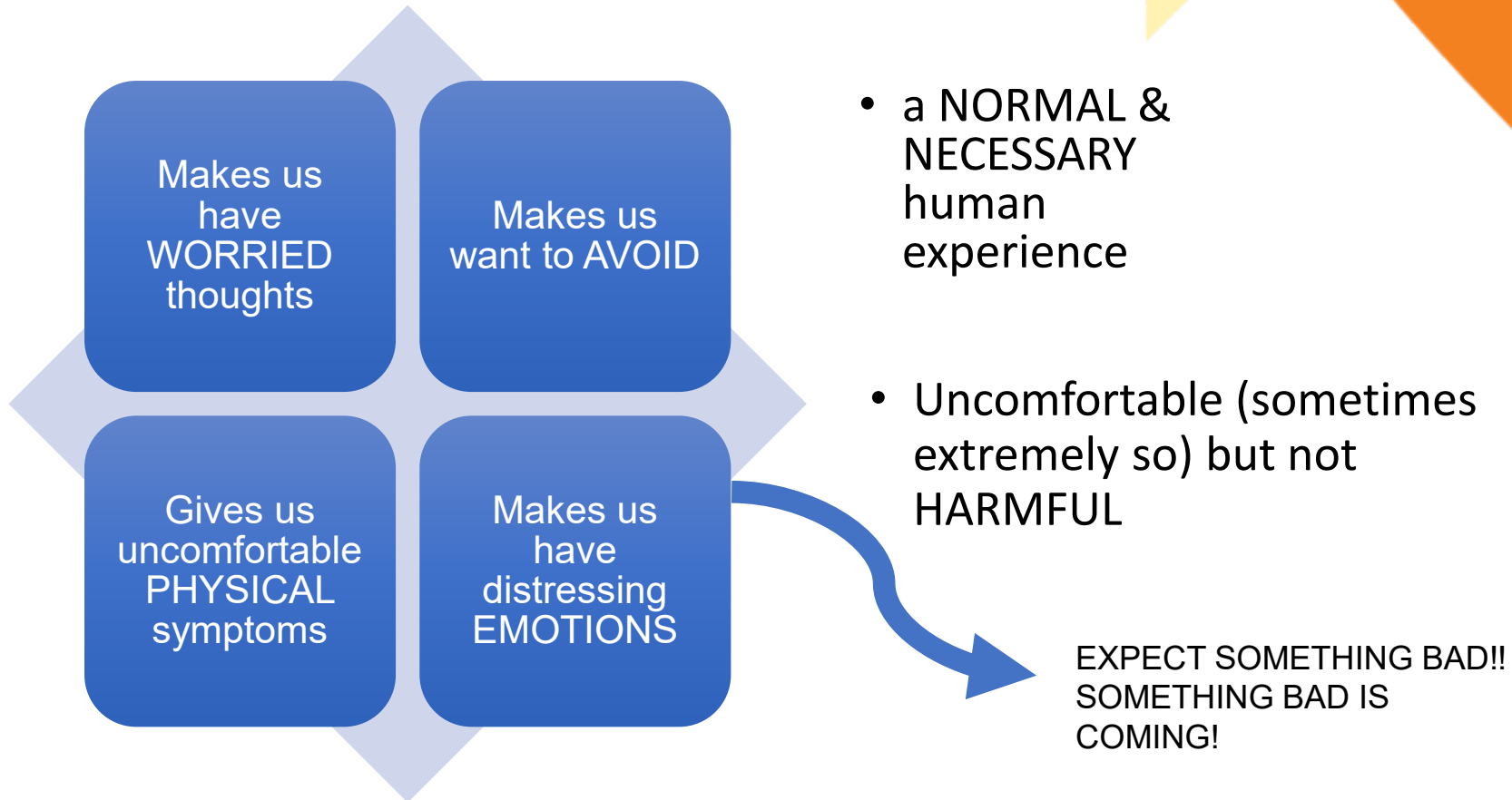Challenges with school attendance usually **anxiety-based** (at least in part)

Affects 2-5% of youth (that's Pre-Pandemic)

