

# Challenges With School Attendance: Introduction For Parents & Caregivers

November 16, 2020

## Speakers

Alex DiGiacomo, PhD & Alexandra Wilson, MEd

## Panelists

Sarah Anderson, PhD, RPsych, Julie Collette, RCC &  
Rosalind Catchpole, PhD, RPsych

A Collaboration Between  
BC Children's Hospital,  
The Vancouver School Board,  
Vancouver Child & Youth Mental Health,  
& Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre



**Welcome! We will begin the  
presentation  
shortly. Please note that your  
microphones have been muted and  
cameras are turned off  
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.

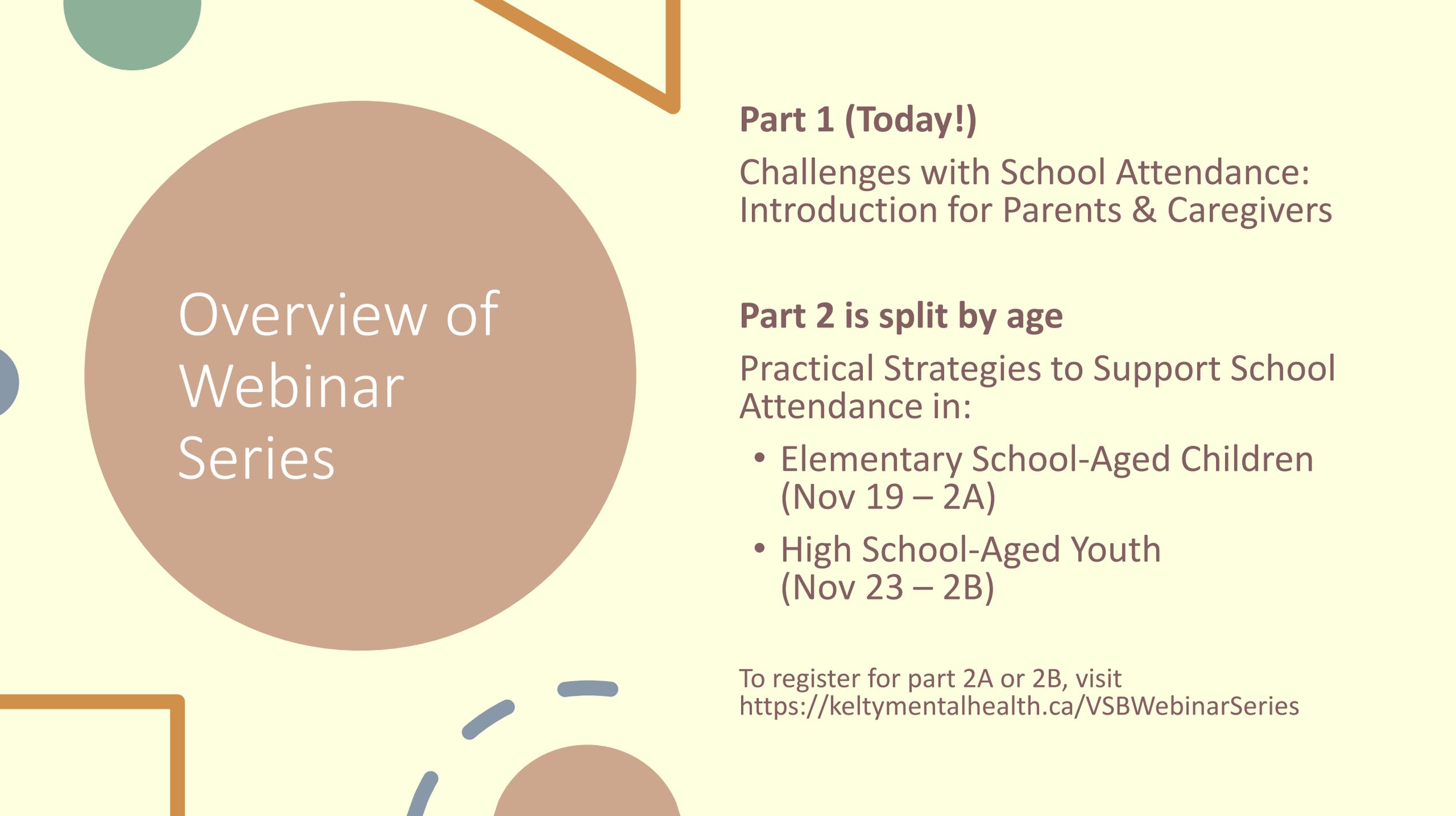


# Before We Begin...

- This information applies to the context in British Columbia. Some information is specific to the Vancouver School Board. If you are in another jurisdiction please consult local health and school authorities for further information.
- If you/your child, or someone you care about is having a mental health or substance use crisis: Call [911](#) or go to your local hospital's emergency room

