

Setting Children & Youth up for a Successful Return to School in the Era of COVID-19

Dr. Sarah Anderson & Dr. Rosalind Catchpole
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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.





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



Dr. Sarah Anderson
Psychology Post-Doctoral Fellow
Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic
BC Children's Hospital & UBC
Musqueam, Squamish & Tsleil-Waututh
Traditional Territory



Dr. Rosalind Catchpole, R.Psych.
Psychologist and Clinic Head
Mood & Anxiety Disorders Clinic
BC Children's Hospital
Musqueam, Squamish & Tsleil-Waututh
Traditional Territory



WHAT ARE WE COVERING TODAY?

I
really,
really
miss
precedented
times

- Implications of the pandemic
- Decision making framework for parents
- Managing your own anxiety
- Concrete steps to support your child's return to school
- What to do if your child refuses to go to school

Pandemic Times...

- These are uniquely **challenging** times
- Parents are facing **decisions** we never anticipated
- Our lives and **routines** have been turned upside down
- We've been 'practicing' **avoiding** a lot of things over the last 6 months...
 - Fear reactions increase (e.g., try avoiding red cars for an hour)



School & COVID-19

- Safety is at the forefront of families' and teachers' minds
- Many children and teens have been away from school for almost 6 months
- Educators are navigating these changes alongside families
- Parents have been balancing work and childcare/remote schooling
- School will look different in September

Everyone is stressed out!!

K-12 Schools are in				
Remote learning for all	Remote learning with exceptions	In-class & remote learning	Learning groups: full-time in-class	Learning as usual: full-time in-class
Stage 5	Stage 4	Stage 3	Stage 2	Stage 1



How are we doing as parents?

The result of these challenging and uncertain times can be a sense of **paralysis** as a parent...

What to do?

How to move forward?

How to help our kids?





A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL RETURN

Step 1: Make an informed decision about whether to send your child back to in-person school



Step 2: "Live" your decision. Practice it.



Step 3: Communicate confidence to your child



Step 4: Practice the routines in advance with your child



Step 5: Don't give up if your child pushes back!



STEP 1: MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION

Gather information from your child's school/school board

If health issues (child or family), speak with your physician

Weigh the pros and cons of different options

- MOST kids do better with structure and social contact of school
- Kids with anxiety often need practice being brave and being out in the world
- What is sustainable for me as a parent?
- What are my child's learning needs?
- How did my child (and I) do from March – June?
- What are the implications for grandparents, other family members

Make a decision (for now!) and stay flexible

- Public health and school board recommendations may change



STEP 2: “LIVE” YOUR DECISION. PRACTICE IT.

- Preparation will help you feel confident when ‘the big day’ comes
 - decreases anxiety
- Figure out your ‘routine’ before and after school
- Iron out any ‘wrinkles’ in the plan in advance

How did you feel the first time you went to the grocery store during the pandemic? What about the 20th time?



Coping in uncertain times...

We're primed to want *certainty* in our lives.
However pandemic times are challenging our
'flexibility muscles'

Tips for successfully coping in a pandemic:

- Take it week-by-week (don't look too far ahead)
- Be aware of news intake
- Start or keep up a physical activity routine
- Practice mindfulness or other self-care activities
- Stay socially connected

Focus on what you *can* control!

