

Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog

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Epilepsy is more than just seizures. Anxiety disorders are a common co-existing condition that accompany epilepsy. We all experience feelings of anxiety and nervousness. Anxiety becomes a disorder when the feelings are frequent or intense, are produced by trivial things or nothing at all, and interfere with our functioning.

The first sign of an anxiety disorder may appear right after the initial diagnosis of epilepsy or after their initial seizure. The fear and anxiety of having a seizure in public or around friends and family is real. Those with epilepsy never know when or where a seizure will take place. A person with epilepsy has a great fear of social rejection to their condition. This fear really rears its ugly head during the teenage years. Additional sources of anxiety may come from the need to remember to always take their medication. A big source of anxiety for teens revolves around their inability to get their driver's license, and always having to depend on others to get around. Several other factors can be part of the cause of anxiety in children with epilepsy includes psychological stress related to the epilepsy, medication effects, and associated neurological or psychiatric disorders.

When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, actually exacerbate the youngster's anxiety. It happens when parents, anticipating a child's fears, try to protect her from them. So, how does a parent help their child with epilepsy escape the cycle of anxiety? Below are some tips to take into consideration.

1. The goal is not to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety is not to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It is to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they are anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.

2. Do not avoid things just because they make a child anxious.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that is how she feels—and her parents whisk her out of there, or remove the thing she is afraid of, she is learned that coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

3. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.

You cannot promise a child that his fears are unrealistic—that he won't fail a test, that he will have fun ice skating, or that another child won't laugh at him during show & tell. But you can express confidence that he is going to be okay, he will be able to manage it, and that, as he faces

his fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives him confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you are not going to ask him to do something he cannot handle.

4. Respect feelings, but do not empower them.

It is important to understand that validation does not always mean agreement. So if a child is [terrified about going to the doctor](#) because she's due for a shot, you don't want to belittle her fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic, help her understand what she is anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

5. Avoid asking leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about his feelings, but try not to ask leading questions— "Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?" To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: "How are you feeling about the science fair?"

6. Avoid reinforcing your child's fears.

What you do not want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: "Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of." Let us say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time she's around a dog, you might be anxious about how she will respond, and you might [unintentionally send a message](#) that she *should*, indeed, be worried.

7. Encourage your child to tolerate their anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what he wants or needs to do. It is really encouraging him to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the "habituation curve"—it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that is how we get over our fears.

8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.

When we are afraid of something, the hardest time is really *before* we do it. So, another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is [nervous about going to a doctor's appointment](#), you don't want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that's likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

9. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who's [anxious about separating from her parents](#) might worry about what would happen if they did not come to pick her up. So, we talk about that. If your mom does not come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? "Well, I would tell the coach my mom's not here." And what do you think the coach would do? "Well, he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me." A child who is afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. For some kids, [having a plan](#) can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see [how you cope with anxiety yourself](#). Kids are perceptive, and they are going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you cannot handle the stress or the anxiety. I am not saying to pretend that you do not have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.

Editor's Note: The Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog will be distributed and posted weekly.
Always remember – **CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY!**

Steve.Hutton@epilepsy-ohio.org