

Supporting the anxious adolescent

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Adolescence

- Early Adolescence 9 – 13 years: “exploration” when children start to separate from but still remain dependent on their parents.
- Middle Adolescence 14 – 18 years: “declaration” when they are working out who they are socially and sexually.
- Late Adolescence 19 – 25 years: “confirmation” when they are consolidating their individual identity as adults.

Adolescents

- A lot of issues can arise during the middle phase, as it can be the most chaotic.
- However, issues can arise earlier which might manifest themselves in ways such as obsessional (washing hands, placing items) or controlling (food, routines) as well as the emergence of behavioural issues (school avoidance).

What's happening with anxiety?

- According to research by Oxford University Press the word anxiety was the top word chosen by under 14s in the UK in relation to health and wellbeing in 2021.
- In a 2022 study of 11,000 adolescents in the UK they found that while most children were satisfied with life at the age of 11, the majority were extremely dissatisfied by age 14.
- The study found the most dramatic downturns between ages 11 and 14 were related to school and relationships with peers.

What's happening with anxiety?

- Studies from Ireland indicate an increase in mental health difficulties here. The number of children on CAMHS waiting lists increased from 2,755 in December 2020 to 4,434 at the end of February 2023 (*The Irish Times*, 2 June 2023).
- The evidence from studies and anecdotally is that there is an increase in anxiety among adolescents.
- What is your experience in your school? In what ways is it (or is it?) manifesting in your schools and what do you think are the causes?

What's happening with anxiety?

- The sense of belonging in school among 15-year-olds declined significantly in Ireland between 2003 and 2022, by a margin well in excess of the average for most other developed countries based on data collected by the OECD for its international Pisa rankings. (*The Irish Times*, 11 Jan 2024, Pasi Sahlberg article).

Anxiety – what is it?

- Anxiety is an internal response (both cognitively and physiologically to a perceived or imagined threat). It is different to fear which is a response to an actual threat.
- Anxiety is a sign that we are becoming overwhelmed by stress. It can stem from low self-esteem, perfectionism or harsh self-criticism.

Anxiety – what is it?

- For adolescents there is also the pressure from school, peers, parents and society.
- Social Media? Research so far seems to show a definite connection between anxiety and phone use. Teenagers who are the heaviest users report the biggest mental health problems. In one study, 40 per cent of girls who spent more than five hours a day on social media showed symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Anxiety – what is it?

- Yet no one can say for sure if phones cause anxiety or if anxious children are drawn to use their phones more.
- What the experts do agree upon is that lack of sleep can contribute to anxiety and having phones at night can lead to a reduced amount of sleep.
- Research concludes that teenagers need about nine hours' sleep a night, but the average 15-year-old gets only 7.8 hours, and some teenagers markedly less.

Anxiety – what is it?

- Research in Ireland and elsewhere shows students are spending up to eight hours a day on digital devices such as smartphones amid evidence that it is disrupting young people's sleep or distracting them from teaching and learning. (*The Irish Times*, 11 Jan 2024, article on NAPD/IPPN Symposium with Pasi Sahlberg).

Anxiety – what is it?

- Anxiety needs to be distinguished from being stressed at times (which is normal), or being worried at times (which is normal), or feeling a bit overwhelmed at times (which is normal).
- What distinguishes normal worries/feelings from more serious anxiety is how long the symptoms exist and their intensity.
- Does it affect behaviour, not coming to school, going out, panic attacks, repetitive thoughts, not able to sleep?

Anxiety – our response and experience

- Do we/students/parents/teachers use the word anxiety when we actually mean something else? What are your thoughts/experiences?
- What's your response to the issue of anxiety when it's raised in schools?
- How do you deal with anxiety, if you experience it?
- Exercise – cognitive and physiological effects.