Most common during transition periods

Not the same as "skipping school" or acting out (but there can be overlap)
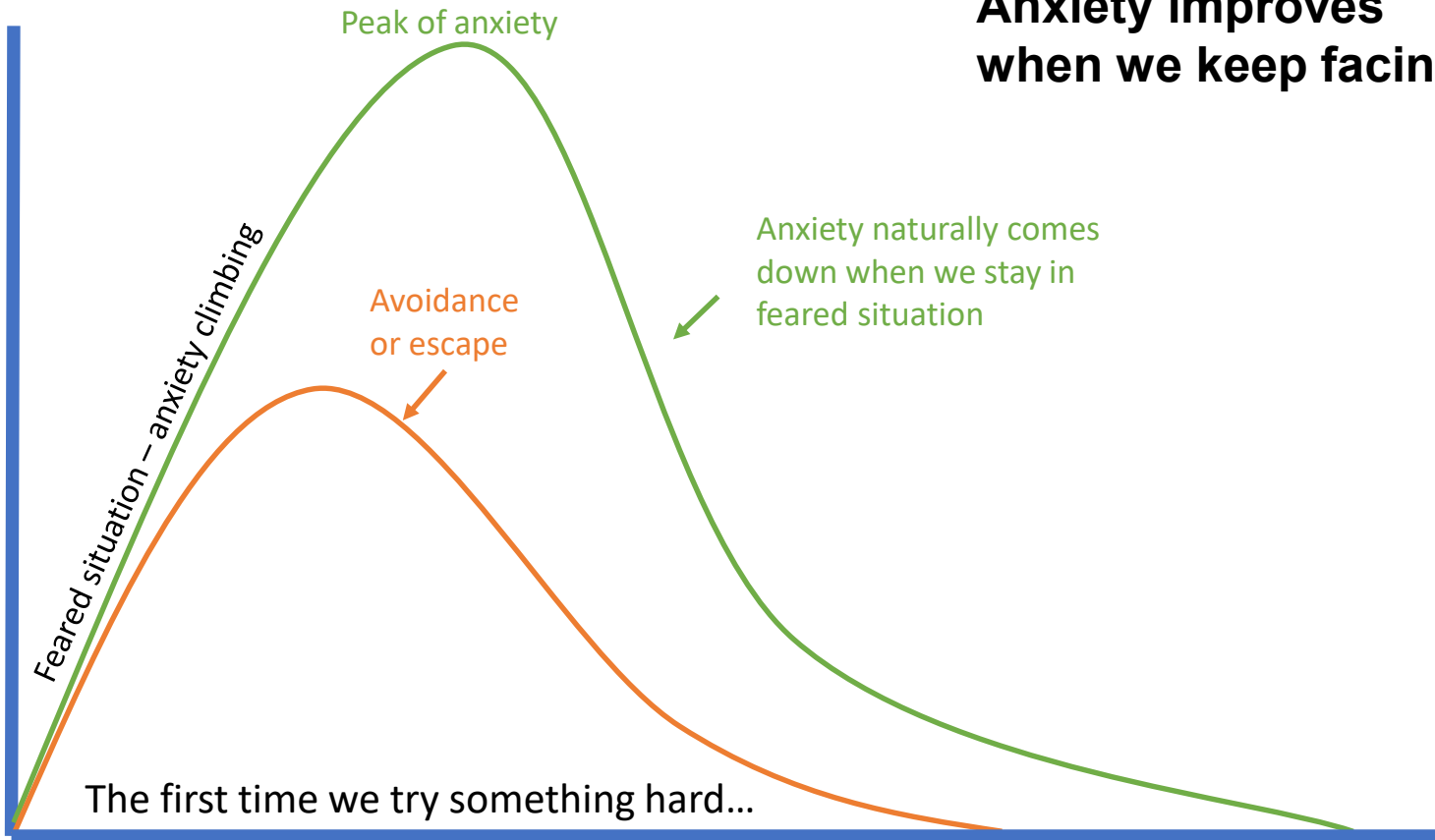
What is anxiety, actually?

Makes us have WORRIED thoughts

Makes us want to AVOID

Gives us uncomfortable PHYSICAL symptoms

Makes us have distressing EMOTIONS

- a NORMAL & NECESSARY human experience

- Uncomfortable (sometimes extremely so) but not HARMFUL

EXPECT SOMETHING BAD!! SOMETHING BAD IS COMING!

Can think about it as a false alarm

**Anxiety improves
when we keep facing hard things**

Peak of anxiety

Feared situation – anxiety climbing

Avoidance
or escape

Anxiety naturally comes
down when we stay in
feared situation

The first time we try something hard...

