

# Identifying & Addressing Anxiety in Youth

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# Disclosure Statement

We have no actual or potential conflicts of interest in relation to this program/presentation

# Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land we live and work on is the traditional territory of the Duwamish and Coast Salish people who have never been compensated for their land. We honor and respect the Duwamish tribe and their descendants, past and present

# Identifying Anxiety

# Flavors of Anxiety

- **Anxiety is like ice cream: there are lots of different flavors**
  - **We eat them all the same way (the intervention is the same)!**
- Common themes
  - Worry about health and safety
    - Germs/contamination
  - Separating from primary caregivers or other safety figures
  - Social situations
  - Worry about grades/doing well enough
  - The unknown!
  - Failure



# Normalizing anxiety and other big emotions

Is your child experiencing anxiety during a global pandemic?

**Of course they are!!!**

► A note about anxiety:

- Anxiety is your body's natural, internal alarm system
  - It is a normal, adaptive feeling- not something to get rid of
  - Think of a fire/smoke alarm- we have to have them!
- Problematic anxiety = alarm going off when there is no fire
  - Want to recalibrate the alarm not remove the batteries

# What does anxiety look like?

- **Avoidance**
  - Not speaking, reluctance to answer in class
  - Overdoing work to avoid failure/uncertainty
- **Body reactions/complaints**
  - Frequent trips to the nurse, asks to go home, or complaints about illness that are unfounded
- **Sleep and eating difficulties**
  - Eating less at school or avoiding the cafeteria
- **Excessive reassurance seeking**
  - Checking in about rules or due dates when they are typically remembered and followed by this child
- **Inattention, poor school performance**
- **School avoidance**
  - Periods of missing school to avoid aversive experiences at school
- **Angry outbursts in effort to avoid**

What can we do about it?



# Talk it out

## ▶ **Validate their emotions- All feelings are ok**

- “You’re worried, I hear you”
- “It seems like you’re feeling angry/scared/sad”
- Tie emotions to physical experiences to make sure they don’t confuse this with being sick

## ▶ **Calm, open conversations**

- Model coping with emotions, not mastery over them
- Avoid abject reassurance
- Instead, encourage with honesty

## ▶ **Thoughts to hold on to**

- Name anxiety when you hear/see it
- Help them to be critical consumers of their own thoughts
- What are helpful and true thoughts to hold on to?

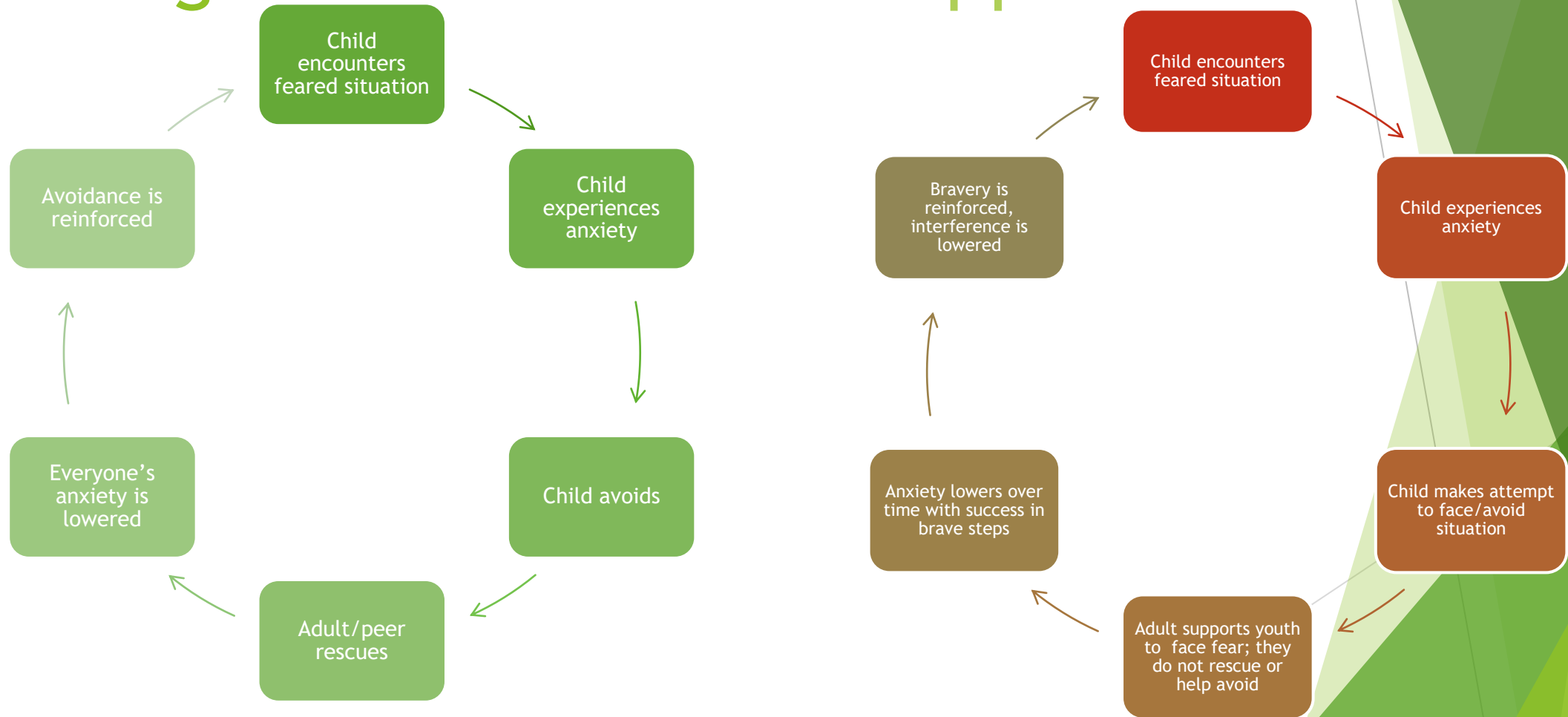
Most importantly:

