

Strategies for Anxiety Management at School

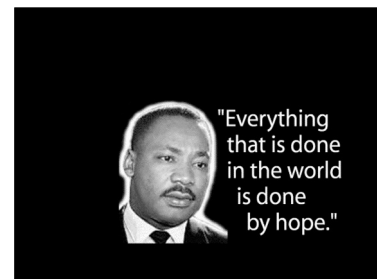
NEUSHA Conference - November 7, 2023



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BEST HOPES

You will find that this material resonates with you and that you feel more confident to manage anxiety when it shows up during the school day.



2

Agenda

1

Overview of
Anxiety

2

Common
Pitfalls

3

3 Es of Anxiety
Management

4

Cognitive
Patterns

5

Self-
Care

3

3

Human **BINGO**

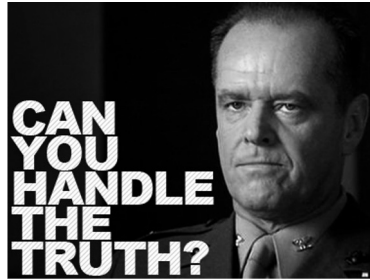
- If what is called out applies to you, shout BINGO!



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Anxiety Truths



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- Dealing with anxiety is exhausting.
- Some things adults do to help the situation can unintentionally make things worse.
- There are many helpful things adults can do to support with the management of anxiety.

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Anxiety = Most Common Disorder in U.S. & World

- The pandemic certainly put a spotlight on the already rising anxiety disorder rates from pre-pandemic.
- Anxiety is the most frequent reason parents bring children to mental health provider.
- 1 to 8-10 kids have a diagnosable anxiety disorder – estimate only.
- 75-80% of children with anxiety have another psychiatric disorder - there is a strong link to depression.

6

6

Risk Factors for Anxiety

- Genetics (Approximately 30-40%)
- Biological (Quick Activation of Amygdala/Hippocampus & Increased Cortisol)
- Temperament (Slow to Warm & Overly Conscientious)
- Parental Overinvolvement, Conflict, Restriction of Autonomy
- Trauma
- Stress/Life Events
- Social-Technological Issues

Is it NATURE? YES!
Is it NUTURE? YES!

7

7

School Contributors to Anxiety

- Environmental factors such as size of school & level of structure
- Teaching approaches/expectations, including homework
- School culture
- Level of parent communication
- Quality of relationships with peers
- Quality of relationships with staff – need for positive regard is key!

8

8

Behavioral Manifestations in the Classroom

- Sleeps
- Presents as idle
- Asks 'what if' questions
- Has difficulty with attention
- Shows perfectionism with work
- Reports many somatic complaints/"stomach hurts"
- Presents as unable to access known material
- Shuts down/detached - "never mind"
- Demonstrates noncompliance
- Is restless
- Doesn't volunteer
- Sits in the back row
- Attempts to leave classroom
- Regression with transitions
- Refuses school/classes outright

9

Anxiety Wants:

Certainty

• Anxiety wants to know EVERYTHING that's going to happen ALL the time.

Comfort

• And, it wants to feel relaxed and safe ALL of the time.

10

Our Strategy:

Acceptance

. Acknowledge that anxiety exists
& it won't be judged.

Confidence

. And, we have a belief that anxiety
can be managed by our students.

11

11

1. He/She has to _____ &
he/she's getting anxious.

2. He/She wants me to make
him/her feel better.

3. I'll just tell him/her what
he/she needs to hear.

4. That seemed to do the trick!

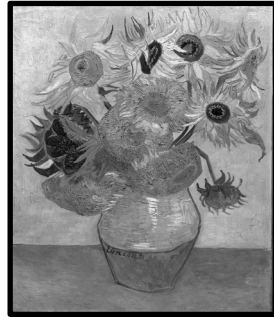
5. But now there are more questions.