Anxiety higher second time if we avoided. Even bigger push to avoid

Peak of anxiety lower the second time if we faced our fear

Anxiety improves when we keep facing hard things

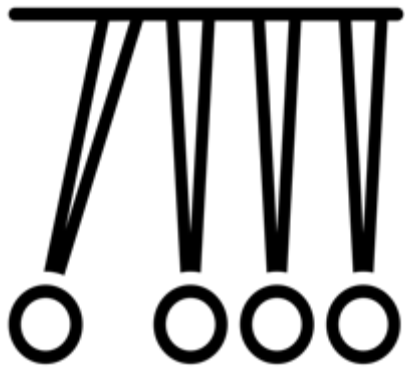The second time we try something hard…
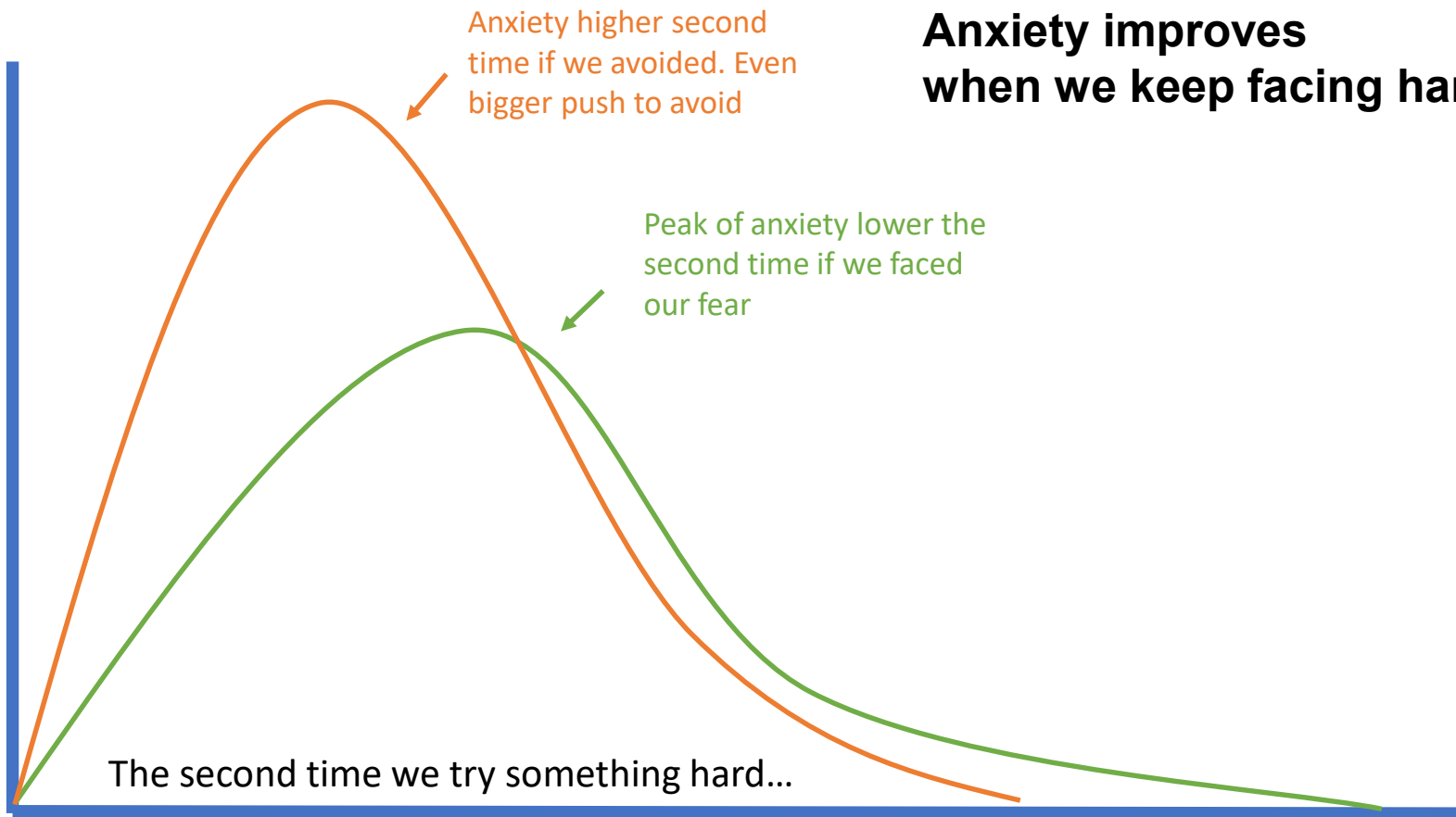
Risk Factors

- **Social Factors**
  - bullying, social skills, substance use
- **Educational Factors**
  - LDs, dev'tal delays, hx of school nonattendance in elementary
- **Family Factors**
  - conflict, parental separation
- **Mental Health Factors**
  - anxiety, depression, trauma
- **Societal Factors**
  - racism, discrimination, economic vulnerability

Impacts of School Non-Attendance

Short term

- Poorer academic performance
- Increased social stress & isolation
- Risk of depressive symptoms