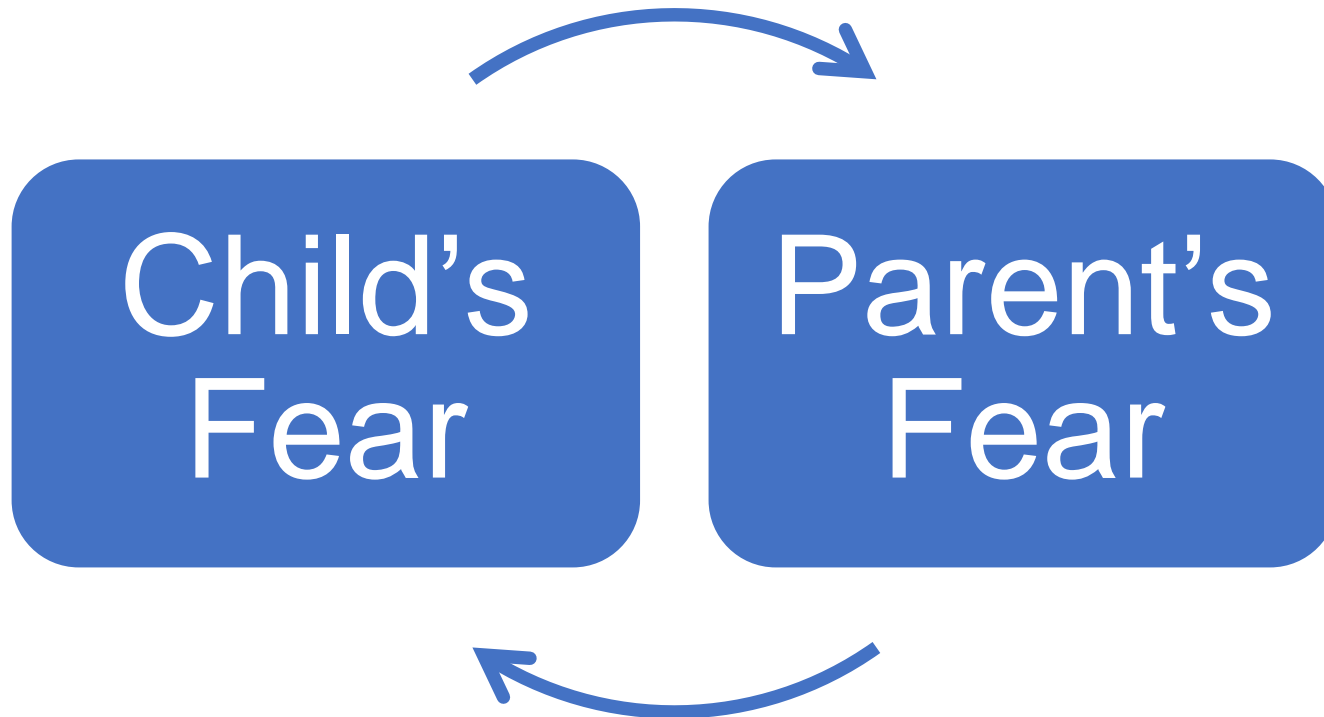


Managing your own anxiety...

- Talk to a friend / make a pact to support each other
- Take slow calming breaths (in through nose, out through mouth)
- Write down your reasons for sending your child
- Self compassion



STEP 3: COMMUNICATE CONFIDENCE







What level of caution do kids need?

More caution...

- My child tends to be impulsive and disregard safety considerations
- My child is failing to follow rules around good practices with the pandemic



More encouragement...

- My child gets nervous when people get too close on walks
- My child is really scared they won't have any friends when they go back to school

Warnings are calibrated for very reckless children 😊



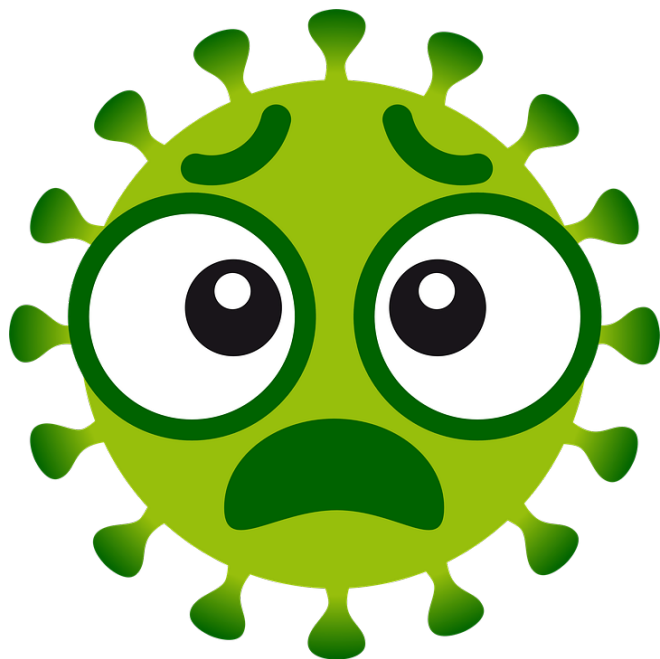
What are we communicating to our children?

