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Dr. Amber May, Psychiatrist The Bloomberg Institute:

Question: What is the difference between feeling anxious and an anxiety disorder? *My kid's anxiety is INTENSE! Should I get professional help?* [Video Link](#)

Anxiety is an essential emotion that serves a purpose. It helps us keep safe and out of harm's way. I like to think of it as a Spider-Man, sixth sense that knowing danger is near. Being able to tap into what our anxiety is telling us can be potentially life-saving. Anxiety can help motivate us to perform at our best. Many top academics, athletes and musicians feel some degree of anxiety before and even during a test, game or performance. But when it becomes problematic is when it begins to impair our ability to engage in our activities of daily life. And we look at these as our social functioning, our relationships, our occupational functioning, our jobs, and for kids this involves their academics. So when we start seeing a decline in grades or an inability to engage appropriately in the classroom, that's often when we become concerned and may want to consider having a professional get involved.

Question: How do you treat an anxiety disorder? *What are anxiety disorders? How do I FIND the right treatment?* [Video Link](#)

In order to manage an anxiety disorder the best first step is to partner with our child and acknowledge that they need the help. So, sitting your child down, having a dialogue about how their symptoms have progressed to the point that bringing a professional in to be part of their success team seems to be the next best step. Another area that you can do as a parent in conjunction with reaching out to a professional is emphasizing their sleep hygiene. So making sure they're getting to bed and waking up at the same hour, sufficient amount of hours and not having screens in the bed or bedroom ideally. And then emphasizing healthy nutrition and trying to minimize things that may contribute to anxiety or exacerbate them such as caffeine, especially in the later hours of the day.

The next step would be to reach out to your pediatrician because they know your child for a significant amount of time, and they can help rule out if there's a medical or substance induced etiology that may be masquerading or contributing to anxiety. Primary anxiety disorders are truly only diagnosed after ruling out that there isn't a physiologic effect due to either a medical condition, a substance, or a medication on board. So at that point, your pediatrician can help link you then with a therapist who would be helpful for things like CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, which is a gold standard approach. And that would be useful in the case of mild to moderate symptoms. Now, if symptoms are so severe that they fall more within the moderate to extreme range, then it would be helpful to also engage a child psychiatrist like myself in a treatment team. And so a child psychiatrist, like your pediatrician is goes through the medical school residency and fellowship process and has that background in how the body's physiology and pathophysiology work and so can consider if needed medication intervention. In addition to talk therapy.

Question: When do you use medication for anxiety? Does my kid NEED anxiety meds? [Video Link](#)

Friendly neighborhood child psychiatrist will help you in determining if a child's symptoms warrant medications. And I would say, if it's at the point that it's causing enough distress in your child's life, that you're considering reaching out to a higher level of care, then medications may be warranted. We look at, again, the range of symptomatology. For moderate to severe anxiety, that's where we would consider, usually in conjunction with talk therapy, prescribing a medication. The most common classes of medications that are used to treat anxiety disorders are antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications and beta blockers. And the most common, gold standard treatment within the antidepressants are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, commonly known by the acronym SSRIs.

And so how, how do they work? From a neurochemistry standpoint, they influence the brain chemicals that regulate emotion and thought patterns. As child psychiatrists, we're always assessing for safety,

tolerability, and effectiveness. And this is a dialogue, we have with patients at each clinic visit. The good news is, treatment for anxiety is highly effective. We should see results happen over the course of one to

six weeks, depending on the medication. And you'll know that your child is feeling better because oftentimes they'll be able to share with you, that they're feeling less anxious. You'll see other domains of life that were impacted begin to improve. So things like their academics, often start becoming more manageable again. They're re-engaging in relationships that they may have stepped away from. Hanging out in the family spaces more often. They're looking better, brighter, less overwhelmed, and worried. So, the initial reasons that you brought them in, those symptoms begin to decrease.

Question: How can I help my child cope with their anxious feelings? What do I say to my anxious child to help NOT make it worse? [Video Link](#)

The things we can do to help our child manage their anxious feelings are to foster an early dialogue with our kids about what anxiety is, what emotions are and help build problem solving skills such as identifying when there's a trigger that leads to anxiety. And then brainstorming about solutions that can help reduce this.

One of the first interventions we can do when we see our kiddo looking worried is to connect at their level. Help them label the emotion. So even saying things as simple as, "Hey, you look worried. Tell me what you're thinking about. Where are you feeling it in your body? Is it in your chest or your tummy? What else is going on?" And validating what their experience is. So saying, "Yeah, that was scary for me too." And then modeling an adaptive response. So you could take your child by the hand and say, "Hey, let's go sit down on the park bench, do some deep breaths together, and then continue on our walk."

Another important intervention is making sure our child's basic needs are being met. So are they getting sufficient sleep, which not enough can impact every domain of emotionality, including anxiety, making sure they're getting sufficient nutrition and enough bonding time with loved ones. Another important area is making sure we partner with our child to assess that they're not overwhelmed with commitments between academics and extracurriculars. Because as we see in our performance arousal graph, we can achieve optimal functioning with mild to moderate stress, but when it becomes too high, the anxiety becomes debilitating. So taking a look at if there's anything on your child's schedule that might be able to be put aside



and modified so that they can get some more leisure and relaxation time.

Some of the things to avoid doing to not exacerbate a kiddo's anxiety is knowing that we don't need to blame them for it. This is something that's just occurring. It's a chemical misfiring of their brain and they're not in control of it. Trying to talk your child out of anxiety is not going to be helpful. And then also a common misconception is avoiding anxiety triggers will be helpful. Avoidance can actually reinforce the anxiety, and ultimately, even though it's a short-term solution, will overall increase anxiety. Some things we can try not to say are; "Just get over it." "Calm down." "Just push through it." These will invalidate your child's experience and not be as helpful as you intend to.

COVID QUESTION: Should I get help for my child's heightened anxiety from COVID-19? [Video Link](#)

We've definitely seen a large surge in families bringing in children and adolescents who previously were functioning with low levels of anxiety or maybe minimal anxiety at all. I think the, the pandemic has added so many different layers of stress to numerous family systems that sometimes it just overwhelms the entire family system and, and is too impactful on the child's life to be able to tolerate and use the adaptation skills that may have worked previously. And so I think the question becomes is this child having clinical levels of distress in their domains of life? So again, looking at how are they doing in social relationships, how are they doing in their academics and in their passions or extracurriculars? And if these areas have become impaired because of these high levels of anxiety, then it may warrant seeking professional help. And I think, again, this is a discussion you'll have in the office if you seek out an appointment with a mental health professional and you'll gauge how distressing this is. If your kiddos not thriving, then getting the treatment they need, even if it's transient, whether it be a pandemic or not, is going to allow them to get to their next stage of development successfully.