Long term

- Limited higher educational opportunities/premature school dropout
- Lower earning potential, unemployment
- "Failure to launch"
- Higher risk for psychiatric disorders

Case Example "Louie*"

Info:

- 15-year-old cisgender male; currently in grade 10

Attendance:

- Multiple weeklong periods of nonattendance in person, limited engagement at school- no engagement with remote schooling
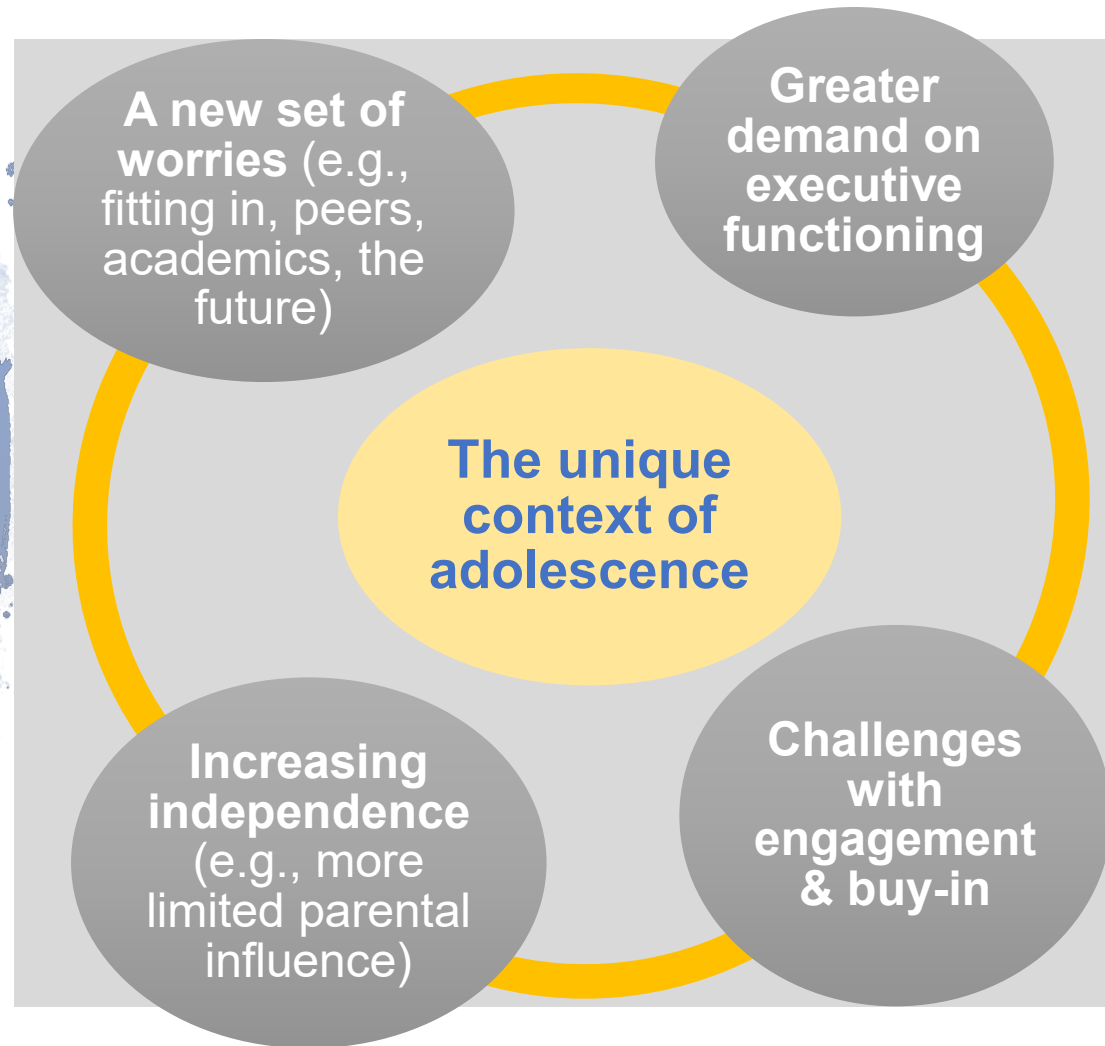- High family stress (e.g., financial, marital)

Observations:

- Dx with several learning disorders (math, reading, & writing)
- History of social anxiety and more recently, depression
- On cross country team; good runner – missed practice last week

* De-identified compilation of youth

We'll be honest...

...**treating school non-attendance in middle/high school is often more complex*** **than it is in elementary-aged kids**

*spoiler alert: successful treatment is still very possible and should be expected in most cases

A new set of worries (e.g., fitting in, peers, academics, the future)

Greater demand on executive functioning

The unique context of adolescence

Increasing independence (e.g., more limited parental influence)

Challenges with engagement & buy-in

Coordination is KEY to successful outcomes.....