# Housekeeping

- Attendees are automatically muted and cameras are turned off.
- Please submit technical questions or comments through the “Chat” function.
- The webinar will be recorded.
- At the end of the webinar, a survey will pop up that we invite you to complete.
- 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.
  - If you wish to remain anonymous, before submitting your question change your name via zoom



# Overview of Webinar Series

## **Part 1 (Today!)**

Challenges with School Attendance:  
Introduction for Parents & Caregivers

## **Part 2 is split by age**

Practical Strategies to Support School  
Attendance in:

- Elementary School-Aged Children  
(Nov 19 – 2A)
- High School-Aged Youth  
(Nov 23 – 2B)

To register for part 2A or 2B, visit  
<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/VSBWebinarSeries>

# Land Acknowledgments

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Speakers and panelists acknowledge with immense gratitude that they live, work, and play on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nation

# Speakers Today

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## **Alex DiGiacomo, PhD**

Post-doctoral Fellow, Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic,  
BC Children's Hospital & UBC Psychiatry



## **Alexandra Wilson, MEd**

SACY Parent & Family Engagement Coordinator



# Panelists Today

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**Sarah Anderson, PhD, RPsych**

Psychologist and Post-doctoral Fellow, BC Children's Hospital & UBC



**Julie Collette, MC, RCC**

VCH CYMH Hospital & School Liaison Clinician



**Rosalind Catchpole, PhD, RPsych**

Psychologist and Clinic Head, Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic, BC Children's Hospital



# What are we covering today?

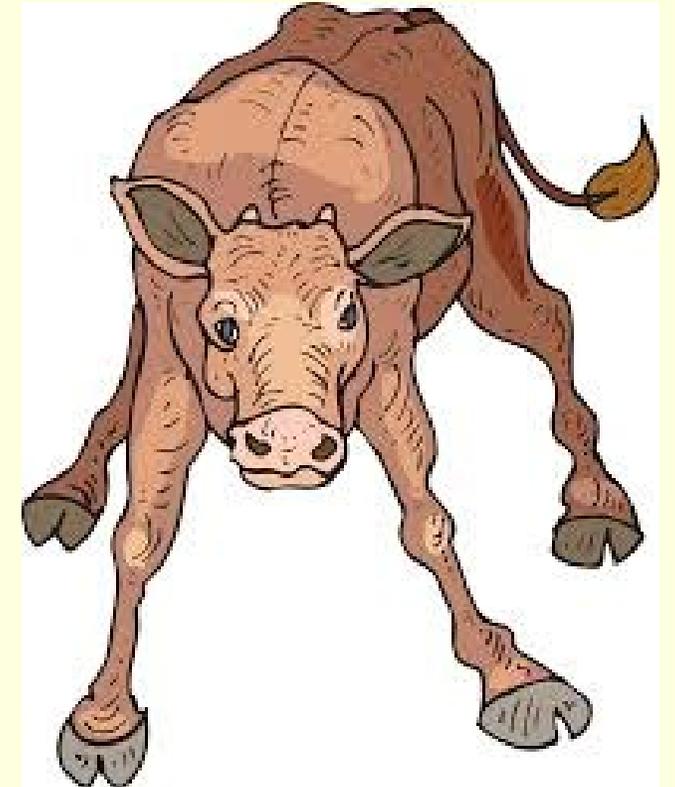


- Anxiety and getting to school
- Parents on the frontline: what do we need?
- Supporting our children/youth: what do they need from us?
- Preview of Part 2: Practical Strategies For Success

# This is not new....

*...but the complexity of 2020 adds extra wrinkles for families:*

- School routines are DIFFERENT and changing (especially secondary school)
- Less time in school might mean more time without support
- School looks a bit different now
  - Hygiene Protocols | Social Life | Building Community
- Everyone is more conscious of safety
- Everyone is stressed and we are all a bit wobbly
  - Decision overload!



*Good news: the interventions are the same. And they work.*

# There's a spectrum.

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Attends  
school  
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

# What's behind the struggle?



- Challenges with school attendance usually **anxiety-based**
- Affects 2-5% of youth (that's Pre-Pandemic)
- Most common during transition periods (K, middle/high school, after summer break)
- **Not** the same as “skipping school” or acting out (but there can be overlap)

# What's in store for our kids?

On the one hand...

Not something to ignore or brush off

Can get worse with time & impact other parts of kids' lives

On the other hand...