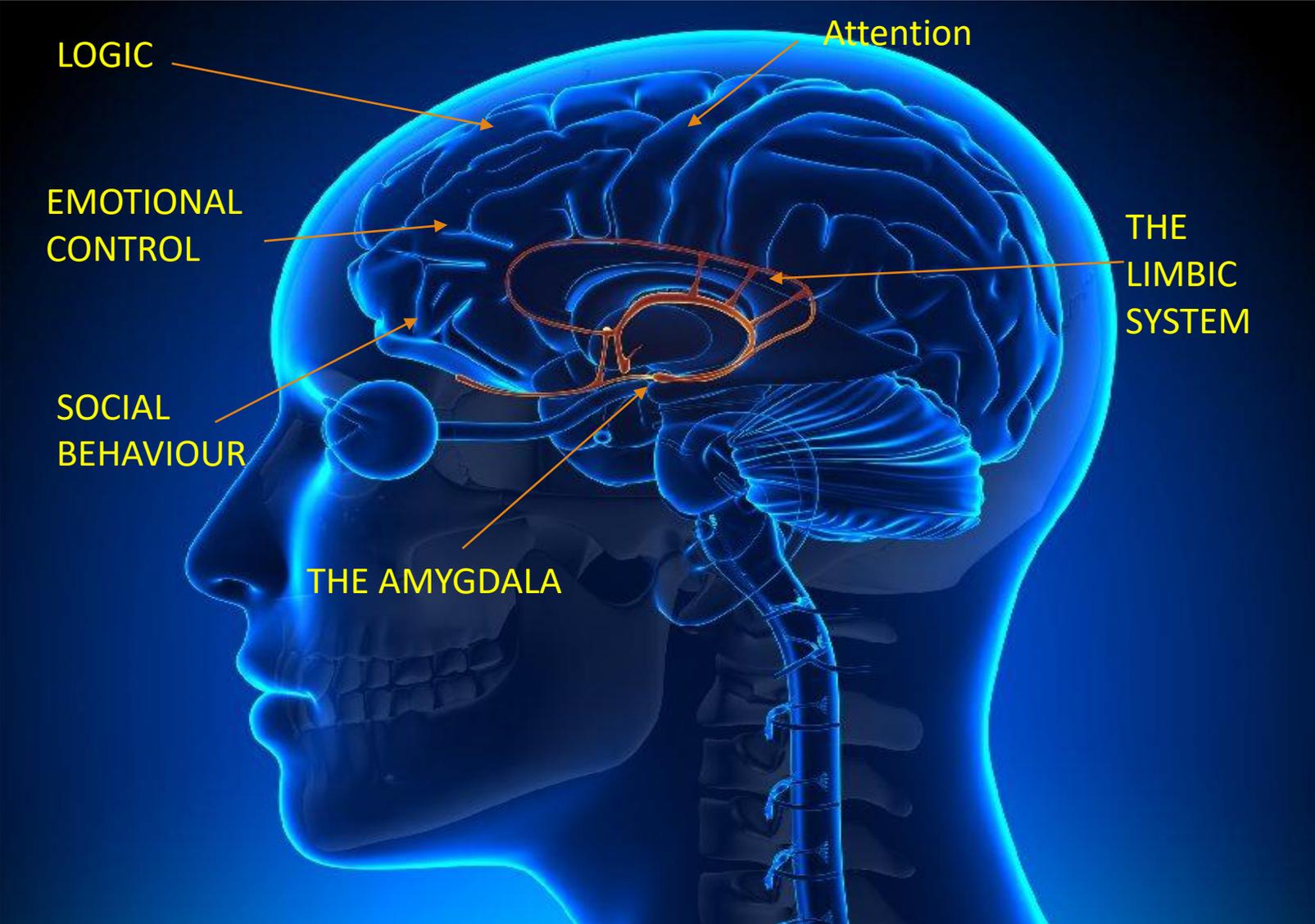
Supporting by understanding and awareness

- Anxiety is never the issue in and of itself – it's a sign of something deeper going on.



The adolescent (and non-adolescent) brain

- We have emotional and logical parts to our brain.
- Problems occur when there is a breakdown in communication between these parts.
- It helps us to understand what is going on for those with anxiety if we know a little about the frontal part (logical) and limbic part (emotional) part of the brain.