So, self-compassion is equally as critical as good coordination

- It is not easy to support youth with school attendance challenges, especially when they are very long-standing

- School professionals have many competing demands

- It is unrealistic to support families on your own: a team-based approach is essential

What are common & understandable barriers to responding effectively?

"These absences are not acceptable."
"They can't be allowed to get away with this."

Belief: Youth is being manipulative & defiant

Being too soft

Being too tough

Belief: Youth is incapable of improving

"This is so hard for them. Should they even be here?"
"I don't want to push them. I really want them to trust me"

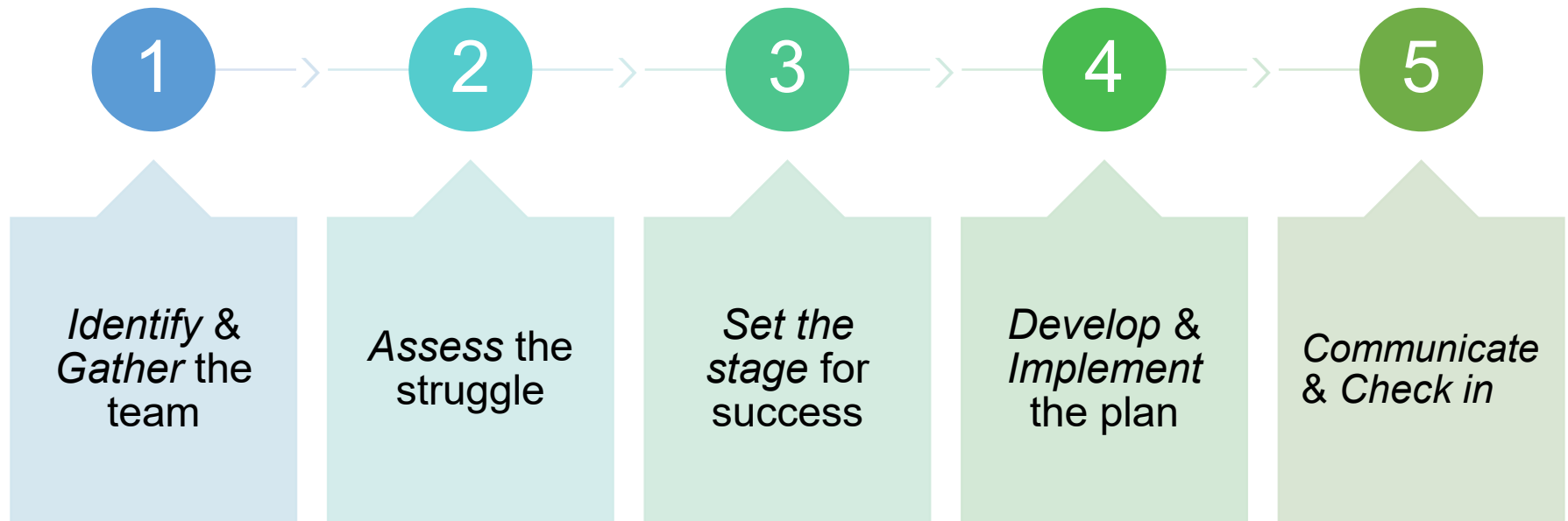# What does a helpful & effective response contain?

empathy

encouragement
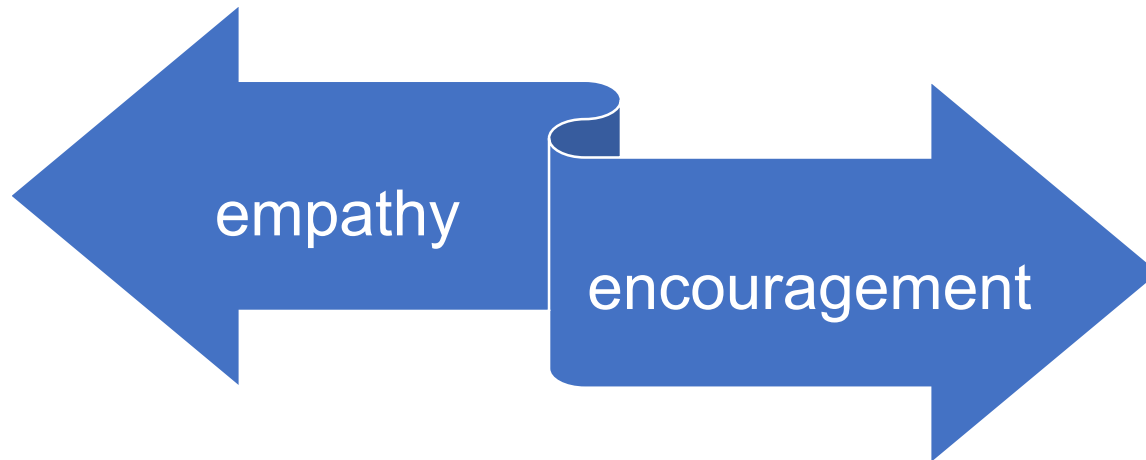
To Youth "I know it feels hard being here"