Not something to feel hopeless about

With good coordination, can absolutely **improve!**  
Children/teens can and **do flourish**

# Hints that your child/teen may be experiencing anxiety

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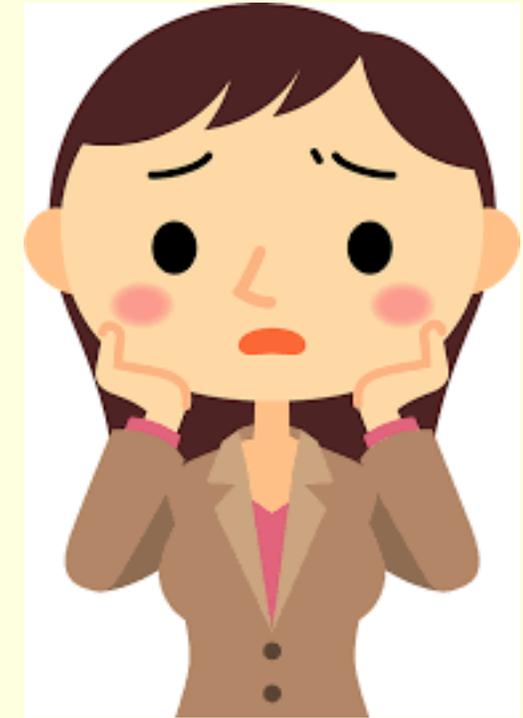
Physical (headaches,  
stomachaches,  
changes in  
sleep/appetite)

Irritability, changes  
in mood, arguments  
with caregivers

Frequent calls /  
texts to caregivers  
or avoiding talking  
to caregivers

Attention problems,  
forgetfulness,  
resistance to change

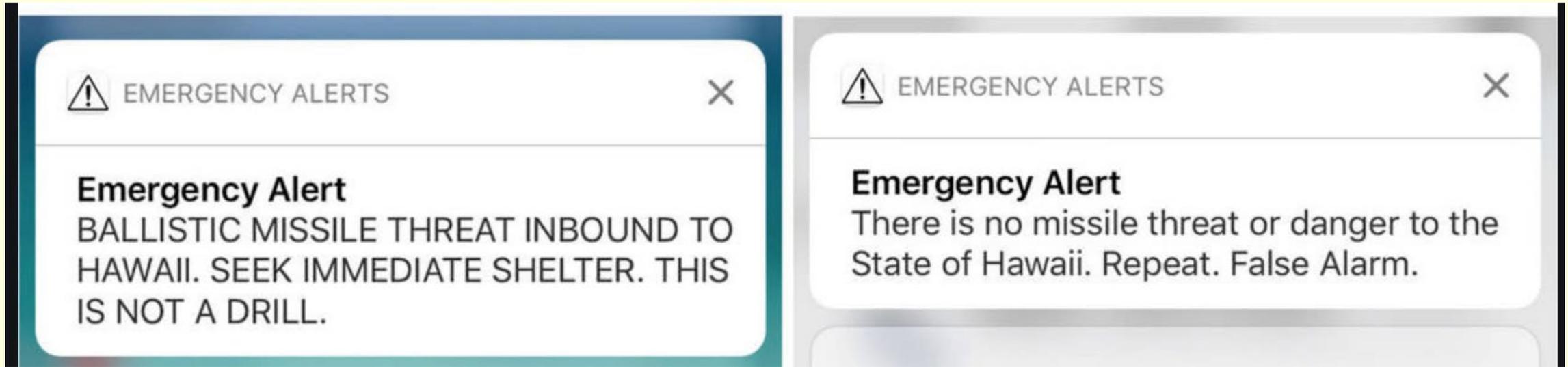
# What is anxiety, actually?



