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How Mindfulness Rewires the Anxious Brain (excerpt)

We used to believe that the thinking part of our brain, known as the cortex, was largely responsible for creating anxiety. But now neuroscientists realize that the amygdala, our fear center, plays a key role that helps explain why mindfulness shows such promise for easing anxiety. Here's how a stress-prone brain and a more mindful one react to one of the most anxiety-inducing experiences we face: public speaking. Anxiety from speaking in front of a crowd starts in either the amygdala (via flight-or-fight physical sensations) or the cortex (via thoughts). It ends up involving both. A person trained in mindfulness can short-circuit anxiety from both directions. In a situation like public speaking, the stress-prone brain's amygdala reacts to the crowd as a threat. It might have learned to fear public speaking from a

Protecting Kids from Child Sexual Abuse

It's the elephant in the room of parenting topics: child sexual abuse. And it's no surprise parents have difficulty addressing it—especially with their children—because the statistics are so horrifying and sobering, you don't want to believe them. Approximately one in six boys and one in four girls are sexually abused before the age of 18, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Ninety percent of children who are victims of abuse know their abuser, according to government reports. Sixty percent of child victims are sexually abused by the people a family trusts. Nearly forty percent of child victims are abused by older or more powerful children. So what exactly can parents do? TODAY Parents asked experts for guidance on how to confront a threat that is still something many people feel “could never happen” to their child. “What the statistics really should be telling us is that...all of us who care about kids and mental health and communities ought to be doing something about it” says Janet Rosenzweig, author of *The Sex-Wise Parent* and executive director of The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. Rosenzweig and Katelyn Brewer, CEO of the child sexual abuse prevention organization, Darkness to Light, offer this advice: **Talk to you kids about sex, early and often.** Rosenzweig says she's always surprised at how parents find it difficult to talk about sex with their kids. “They can talk about poop and vomit...but for some reason, sex is more embarrassing than other bodily functions,” she says. Start when kids are young enough to name their body parts and teach them proper anatomical terms. (Yes, call a penis a penis, a vagina a vagina, an elbow an elbow.) Rosenzweig suggests making a “Family Values About Sex” checklist of questions and go through it with the family once a year. When kids are younger, start with questions like, “What terms are we going to use?” And “Who gets to see

(Anxious Brain continued)

previous bad experience, or it may be a deep-seated fear of becoming rejected by our clam. Evolutionary scientists suggest we may be hard-hard-wired to interpret eyes watching us as potentially dangerous. Either way, the amygdala creates a fear response, which activates stress hormones. The cortex looks for an explanation for our stress and tells us we're afraid of performing badly even if the real cause is rooted in at the amygdala. That can lead to anxious thoughts like, "I'm going to make a fool of myself"—triggering a spiral of worry. The cortex can't simply "reason" away the anxiety, say, by reminding us the audience isn't out to get us. If fear's coming from the amygdala, it has to be addressed there. The amygdala of a person trained in mindfulness is less likely to respond to a neutral situation like public speaking as threatening, perhaps because his or her amygdala is actually smaller and less reactive. What's more, in the moment of speaking, the deep breathing and relaxation that are habitual in meditators calm down the amygdala to insulate it from stress. The cortex of the more mindful brain has weaker connections to the amygdala, making it less likely for any hard-wired reactivity to overwhelm the logical part of the attention centers of the cortex, which creates a distance from the anxiety.. that allows us to experience anxiety with less judgement. **Source: Mindful, April 2019, Vol. 7, No 1, mindful.org**

(Protecting Kids continued) in what stage of undress?" As kids age, the questions change accordingly. Use as many teachable moments as you can find. If your child wants to be in a bedroom by themselves, explain it as a matter of privacy versus secrecy saying: "Privacy means you get to do it by yourself but mommy and daddy know about it. Secrecy means that we don't know about it, and our family doesn't do secrecy." **Teach kids about arousal (as uncomfortable as that may be).** Arousal might be one of the most important physiological responses related to sexual abuse that our kids need to know about. Explain why touching certain parts of their body makes them feel the way it does and who is allowed to do it to them. (The answer: No one but themselves can touch their mouth, their chest and their private parts.) "Arousal is autonomic, a reflex that your body does in response to a stimuli," explains Rosenzweig. "But one of the things that makes kids so vulnerable to being exploited is when you have a really skilled molester, they go out of their way to make sure their victims experience arousal, which feels good. And when kids equate arousal with love, they are sitting ducks for bad guys." Ultimately, kids need to know from an early age that they have agency over their own bodies. That means parents should never insist that kids kiss or hug people, whether it's the grabby uncle at Thanksgiving or the cool babysitter. **Kids are never too old to talk about sex and sexual abuse.** If you feel like you "missed the boat" continuing to talk to teens about sex, it's not too late. Nearly 40 percent of kids are abused by older children, and child on child sexual abuse has grown from 40 to 50 percent in the last 10 years, according to research by Darkness to Light. (The younger child in this scenario is in the 10-year-old range.) Much of these incidents are related to pornographic content online. Brewer says kids are "going to get access to online content anyway. And they don't know what to do with their hormones once they see that content. So they test it with a younger, accessible child. They don't mean to traumatize — they aren't pedophiles— but the child is traumatized because something is taken from them they didn't consent to." "As much as we'd like to put our kids in a bubble, it's not possible," she says. "Actually sitting down and having that uncomfortable conversation with your kid is going to help prevent things in the long run because... they are going to understand that you are a safe person to talk to and you aren't going to freak out that they've said the word sex to

(Protecting Kids continued) you because you brought it to them first.” Also if you have teens that won’t entertain a conversation, Brewer suggest different ways to communicate. “Send them a link via text to an article,” she says. “That’s a great way to continue to have the conversation without even having it.”