"and I know you can do it. I'm here for you"

To Parent "I know this feels really stressful and it would be easier to let him stay home"

"and I know he's going to get through this one day at a time. Great work following the plan we laid out."

So, your student is struggling with school attendance….

…here's what to do in 5 steps.
Early intervention is best!

1 → **2** → **3** → **4** → **5**

Identify & *Gather* the team

Assess the struggle

Set the stage for success

Develop & *Implement* the plan

Communicate & *Check in*

These steps are fully explained in the companion manual accessible via Kelty.

Step 1: *Identify & Gather the team*

Coordination is KEY to successful outcomes

- Who is on the student's team?
  - Caregivers
  - School professionals
    - Who will be part of the school-based team?
  - External MH professionals (often benefits from a referral)

- Who will the school point person(s) be?
  - They will lead the assessment & facilitate development of the plan
  - They communicate with youth, family, rest of school-based team, & external MH professionals

Step 2: *Assess* the struggle
point person in conjunction with school-based team

Goal:

- Understand what's been going on for the youth, including...
  - 2a) strengths & what motivates them
  - 2b) the function(s) & maintenance factors for school nonattendance
  - 2c) stressors contributing to school nonattendance
  - 2d) history & current severity of school nonattendance

- Methods:
  - talking with teen and caregiver
  - consider school School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised (Kearney & Albano, 2007)
  - review of school records & attendance
  - conversations with relevant school professionals

> in case of bullying or other structural challenges, a systemic approach is needed first

Detailed information and scripts in accompanying document

Buy in is important (especially if parents have limited influence). We need to know *what matters* to the youth.
Where are they feeling competent?
Where do they find meaning & purpose?

What is motivating to the youth?

Is it a particular class? Seeing friends?
Extracurricular sports or clubs?
A connection with a particular teacher? Leisure time? Faith? Family?

What area(s) is the youth doing well in?

Sleep? Physical activity? Are they kind?
Babysitting a sibling? Friendships? Academics?
Athletic achievement? Community involvement?
Volunteering?

Step 2a:
Assess the strengths, protective factors, & sources of motivation

We want to understand:
*for this youth, what is keeping
the school avoidance going?*

1. **Negative reinforcement** *(escaping bad feelings)*
e.g., avoiding a class presentation, avoiding social aspects of school

2. **Positive reinforcement** *(getting good things)*
e.g., gaming with friends during the day

3. **Symptom accommodation** *(allowing for avoidance)*
e.g., adults can struggle to cope with teen's distress
*"OK fine you can stay home today
but you HAVE to go tomorrow"*

Step 2c: *Assess* areas that may be exacerbating anxiety

Social

Are they worried about fitting in? Conflict with peers?

Academic

Are they feeling embarrassed about learning difficulties? Overwhelmed with workload?

Organizational / executive functioning

Are they struggling to remember remote/in person class schedule? Remembering to check & hand in homework remotely?

Family/Home

Is there conflict in the home? Are they worried about a parent's illness?

Step 2d: *Assess the* severity

Attends classes regularly with distress

Misses full school days or partial school days infrequently

Regularly misses full or partial school days

Misses multiple full days or weeks of school at a time

Hasn't been at school for months or more

At risk

Developing

Significant

Long-standing

Team *may* consist of school & caregivers only

Team needs to be well-coordinated and will likely include multiple people at school (e.g. teacher and counsellor), caregivers, and external mental health professional(s).

Who is responsible for what?