# Help youth face their fears

(also known as exposures, per the cognitive behavioral therapy model)

Note: This often involves parents/caregivers facing fears, too!

# Addressing Anxiety: Moving from Avoidance to Approach



# Ways to face fears

Depends on the fear or worry!

- Practice:
  - Going up to the school building (a “dry run for day one”)
  - Getting answers wrong or making other mistakes
  - Talking to other people or ordering for yourself
  - Looking silly in front of others
  - Practicing the steps up to getting a shot

# Rating Anxiety: Subjective Units of Distress (SUDS)



The most anxious you could possibly feel!

- We experience different levels of anxiety
- Levels of anxiety can be different across situations
- Levels of anxiety can be different in the same situation
- Anxiety levels can change
- We can be successful even at high levels of anxiety!
- Caution: do not make decisions based on these ratings

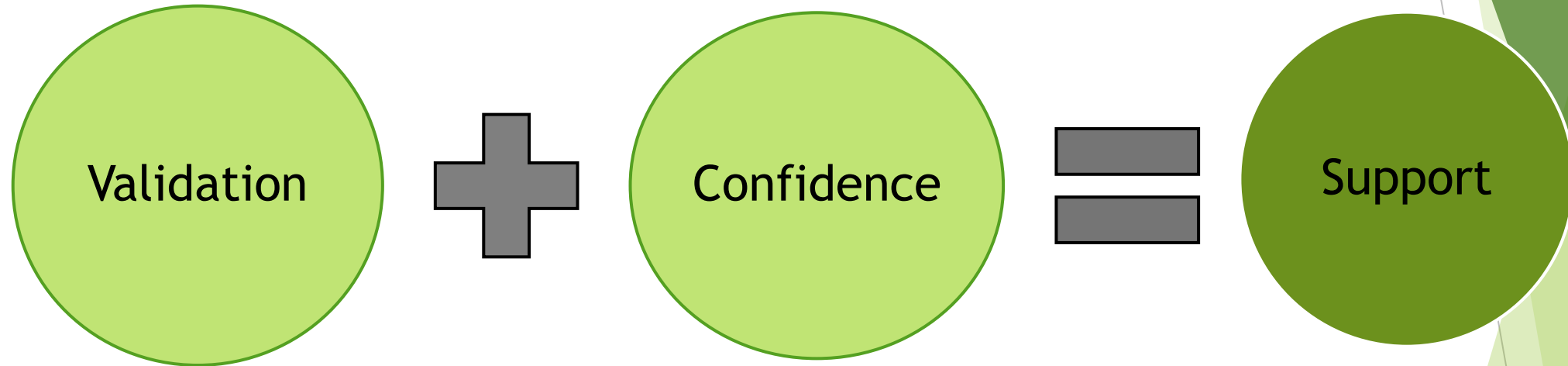


Sitting on your couch, eating ice cream, watching Netflix

# Example Fear Ladder

Exposure Step	Worry Rating
Give a full presentation in class	10
Give a 2-minute report to the class	9
Ask a question in class	7
Give a full presentation to friends and family	6
Give a short talk to friends and family	5
Prepare a short talk and present to pets	3
Talk about your day at the dinner table	2

# Supporting Youth with Anxiety



Lebowitz, 2021

“I know this is hard, and I know you can do it.”