- a **NORMAL & NECESSARY** human experience

- Uncomfortable (sometimes **VERY** uncomfortable) but not **HARMFUL**

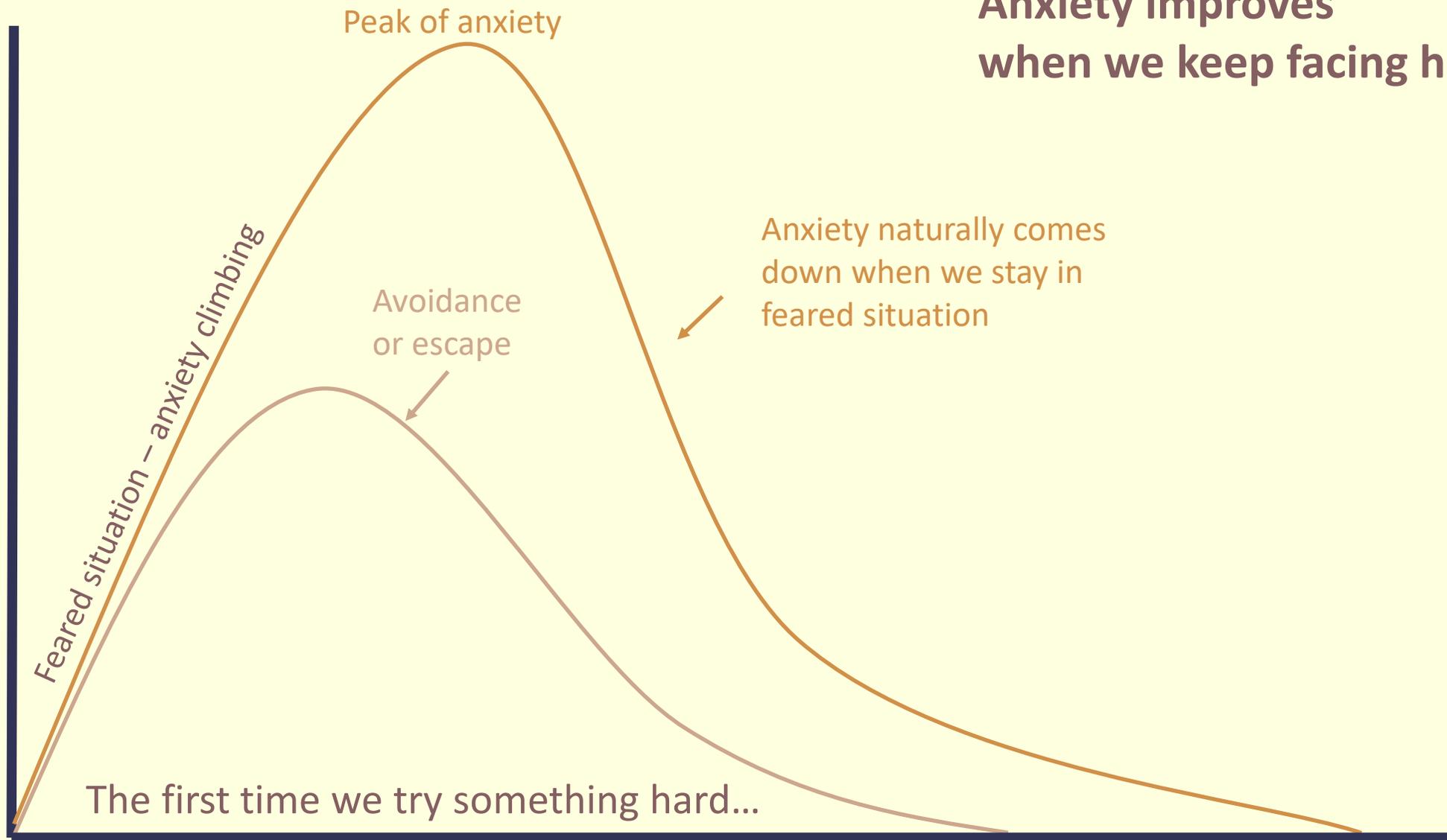
EXPECT SOMETHING BAD!!  
SOMETHING BAD IS COMING!



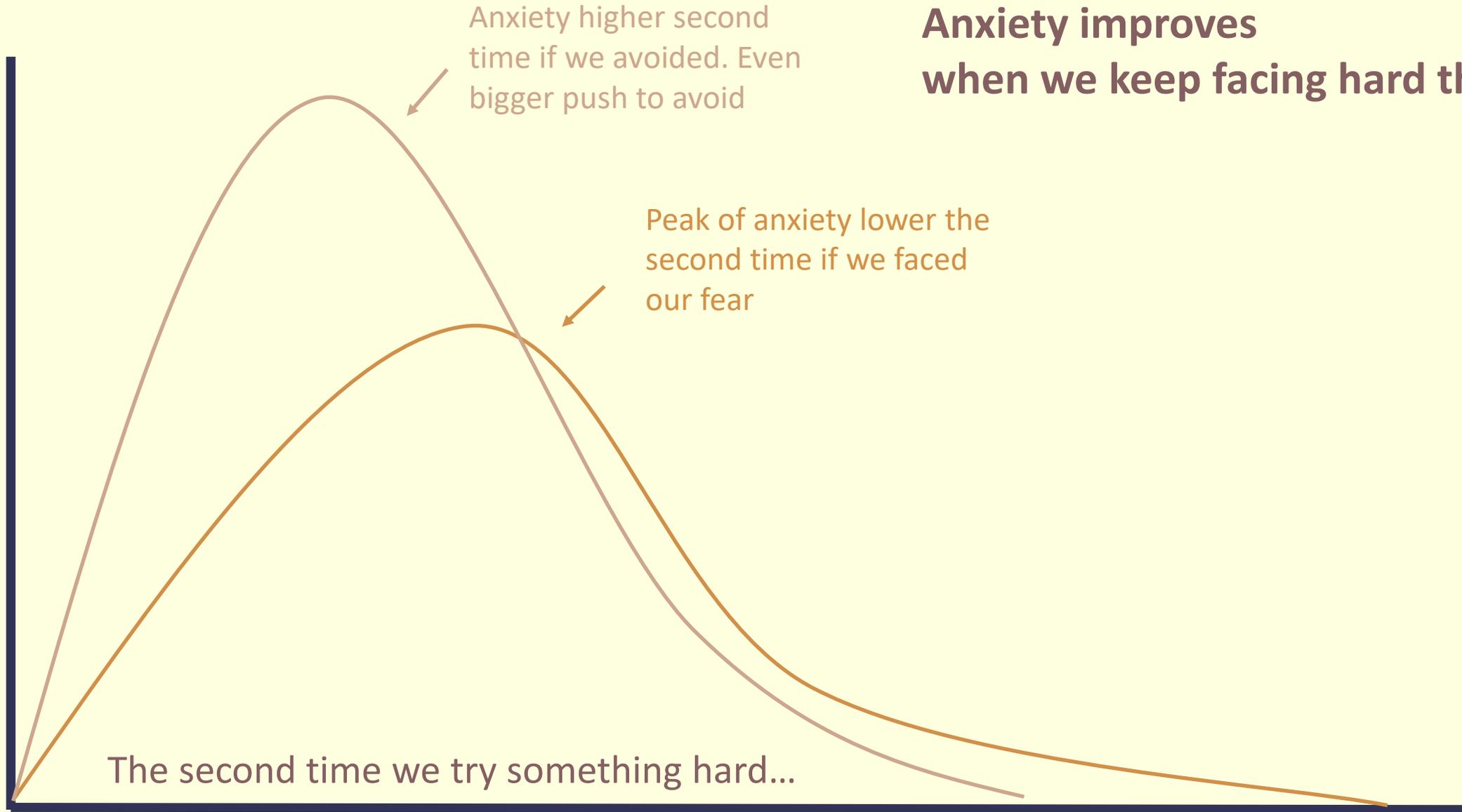
We can think about anxiety as being our alarm system....