Pay attention to who your kid is spending time with. Kids are going to be in situations where they may have one-on-one with individuals, whether it’s friends, teachers, coaches or sitters. So how do you not get paranoid with every person your child is with? For starters, check in with your kid in detail after they’ve been alone with someone, says Rosenzweig. “Keep the line of communication open. It doesn’t have to be in a paranoid way. Just ask, ‘What did you do?’ ‘Did you have fun?’ ‘Who was there?’ Having such routine conversations all make a child feel OK to tell you if there is ever an incident where they do feel uncomfortable. Brewer adds that while it’s important to minimize opportunity to incidents of child sex abuse by avoiding isolated situations with adults or other youths, it’s best to take a rational approach and trust your gut. “If someone is spending considerable one-on-one time with your child, redirect their energy. Make them get together in public places. A lot of sexual abuse happens in the car. Don’t let them be on the car together,” she says. **Know that stranger danger is a myth.** “We have grown up with ‘stranger danger’ being forced down our throats,” says Brewer, referring to the idea that kids should avoid strangers to be safe from predatory activity. The reality: 90 percent of people who are abused are abused by people who they know and trust. “If that doesn’t make you pay attention to what is happening in your own back yard, I don’t know what will,” says Brewer. People who abuse children look and act just like everyone else. They go out of their way to appear trustworthy, and seek out settings where they can gain easy access to children. **Educate yourself on the signs of child sexual abuse.** This is always the hardest with parents, says Brewer, because there aren’t always specific physical signs.” Trauma manifests itself differently in everyone,” Brewer says. Focus on the extremes, she says. “If there is an extreme reaction to something, trust your gut and know something may be wrong.” One example is the student who all of a sudden is growing their hair out, gaining weight, wearing baggy clothes, dabbling in substances. They are doing things that are going to hide the pain, hide themselves from what’s actually happening. “They do that to try and look unattractive, so their abuser won’t want them anymore,” says Brewer. **Know the three words to say if a child tells you of abuse.** If your child, or any child you know, comes to you with a potential disclosure of being a sex abuse victim, there is only thing to say: “I believe you.” “Those three words alone start a conversation off the right say,” says Brewer. “Don’t interrogate them. There are professional who know how to do that. Making your child relive that trauma is not helpful to you, to the child, or to the professional. They are the ones that are going to ask the right question to get the information they need.” Rosenzweig adds that one of the toughest things for parents is to not feel guilty upon hearing of a potential abuse situation. But, you should never make a kid feel bad about it. The response should be all about thanking your child for being brave enough to tell you about it. Ultimately, says Rosenzweig: “The amount of courage it took to break the spell and seek help is nothing in short of heroic.” **Source: Kavita Varma-White is a Senior Editor for [TODAY.com/TODAY Parents/TODAY Parenting Team](https://www.today.com/TODAY-Parents/TODAY-Parenting-Team). After a career in newspapers, including the (Fort Lauderdale, FL) Sun-Sentinel and the (Wilmington, DE) News Journal, she became a digital editor for Red Tricycle and [MSNBC.com](https://www.msnbc.com). She is the parent of two teens and resides in Bellevue, WA.**

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Physical Activity May Lessen Depression Symptoms

Researchers found that how much sleep you get, how much energy you have, and how much physical activity you do can affect feelings of depression. The findings suggest that physical activity may improve your mood and sleep. Physical activity can help improve your health and quality of life. Not getting enough can increase your risk for some diseases and mental health issues. A research team looked at the relationship between sleep, physical activity, energy, and people's moods. They collected data about physical activity and sleep over two weeks using devices worn around the wrist. Participants used the mobile devices to rate their mood and energy levels four times a day. Ratings ranged from "very happy" to "very sad" for mood and "very tired" to "very energetic" for their energy levels. They also rated their sleep and daily activities. The team found that physical activity improved people's moods later in the day. The effect was even larger for those

with bipolar disorder, a mood disorder that has periods of feeling extremely "up" to feeling very "down" and depressed. Physical activity also made people feel energetic and affected their sleep. Feeling tired and getting too much sleep decreased people's physical activity. But their moods during the day didn't change how much physical activity or sleep they got later. "The research team and I are currently conducting additional studies to understand these complex interactions better," says Dr Kathleen Merikangas, a mental health researcher at NIH.

Source: NIH News in Health National Institutes of Health, Dept. of Health and Human Services, newsinhealth.nih.gov, March 2019.