My inside voice:

- 'Be careful!'
- 'Wash your hands'
- 'Stay away from other kids!'
- 'Don't breathe too much 😊'
- 'Maybe we should just stay home today'
- '*I'm* scared of getting sick'

My outside voice:

- 'The teachers and doctors have done a good job to make sure that school is safe'
- 'You might feel a bit nervous at first but you will feel so much better after you've gone to school the first day'
- 'New things are hard but I know how brave you are'
- 'Won't it be exciting to see your friends?'
- 'When I go to the grocery store I wash my hands and wear a mask and these things help keep me safe'



Turn off the news!

- Be mindful of what your kids are exposed to
- If your kids are listening to you having worried conversations with friends about the uptick in cases and then we tell them it's time to go to school, we're not setting them up for success
- How to **safely relay information**:
 - The amount of information shared depends on the age of your child
 - Make sure it is reliable, science-based information
 - Focus on the things we do to keep ourselves safe



STEP 4: PRACTICE THE ROUTINES

Sleep and other daily routines: Set them up for success

Get sleep on track

- When is your child waking up?
- When do they need to wake up for school?
- Look at the difference and move bedtime /waketime earlier in 15-30 minute increments a night
- No screens 1-2 hours before bedtime

Get daily routines on track

- Get out of PJs in the morning, into daytime clothes
- Get meals on a schedule; snack/lunch time around when it would be at school
- Get their bodies moving; physical activity helps with anxiety and mood



Social and practical routines

SOCIAL

- ✓ Schedule some playdates / social visits with peers from school if possible
- ✓ “Play” school with younger kids
- ✓ Create some excitement!

PRACTICAL

- ✓ Practice the walk/drive to school
- ✓ Practice mask wearing if your child will be wearing one at least part time
- ✓ Pack the backpack, etc.

Make the unknown known



But my child is *really* nervous...

BREAK IT DOWN

- Drive / walk halfway to school
- Drive / walk to the edge of the field
- Go all the way to the front door of the school
- Have a playdate / visit with a friend at home/at a park
- Have a playdate / visit on school grounds

KEYS

- Stay in the situation until your child's anxiety is LOWER
- Provide rewards for each step:
 - Younger kids: go for an ice cream after, sticker
 - Teens: extra screen time, money, privileges
 - Praise your child / teen for being brave

Remember: success breeds success!