....but sometimes, it gets triggered too easily: false alarm!

# Anxiety improves when we keep facing hard things



# Anxiety improves when we keep facing hard things



# Anxiety and Parenting / Caregiving....

...we are biologically primed to PROTECT the children under our care and to be on HIGH ALERT to their distress



It's really easy for us to "catch" our kids' fear...  
and for them to "catch" ours!



- Exhausting!
- We may struggle to cope with our child's distress
- We may no longer feel able to set effective limits and expectations



## Look after yourself

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- Selfish? Or self-“ish” (a little selfish)
- Not “me first” but “Me Too.”

# Looking Inwards

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- Be honest about the cost to daily life...and get support
- Our basic needs: sleep, food, fun (yes, fun)
- What do we mean by self-care? 😐
- How about: “a 30 min vacation from your life” 😊
- Small things work...if we do them



## And if you're really struggling?

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- Focus on what you can do
- Express your feelings, maybe write them down, or talk to a friend
- Focus on helpful, realistic thoughts (family strengths; you're doing your best; there is help)
- Seek out support (friend, professional, spiritual leaders)
- Make a plan of action (more in Part 2)
- Take care of yourself
- Acceptance (there may be things you cannot change)



breathe

# How to respond in the moment: 3 steps

1

2

3

Step  
back

Balance  
the scale

Empathize  
AND  
Encourage



## Step 1: Step back

I can't handle much more of this.

Enough!  
We've got to get her to school now.

- Notice our automatic reaction:

| Overwhelmed? Angry?  
| Annoyed? Hopeless?  
| Paralyzed? Numb?

What on earth is wrong with him?



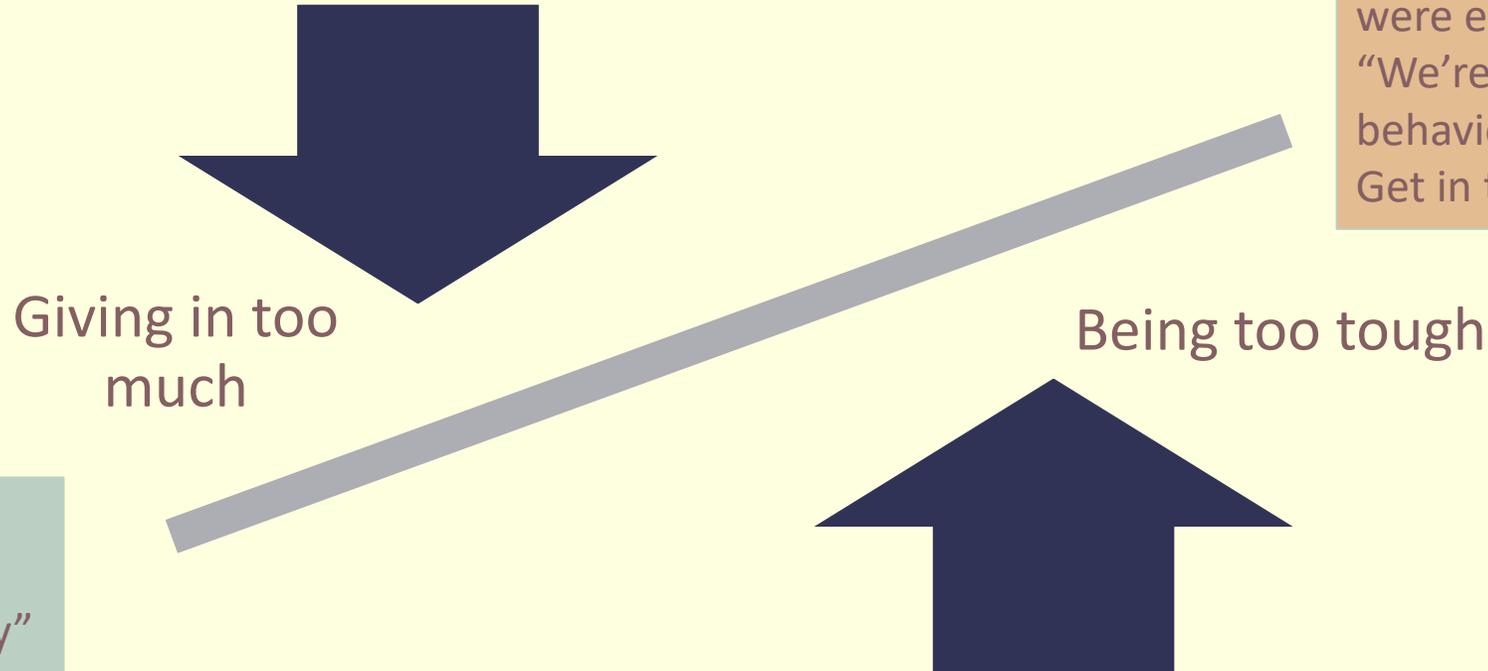
Will this ever end? Am I hurting her?

