

Parenting in an Age of Anxiety

A Stress and Anxiety Toolkit for Parents

A presentation by Ann Douglas

A few important facts about anxiety

Everyone experiences anxiety.

- Anxiety functions as your body's early warning system. It's designed to alert you to threats so that you can take action to keep yourself safe.
- Normal anxiety is similar to stress in that you can connect it with a particular situation or problem; it only lasts as long as the situation or problem is an issue for you; it is proportional to the situation or problem.

Anxiety becomes a problem (and may be diagnosed as an anxiety disorder)

- when it arises suddenly and unexpectedly, for no apparent reason, or is rooted in worry about something that is highly unlikely to happen;
- when it doesn't seem to be proportional to the situation or problem;
- when it is far-reaching and long-lasting (it feels impossible to control or manage and is affecting your ability to function or your enjoyment of life).

Calm yourself

- Recognize that calm is your parenting superpower. You have the emotional self-regulation skills required to make conscious and deliberate choices about your thoughts, actions, and behaviour—skills that are still just coming on stream for your child or teenager. Take stock of all the coping skills that you've developed over the years and zero in on the calming strategies that have proven to be most effective for you.
- Make a conscious effort to focus your attention in ways that leave you feeling happier and less stressed.
 - Work at become comfortable with feelings of uncertainty.
 - Accept whatever it is you're feeling.
 - Instead of focusing on how out-of-control things feel, remind yourself of all the things that are still within your control.
 - Know how to hit the brakes on unproductive worry, either by taking action on that worry or by giving yourself a mini-vacation from the worry.
 - Consider giving yourself a "worry budget."
- Find a way to make peace with whatever decisions you're being asked to make for yourself and your family right now. Your goal is to be able to say to yourself, "I made

the best decision I could with the information I had at the time” as opposed to endlessly second-guessing yourself.

Calm your child

- Do what you can to maintain the reassuring rhythm of everyday life as much as possible. We humans find comfort in our day-to-day rituals and routines.
- Encourage your child to talk about whatever it is they’re thinking and feeling. Look for opportunities to validate those feelings—to let them know that their feelings make sense—and to help them to understand that there’s no such thing as a “wrong” or “bad” emotion.
- Try not to be triggered by any annoying behaviour your child might be exhibiting. Instead of getting angry, remind yourself that behaviour is communication. Ask yourself, “What does my child really need from me right now?”
- Help your child to recognize that reaching out for support from other people is a powerful way to deal with difficult situations and overwhelming emotions. We’re wired to support one another in times of struggle.

Parent in a way you can feel good about and that will strengthen the relationship between you and your child

- Keep your big-picture parenting goals in mind: your hopes and dreams for your child, yourself, and your family.
- Learn about child development so that you can parent in a way that brings out the best in your child. Parenting is easier and less stressful when your expectations of your child reflect what’s possible at a particular stage of development.
- Understand the three things that children need most from their parents (and that is pretty much the definition of good parenting):
 1. Unconditional love and approval
 2. Warm, sensitive, and responsive parenting
 3. Support for their growing independence and emerging abilities

Give yourself permission to be a gloriously imperfect parent—and your child permission to be a gloriously imperfect kid.

- Parents don’t have to be perfect and neither do kids. We can learn and grow together. Think progress, not perfection!
- Minimize the expectations gap (the gap between the expectations you are setting for yourself and the resources you have available to meet those expectations).
- You might also want to work at modifying other people’s expectations of you—and your expectations of other people.
- Have a strategy for recognizing and steering clear of planning fallacy.
- Have strategies for minimizing role conflict (a major source of parental guilt).

- A strategy for task switching and managing interruptions
- A strategy for setting healthy boundaries in your key relationships—at work, at home, and elsewhere—to minimize feelings of guilt and overwhelm.
- Practice self-compassion. Learn about the science of self-compassion (including the far-reaching benefits to your health, relationships, and overall quality of life) and how you can tap into this powerful resource on an ongoing basis.

Recognize and celebrate your many strengths as a parent

- Consider how those strengths can be a resource to you during this challenging time.
- If you're having a hard time pinpointing your strengths, ask a friend who knows you well what words they would use to describe your parenting.

Understand that you have the opportunity to set the emotional tone for your family

- There are things you can do to help yourself and your kids to feel happier and calmer, even if everyone's worries aren't about to disappear anytime soon.
- Remind yourself that you are the key ingredient in the recipe for your child's resilience. Having at least one caring adult in your life—someone who helps you to feel safe—is what ultimately allows children to come through challenging times. You can be that safe place—that safe person—for your child.

Ann Douglas sparks conversations that matter about parenting and mental health. She is a regular contributor to CBC Radio and a bestselling parenting book author. Ann is the creator of The Mother of All Book series and the author, most recently, of *Happy Parents, Happy Kids* and *Parenting Through the Storm*. A passionate and inspiring speaker, Ann delivers keynote addresses and leads small-group workshops at health, parenting, and education conferences across the country. Her website is anndouglas.ca.