STEP 5: DON'T GIVE UP IF YOUR CHILD PUSHES BACK

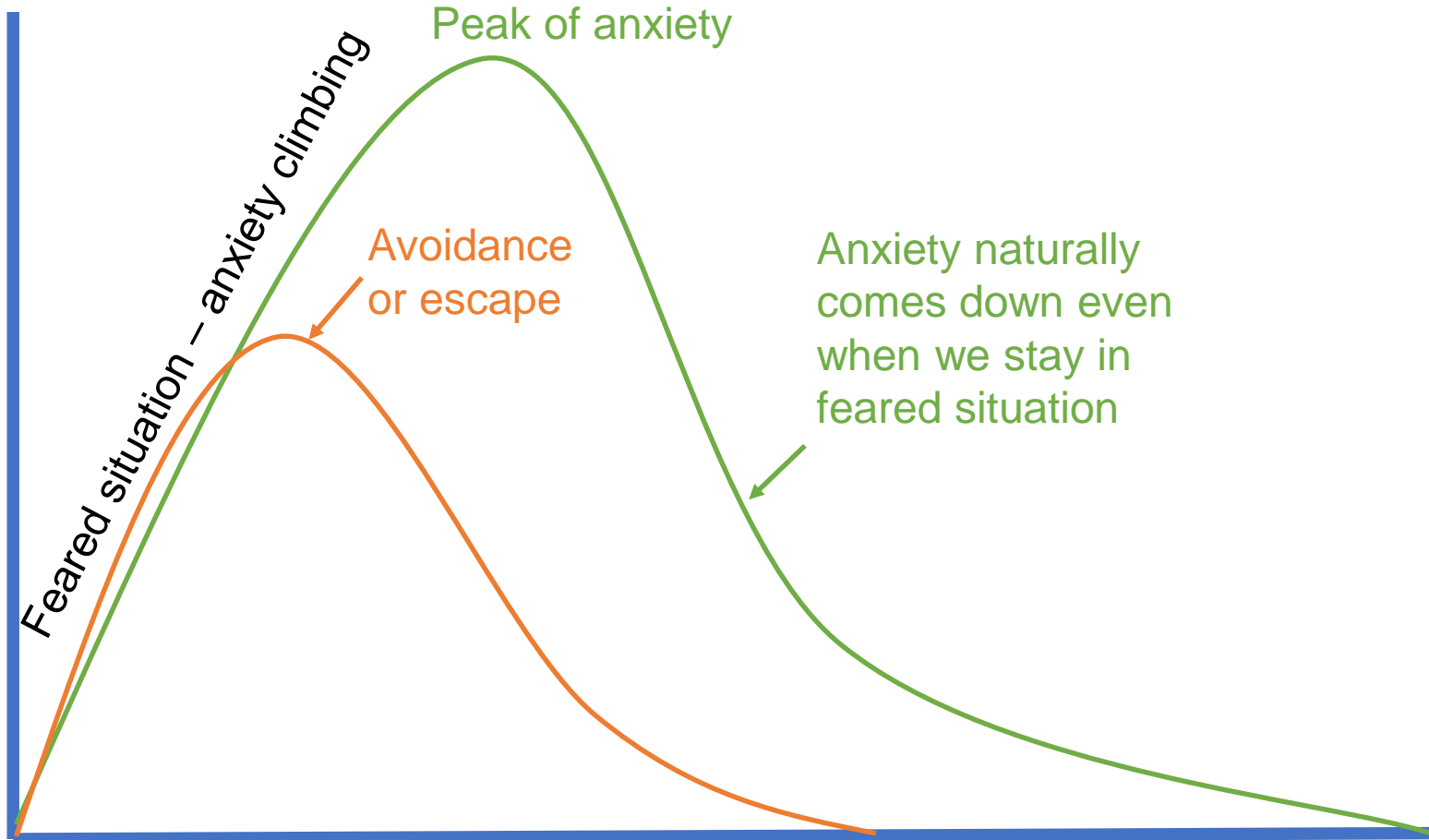
What is anxiety?