- Remind ourselves that:
  - Our kids' fear fuels ours → their false alarm is getting us going

## Step 2: Balance the scale

### Examples

“This is not a big deal.  
Let’s go!!”  
“I thought you said you  
were excited! Come on”  
“We’re going. This  
behavior is not acceptable.  
Get in the car!”



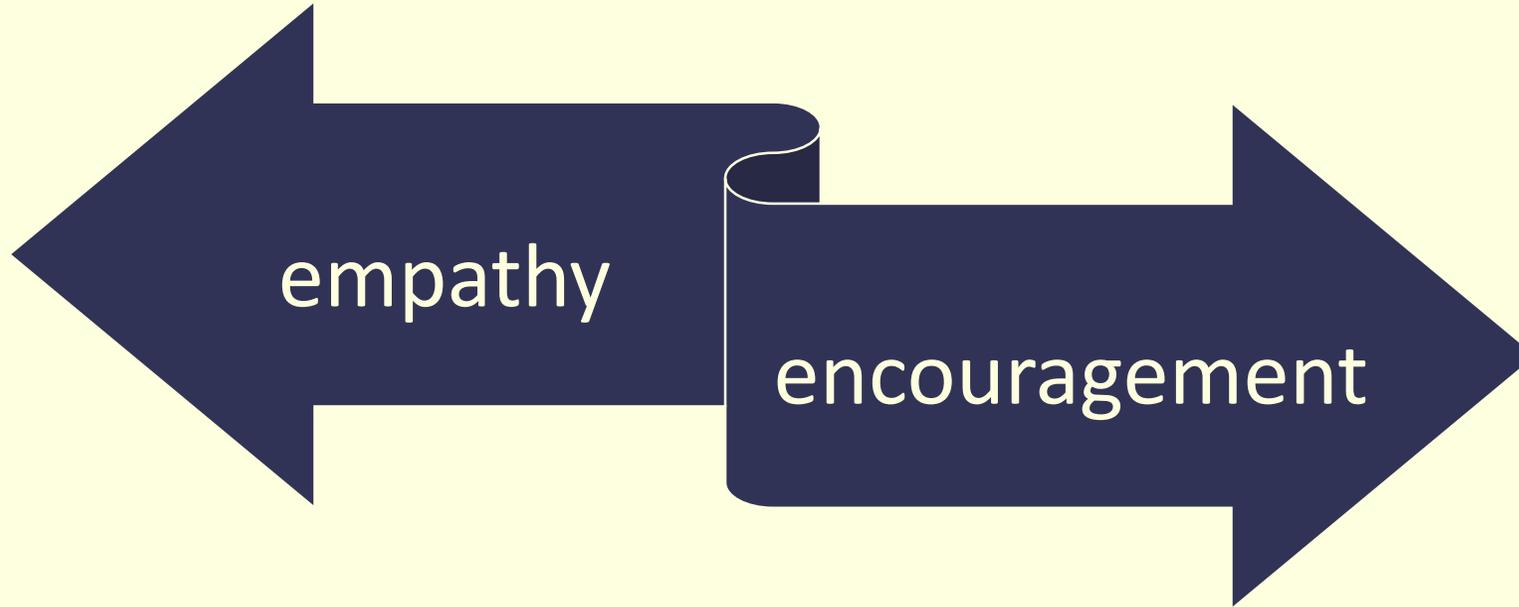
Giving in too  
much

Being too tough

### Examples

“You poor kid, I’m so sorry”  
“This is too hard. Let’s stay  
home”  
“Okay, you can stay home  
today”