School Team

- Developing/executing school re-integration plan (with external consultation in some cases)
- Setting up internal school team meetings/keeping classroom teachers up to date
- Liaising with mental health clinician/family

External MH Clinician (if applicable)

- Individual therapy and/or parent consultation
- Consulting with school team; attending school team meetings
- Keeping school up to date on plans/progress re: attendance

Caregiver:

- Communicating confidence & setting effective limits
- Making sure the home setting is boring during school hours
- Ensuring teen is getting enough sleep; awake in time for school

Youth: going to school

Coordination is KEY to successful outcomes

Step 3: Set the stage for success
3a) Communicating with youth / family

Goals

- **Validate** & **encourage:** demonstrate empathy for the youth's struggle and offer hope that things can get better
  - **Normalize** the struggle & communicate **confidence**
- **Educate** the youth (and family) re: anxiety and how it's treated
- Introduce idea of **stepwise plan** that will help get things back on track
- Discuss CYMH/external mental health referral if needed

- Methods:
  - Point person will talk with the youth / family

Detailed information and scripts in accompanying document

Step 3: Set the stage for success
3b) Covering the 'triple S' basics

Goal: Encourage youth and families to address the **three S's**

Sleep

Sports or physical activity
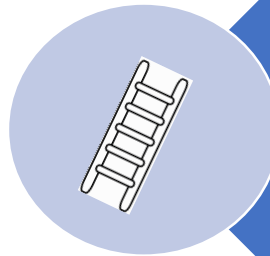
Screen / social media use

We know that healthy habits in these three areas go a long way towards
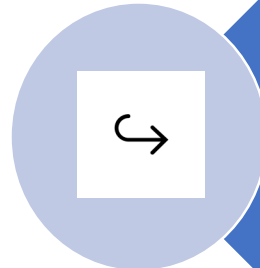a) **reducing anxiety &**
b) **increasing the effectiveness of other interventions**

Step 4:

Develop & Implement Plan

4a: Develop fear ladder

4b: Plan school re-entry

Step 4a:
Develop Fear Ladder

A set of increasingly challenging steps towards full school reentry

- Should be done **collaboratively** with defined rewards for each step

- Should address problem areas discovered during ax phase

- Goal is to repeat each step a few times until anxiety is somewhat lower

- You do NOT need to plan/share all the steps right away; can be done in phases

- Remember: Empathize & Encourage

Preparing for the fear ladder

Recall what you learned during the assessment

Louie

- Biggest challenge is participating in remote schooling with video on (Rated 10/10 for anxiety)

- Motivated to attend cross country practice

- Likes social studies teacher but scared of being called on in class

- Really struggling with math this term and is far behind in his work

- Really worried about being judged by his peers. Social studies teacher noted that he has a peer who he sits and who seems to like him

- Three S's weakness in the area of sleep.

Strategizing & ordering the fear ladder
What is easier & what is harder?

Louie

- In person schooling feels easier than remote → will target this first to maintain routines and engagement and prevent worsening of functioning

- Social studies feels easier than math

- Attendance will be targeted first, then social and academic goals (these will be separate fear ladders)

- Love of cross country will be used to help motivate him

- Dad will work on helping him get to sleep earlier

- Money towards a new video game is motivating. Parents agreed to set aside budget of $5 a week for this.
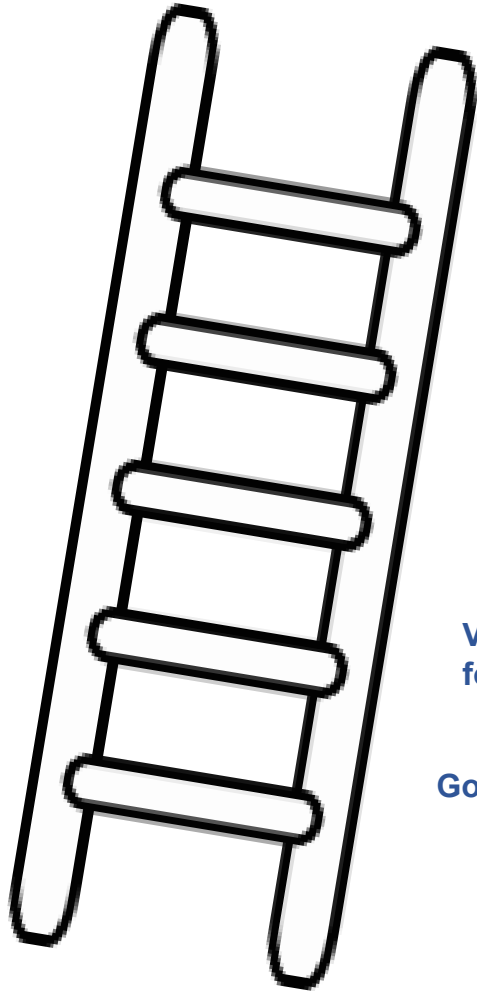
Louie's Fear Ladder #1:
In person schooling

Etc. etc. until full attendance.

