Recognising and Responding to Anxiety

As the return to school approaches, the prospect of being around others may be daunting after the experience of lockdown. Some, whether adult, teenager or child, may have spent extended periods shielding, isolating from their friends and family. Even those viewing the return with anticipation and excitement may also suffer with underlying fears about safety. Anxiety is not always easy to spot and can be masked by other emotions and behaviours and we may not recognise the fears that sit beneath. Some common things to look out for.....



CONTROLLING

- An urgent need to be in charge or to call the shots.
- Ordering others around
- Taking control of or monopolising resources
- Need to be noticed



CONFRONTATIONAL

- Argumentative
- Finding fault or criticising others
- Oppositional
- Rigid



EXPLOSIVE OUTBURSTS

- Extreme responses and emotions
- Tantrums
- Loss of self control
- Emotional overwhelm
- Irritability



ACTIVE AVOIDANCE

- Feigned busyness
- Distraction strategies
- Procrastination and excuses
- Absenteeism, truancy lateness
- Last minute changes to plans and agreements
- Leaving the room

Outward Mobilisation

Fight or Flight Responses





REFUSAL

- Outright refusal - no, I won't
- Silent, stubborn, obstinate
- Claiming boredom, lack of interest



AGITATION

- Need for movement, repetative actions
- Inapporpriate humour
- Constant chatter
- Fleeting attention
- Restless, unable to settle or focus



DIFFICULTY SEPARATING

- Tearful
- Clingy
- Seeking attention from others
- Overwhelming distress

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SOMATISATION

- Expression of anxiety as physical sympotms in the body
  - Headache
  - Nausea
  - Stomach ache
  - Sickness or diarrhoea

OVER COMPLIANCE

- Agrees without thought
- Robotically good to avoid detection
- Discounts own needs to see to others
- Overly helpful



WITHDRAWN

- Distant, aloof, hard to reach
- Avoids interaction with others
- Stays on the outside of groups
- Low energy
- Disengaged, non participative



Inward

Mobilisation/Immobilisation

Dissociative/Freeze/Flight

Responses





INEFFECTIVE SELF-REGULATION

- Self harm
- Substance misuse
- Over exercising/activity
- Difficulty in acknowledging the need for or accepting help



DISRUPTED EATING

- Loss of appetite
- Controlling eating
- Over eating to obscure/cover up anxiety
- Obsession or aversion to particular foods
- Picky eating



DISRUPTED SLEEP

- Waking early
- Night terrors and nightmares
- Difficulty falling asleep
- Bedwetting

Ways of Responding

- **Notice , describe and wonder aloud** - *'It seems like it's really important for you to feel like you're in control of things right now, I'm wondering why that might be?'*
- **Offer supportive care** *'what could I do that would be helpful right now?' 'Would it be helpful if I.....'*
- **Accept and validate the perspective of the individual, even if this is different from your understanding of events** *'so you are letting me know just how awful you are feeling about this, I can understand why you would feel that way'*
- **Avoid distracting, minismising or problem solving for the individual**
- **Offer opportunities to move, teach self regulation strategies and practice these together**
- **Offer a lower stimulus environment - a quieter area with fewer people, a space outside**
- **Show genuine interest** - *'can you help me understand how this is for you?'*
- **Be conscious of your own breathing and body language - make it audible and slow it down, stay steady and regualted**
- **Teach the neuroscience of how the body and brain responds to fear - this helps to normalise and remove any shame**
- **Be warm, empathic and non-judgemental**
- **Hold limits and boundaries whilst maintaining connection - gentle on the individual , firm on behaviour and expectation**
- **Offer sensory breaks and a sensory diet if appropriate to support regulation**

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