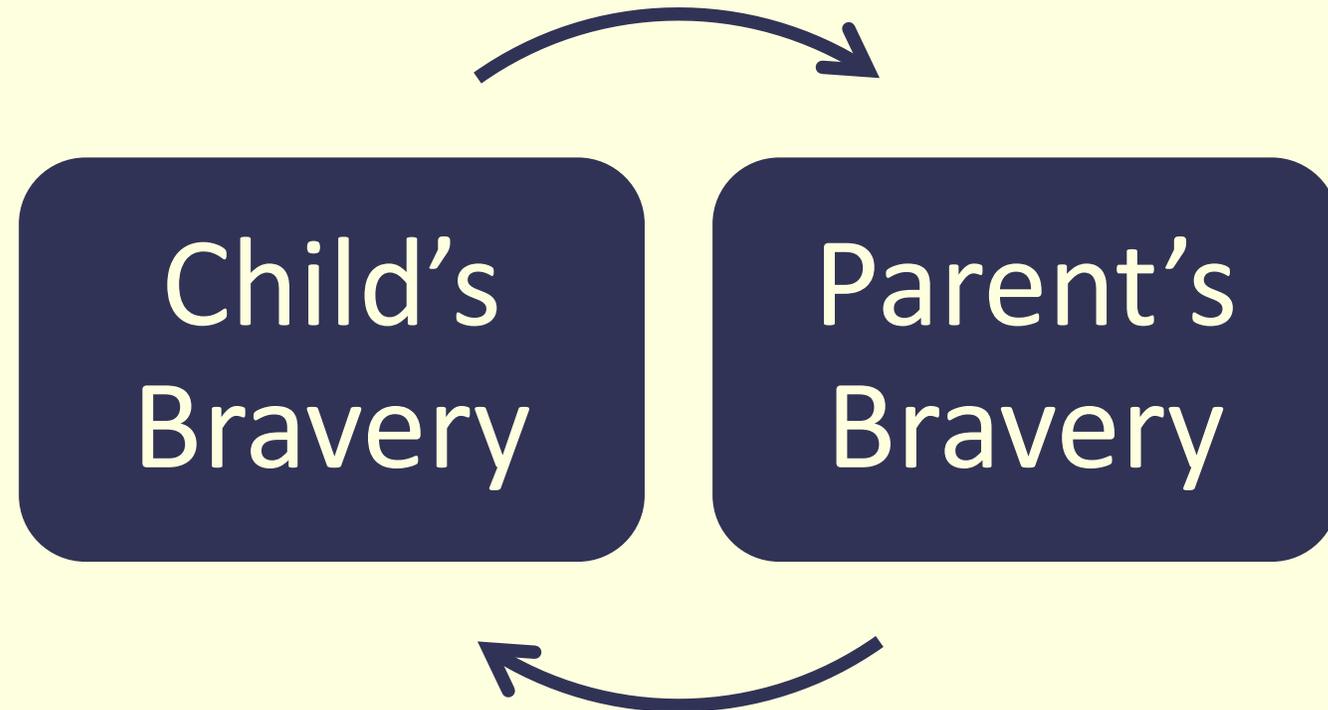
### Step 3: Empathize AND Encourage



“I know this feels really hard”  
OR  
A hug; reassuring touch

“and I believe that you can do it”

Communicate confidence\*  
(even if you don't feel it) 😊



“Thanks for telling me you’re feeling scared about going to school today. When I feel scared I want to avoid stuff too! Let’s talk about some of the things we can do to help you get there today.”

\*you will not do this perfectly and that’s ok

# Communicating Confidence

## in Words and Actions

- Think ahead: have some phrases ready to use. (empathy & encouragement)
- Remember to keep your anxious thought INSIDE. SPEAK confidence and support
- Validate their feelings – it DOES feel hard, scary, painful, etc. And I know how brave you are.
- Be a detective– know your kid. Music? Conversation? Silence? What works for them?
- Small steps: let's get dressed and then we'll talk.
- A Hug. Hold hands.
- Give them a piece of your jewelry to wear under their shirt, a stuffy in their bag, a special stone or object in pocket
- Let them help others: walk a younger child to school, go early to help set up classroom, bring in something for teacher
- Access supports: a neighbor to stop by and walk or drive them to school
- Develop and stick to a plan with school staff for support