# Remember, caregivers

- You set the tone
  - ▶ How you talk about things in front of your child
  - ▶ What you model with your behavior
- You are your child's mirror
  - ▶ How dangerous the world is
  - ▶ Their ability to cope with hard things

**This is hard- take care of yourself!**



# Remember...

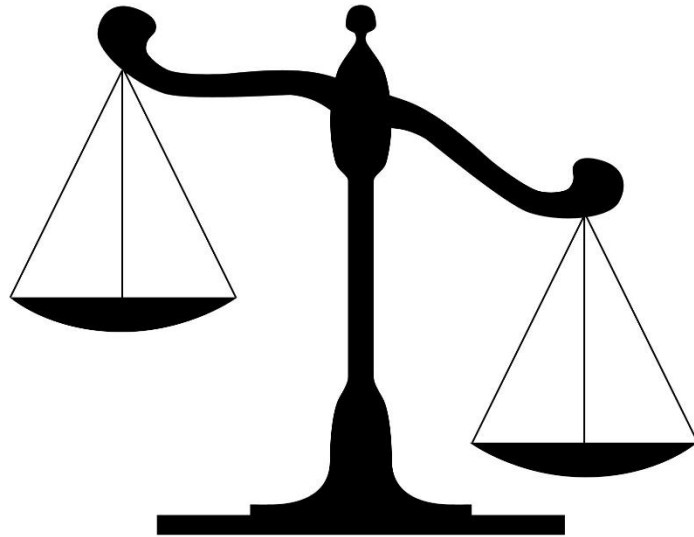
When youth take steps to face fears and choose bravery in the face of anxiety:

Praise  
Reward

The behavior you pay attention to is the one more likely to happen again

# Reinforcing/Rewarding Bravery

Positive reinforcement  
for facing their fear



Feeling of relief from  
avoiding or escaping

We want to tip the scales so that the reinforcement a child receives for facing their fears is **MORE POWERFUL** than the reinforcing feeling they get from avoiding or escaping the situation.

# Reward ideas - involve your child in the selection process!

## Money

Extra screen time

Staying up later

Sleeping in later

Picking out family dinner/dessert

New clothes

New game

New toys

Hanging out with a friend

One-on-one time with a parent

A “yes” day

Picking out a movie to watch with the family

## Social activities

A pet

Alone time

Plants

Gift card

New game/app

Choice of special day (or ½ day)

Paint room

Subscription

Trip out of town

# Supporting Youth with Anxiety at School

- ▶ Common pitfall: Tendency toward accommodation
  - ▶ Sometimes formalized in 504 plans/IEPs
  - ▶ Examples of contraindicated static accommodations:
    - ▶ Extra time
    - ▶ Not calling on a student
    - ▶ Allowing avoidance of specific activities
  - ▶ Not bad but not helpful- not primary interventions
    - ▶ Relaxation strategies
    - ▶ Journaling
  - ▶ Required- partnership from all parties (parents, teachers, specialists)

# If your child starts to refuse school:

- Set clear attendance goals with an eye for facing fears
  - List out the steps between where we are and where we are aiming
- What happens if you do and what happens if you don't
  - Tie rewards to meeting those steps on a daily basis
  - Be clear about what happens if they don't get to school
  - Must have clear criteria for “sick days” or other reasons youth would realistically be excused
- Use your attention wisely
  - Increase attention for brave behavior
  - Decrease attention for anxious avoidance
- Partner with school- who on that team can help support you?
  - Get in the door, make steps toward the classroom
  - Encourage your child with goal setting

# Setting goals at school:

<b>Name:</b>								
<b>Date:</b>								
<b>Goals</b>	Tracker	Goal	Tracker	Goal	Tracker	Goal	Tracker	Goal
1.		😊		😊		😊		😊
2.		😊		😊		😊		😊
3.		😊		😊		😊		😊
<b>Total number of 😊:</b>								
___ /12 = ___ %								
<i>Teacher's initials/signature:</i>								
<i>Additional comments:</i>								
<i>Parent signature:</i>								
<i>Home reward:</i>								

Questions?

Thank you!