NORMAL and
NECESSARY
human emotion

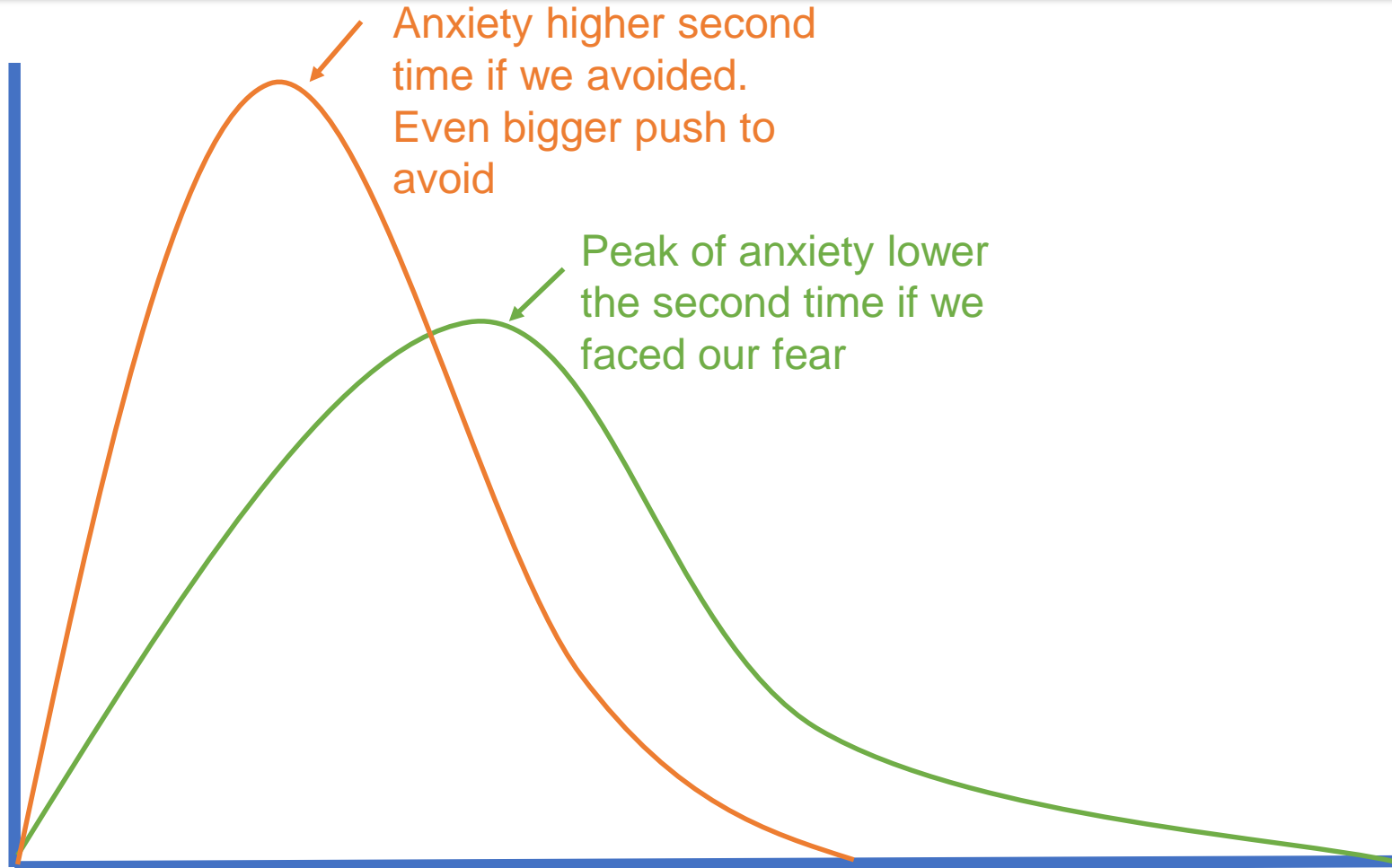
Makes us want
to AVOID

Gives us
uncomfortable
physical
symptoms
(tummy /
headaches,
racing heart,
breathing fast)

Goes down
when we keep
facing hard
things



The first time we try something hard...



The second time we try something hard...

How this applies to school attendance

It is NORMAL and EXPECTED that many children will be nervous about the return to school

There is a lot you can do as parents to help that initial anxiety 'peak' not be so high
make the unfamiliar familiar!

Each time they practice something in preparation for school start their confidence will go up

Each day of school they attend they usually feel better and better

We need to do everything we can to try to make sure they **get to school** and **stay in school**

The first day of school...

You've planned and prepared – now what?

- Communicate your confidence. You know the drill!
- Plan for extra time (but not **too** much)
- Worries may come up – and that's OK
- Don't engage in lengthy conversations about those worries
 - Use redirection (e.g., “what do you want for your after school snack?”)
 - Ignore minor behaviours (e.g., whining, repeating questions)



...but what if I can't get them there???