You're not  
alone

Spiritual  
leaders

After  
school care  
staff

Friends & family  
Neighbors &  
other parents

Healthcare  
professionals

Teachers,  
coaches, tutors,  
youth workers

Parent  
Support  
Groups



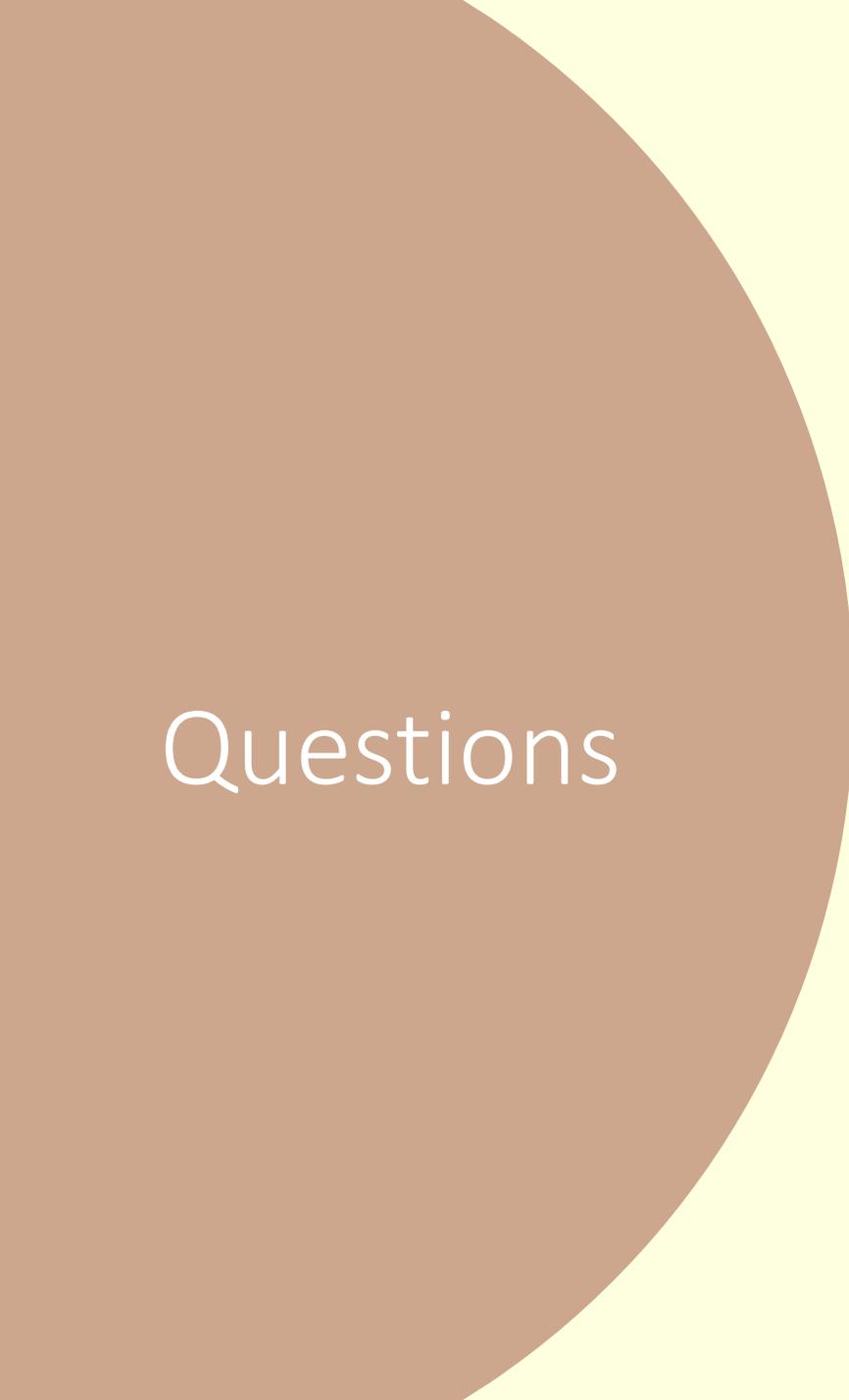
## Take home messages

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- Anxiety is distressing but not harmful. It gets better when we face our fears.
- Our kids' fear feeds our fear which feeds their fear.....
- Take care of yourselves so that you can communicate confidence
- And next time, part 2: practical strategies for success.

# Resources

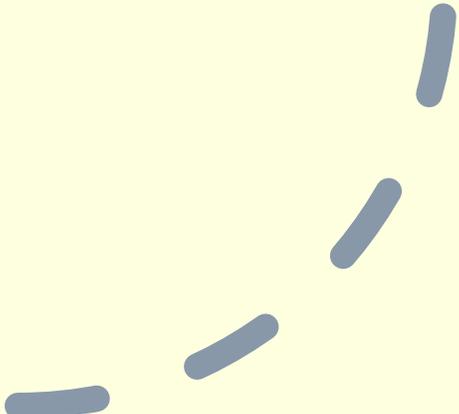
- Kelty Mental Health Webinar (on YouTube) 'Setting Children & Youth up for a Successful Return to School in the Era of COVID-19'  
<https://youtu.be/4ZW6Ojq2uuU>
- Anxiety Canada (formerly AnxietyBC)  
<https://www.anxietycanada.com/>
- Kelty Mental Health <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/>
- Child & Youth Mental Health – local team  
<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/mental-health-substance-use/child-teen-mental-health>
- Self-Compassion <https://self-compassion.org/>
- Here To Help – resources on burnout and more  
<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/>



Questions

**Questions for the speakers?**

**Please use the “Q&A” icon**



Thank-You!!

Thank-you for joining.

Contact the Kelty Mental Health  
Resource Centre:

e-mail: [keltycentre@cw.bc.ca](mailto:keltycentre@cw.bc.ca)

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