Possible Rewards

Getting out of chores

Extra privileges (order pizza for dinner)

Extra screen time

Small amounts of money

Possible Steps

Attend for some extra help with math not during class time

Attend social studies class and complete 1 piece of work

Attend social studies class but no participation required

Visit with his social studies teacher for 10 minutes not during class

Go to cross country practice

This will look different for each youth! Remember to link steps to assessment results!

Louis' Fear Ladder #2: Remote schooling
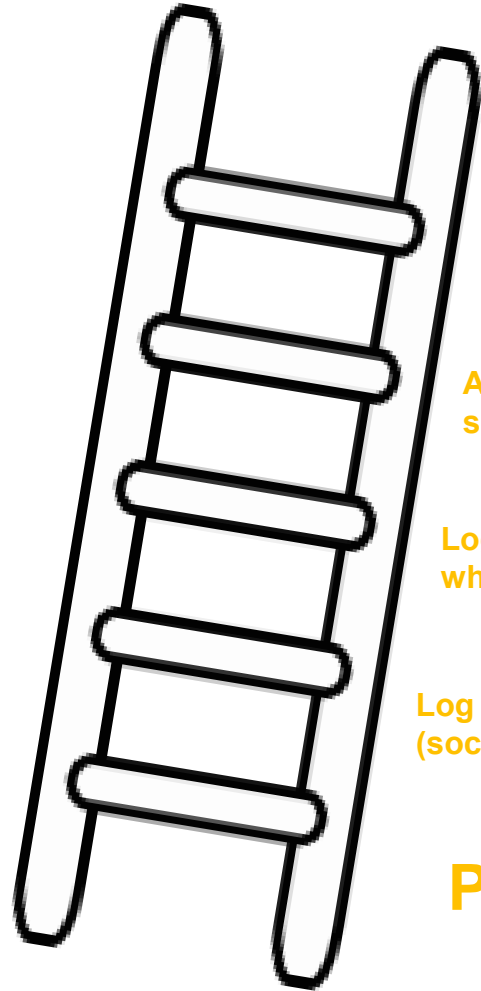
Etc. etc. until full attendance.

Possible Rewards

Getting out of chores

Extra privileges (order pizza for dinner)

Extra screen time

Small amounts of money

Possible Steps

Audio on, video on, answers 1 pre-planned question

Audio on, video off, answers 1 pre-planned question

Audio on, video off during remote schooling, no participation

Log on to remote schooling for whole class; video off

Log on to remote schooling (socials) for 15 minutes; video off

TIPS:

- Remember: Normal for youth to feel anxious and protest. Expect some distress!
- Do not let youth escape at the peak of their distress. They will learn that anxiety goes down when they avoid.
- Remember: Reward bravery even if the step seems small!
- Remember: Confidence will increase with each step!

This will look different for each youth! Remember to link steps to assessment results!

Step 4b:

Plan school re-entry

Make as many of the unknowns KNOWN

- Address logistical concerns (e.g., seating arrangement; cover story)
- Clearly communicate expectations
  - Louie: *"Tomorrow you'll sit in socials but won't have to talk or do any work. Your teacher will say hi but won't call on you at all."*
- Decide on accommodations based on info from 2c
  - Access to point person?
  - Non-classroom space available?
  - Academic?
  - Social?
- Document gradual re-entry plan

Step 5:
Communicate & Check in

- Plan for ongoing check ins among team to ensure gains are maintained & progress continues

- Troubleshoot barriers early (e.g., Louie struggled with getting up in the morning & with what peers would think of him)

- Regular communication with caregivers is important

When school-based intervention isn't enough...

The gold-standard mental health intervention involves three primary prongs:

1. Caregiver support and behavioural strategies

2. School consultation and collaboration

3. Individual support for youth

Each individually may have some impact, but unlikely to result in significant changes for youth with moderate-severe school avoidance unless employed collectively

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

Understanding the reason(s) for
school avoidance is important

Early intervention is associated with
better outcomes

The intervention intensity must match
the severity of the avoidance

Expect some anxiety.
Confidence is key!

School refusal / avoidance requires
good coordination but is treatable!

Resources

- Kelty Mental Health https://keltymentalhealth.ca/

- School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised (Kearney & Albano, 2007)

- Child & Youth Mental Health – local team https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/mental-health-substance-use/child-teen-mental-health

- Confident Parents Thriving Kids – https://welcome.cmhacptk.ca/ (Educators can refer)

- Kelty Mental Health Webinar Series on School Attendance Challenges https://keltymentalhealth.ca/school-attendance-webinars

- Anxiety Canada (formerly AnxietyBC) https://www.anxietycanada.com/

Questions for the speakers?

Please use the "Q&A" icon

Thank-you for joining.

Contact the Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre:

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phone (toll-free): 1-800-665-1822