Reach out for help

- Your child's school
- Your neighbours / friends (someone else taking your child to school or walking with a friend is often very helpful!)
- Mental health support (Child and Youth Mental Health; CBT)

Make a plan

- Coordinate with the school on a good plan to slowly increase their time at school (e.g., visit outside the school, plan for 30 mins at school to start, slowly increase time)
- Make sure it's really boring at home (only chores! No WIFI during school hours! No special outings! Try to do schoolwork!)



Before school starts

- ☐ Walk to the school and back
- ☐ Go to the school playground (picnic area, fields)
- ☐ Playdate/hangout with friends on the school grounds



When school has started

- ☐ Attend school for 30 mins w/o expectations to complete schoolwork
- ☐ Attend school for 1 hour
- ☐ Attend school for 2 hours
- ☐ Attend school for 3 hours
- ☐ Attend school for 4 hours
- ☐ Attend school for the whole day

REMEMBER:
Rewards and
praise for each
step



Spend roughly a
few days at each
step

Example Bravery Ladder



MESSAGING

What not to say...

- “But you were so excited about going back to school!”
- “It’s not a big deal! It’s just school!”
- “It’s OK you can stay home today, but you HAVE to go tomorrow”

Instead say...

- “Thanks for telling me you’re feeling scared about going back to school. There have been so many changes happening lately! Let’s talk about some of the things we can do to help you feel more confident.”

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

- Identify what is still in your control/your child's control
- Confidence is key
- You can help your child prepare for school return
- Expect some anxiety!
- Reach out for help if you need it
- Kids can still learn and grow in the midst of a pandemic!



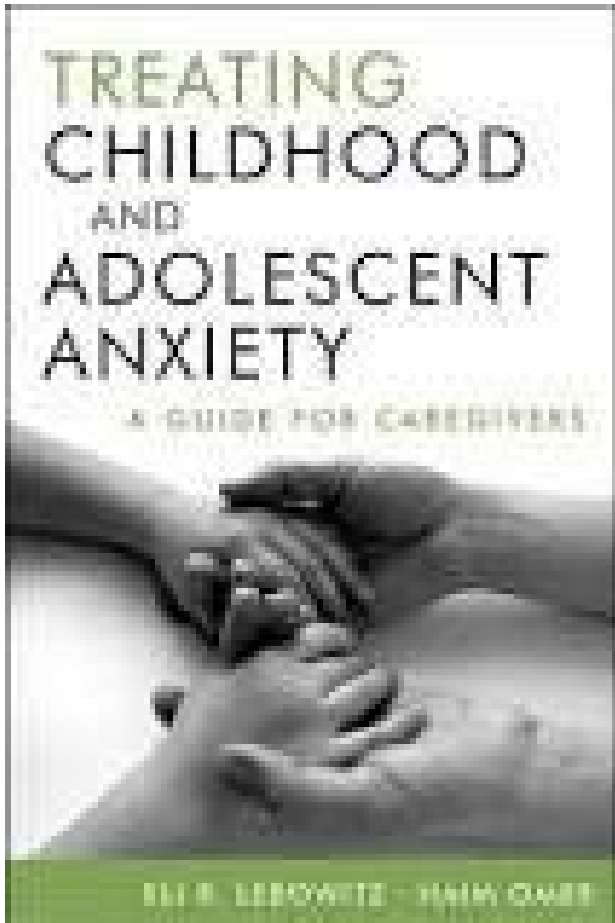
In the words of Dr. Bonnie Henry

Be kind (to
ourselves, to
teachers, to our
kids)

Be calm (show
confidence to our
children)

Be safe (follow
public health
recommendations)

...and be brave
(this is hard! but it
does get easier)



Resources

- Kelty Mental Health
<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/>
- Anxiety Canada (formerly AnxietyBC)
<https://www.anxietycanada.com/>
- 'Treating Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety: A Guide for Caregivers' by Eli Lebowitz and Haim Omer
<https://keltymentalhealth.ca/collection/keltys-recommended-resources-anxiety-parentscaregiver>



Questions for the speakers?

Please use the “Q&A” icon

Thank-you for joining.

Contact the Kelty Mental Health
Resource Centre:

e-mail: keltycentre@cw.bc.ca

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