LOGIC

Attention

EMOTIONAL CONTROL

THE LIMBIC SYSTEM

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

THE AMYGDALA

The Limbic System

- It deals with memories (hippocampus), pleasure (nucleus accumbens) and stress (amygdala).
- In the adolescent brain, this limbic part is more predominant than the frontal cortex (not fully developed yet) so when we as adults look for a reason for the adolescent's anxiety we are asking for a logical reason from a part of the brain that does not deal in logic.

The Amygdala

- Is at the heart of our emotional brain.
- It is a key player in anxiety.
- It is involved in processing our emotions (especially negative ones).
- It deals in threat (real or perceived).
- It produces three basic responses via the release of adrenalin and noradrenalin: fight, flight or freeze.



The Amygdala

- The flight response will look for safety behaviours such as getting out of class, not going to class, not participating in school.
- It thinks it is helping by those doing things, but in effect what it's doing is the opposite because there is no danger, it's only the thought of danger - but this is irrelevant to the amygdala!

Practical support

- One of the ways that we can help is by our knowing what is going on from a brain point of view. When the adolescent is not in a state of anxiety we can help by explaining to them what we know is happening to them (this is called psycho-education) and this helps.
- However, when they are in a state of anxiety don't get into what is causing their anxiety – they may not be able to answer and it may make them worse.
- We can help the amygdala to calm down. Think of the guard dog!

Practical support - immediate

- But in a state of anxiety logical reasoning is no use so the most immediate way (generally) the system can be calmed down is by getting the adolescent draw attention to their breath, to calming their breathing, breathing deeply and slowly.
- Get them to draw their attention to heartbeat, muscle tension, other physical sensations.

Practical support - immediate

- If this doesn't work then instead of getting them to notice inwards, get them to notice outwards – ask them to notice something about the room, the time on the clock, the items in the room/corridor, the noises that can be heard – and then you can move back if necessary to getting them to look inwards, but it may not be necessary!
- Be aware of how you are in the situation because if you are anxious in it then it won't help.

Practical support – long term

- One of the ways that the amygdala is calmed is by facing/staying in the situation so that it learns that there is no actual danger. What does this mean practically in schools? Look at what's being done now in your schools in light of the knowledge you now have.
- That the feelings will eventually pass and that the reality is not as bad as the worry which induces the anxiety in the first instance

Practical support – long term

- One of the way to help the anxious adolescent is by helping them to realise that their thoughts are not factual and in fact may be quite unhelpful to them. This is called anxious thinking. Many teenagers can experience ANTs (Automatic Negative Thoughts) which in turn affect their feelings and behaviours.



Supporting the anxious teenager

- Examples of anxious thinking might include
- Mind reading (Everyone thinks I'm stupid)
- Catastrophic thinking (I am going to fail every test)
- Negative self-labelling (I am rubbish)
- Negative futuring (Life will never work out for me)
- Black and white thinking (Others get it right, but I always get it wrong)
- Thoughts are not facts!

Supporting the anxious teenager

- However, an understanding of CBT can help parents to help their teenagers. Thoughts are not facts!



Practical support – long term

- Help them to learn to rationalise their worries by identifying the thoughts, articulating them, breaking them down and challenging them.
- Encourage them to problem-solve ways to approach what they are stressed about. Help them to think about times when they have managed stress before.

Practical support – long term

- Help them to accept the things they cannot change and so understand that unhelpful racing thoughts can be ignored or that they can distract themselves from overthinking by engaging with something they enjoy.
- Get them to consider what advice they would give to a friend if they were similarly stressed.

Practical support – long term

- Adolescents are very present focused so it can be hard for them to know and understand that things will pass, get better, that there can be solutions and they will come through things

Practical support – long term

- One other useful way of helping them deal with their anxiety is to point out to them that **part of them** is anxious at certain times. Saying part of them is anxious can help give them a certain amount of separation from the anxiety – they are not their anxiety. It's a part of them but not the whole part.

Parents play a part

- Sometimes the anxiety the adolescent is experiencing can be in part due to experiencing the anxiety of someone at home. Remember the analogy of the fire alarm.
- When parents get in contact with us in school about their child's anxiety it's good to be aware of this.

Finally ...

- Like a lot of things that we come across we try to do our best in the best way we can so it's important to remember that.

THANK YOU

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