6. I think we'll just skip it.
He/She can't handle it.

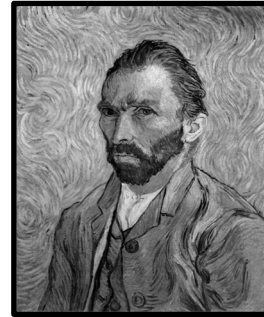
**HOW
ADULTS
REINFORC
E THE
PROBLEM**

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Vincent
van Gogh



"If you hear a voice within you say,
'You cannot paint,' then by all means **paint**,
and that voice will be silenced."

13

13

What's our job as caring adults?

- Help students tolerate uncertainty
- Help students tolerate being uncomfortable

Model skills – Teach skills – Provide opportunities to practice
skills



14

14

Three Common Mistakes



1.



Giving
reassurance

2.



Making
accommodation
s

3.



Getting caught
up in the
content trap

15

15

1. Reassurance



- Reassuring feels like compassionate and helpful advice, yet it's actually giving more attention to the anxiety.
- Instead of providing reassurance and answering the same question over and over...
 - Externalize it: "Sounds like the worry is talking. How can you deal with that? What can you say to the worry?"
 - Confront anxiety: "You might _____, we don't know what is going to happen. Everyone feels uncomfortable sometimes. You can deal with uncertainty."

16

16

2. Accommodations



- Making accommodations puts anxiety in charge.
- We don't want to step in and make things easier to anxiety.
- Crutches are designed to **temporarily** support us when we are weak while we are building up strength. Pay attention to the use/misuse of "anxiety crutches" - the ways that may be helping your student avoid new/challenging situations; or ways that students restrict their activities in order to remain safe.

17

17

Common School Accommodations

- Visits to guidance office/nursing office/preferred staff members
- Calls home/preferred supports
- Permission to avoid certain environments (i.e. gyms, lunchrooms, stairwells, buses, etc.)
- Late arrivals/Early pick-ups
- Extra time for assignments
- Reduced workload
- Access to staff discretion (i.e. only need to present to teacher, separate area for work/break, allowed to wear hoodie, notice of drills, etc.)

18

18

3. Content Trap

- The content is not really important because anxiety does the same thing over and over.
- Need to start talking with child about the process of worry. "It sounds like that's the worry showing up; That worry is really bossing you around right now – how are you going to quiet it? How can you ignore it? How can you get the worry further away?"
- Practice and model stepping back.



19

19



Core Teaching - 7 Puzzle Pieces



1. Expect worry.
2. Talk to your worry.
3. Be unsure and uncomfortable on purpose.
4. Breathe.
5. Know what you want.
6. Bridge back to your successes.
7. Take action on your plan.



20

20

The Three Es

- **Expect** worry to show up

- Normal reaction, don't avoid it – expect it!

- **Externalize** the worry

- Get distance, don't believe everything it says: Just because you think it, it doesn't make it so.

- **Experiment**

- The only way to really help and retrain your brain is to be able to go out and do things. Anxiety loves avoidance so you must start doing and retrain the amygdala to *feel the anxiety & then feel the success* that follows by managing it.



21

21

Expect: Expect worry

- Take home message: Don't be surprised for worry to show up when you are doing something new or different; when you are unsure about plans; and when you have a lot of "what if" questions.
- Think about common times worry shows up.
- Respond with something like:
 - "Of course worry showed up today!"
 - "It's no surprise that worry is here today!"

- Worry is
NOT -

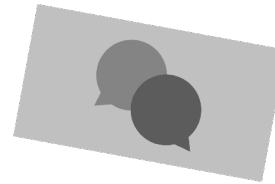


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Externalize: Talk to your worry

- Take home message: Let the worry know with words that it isn't in charge.
- First step: Name it! We want to externalize it and give it life/character.
- We have many parts...recognize the worry part.



23

23

Name of your worry & a list ten character details

My worry's name is _____.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

24

24

Three ways to talk to your worry



1. Expect It

- "Oh worry...I figured you would show up." "Of course, you're here worry - I'm trying something new." "You usually show up at these times, so I am not surprised by you."

2. Take Care Of It

- "I'm going to be feeling a little nervous and then it'll be over..." "I'm safe even though I feel scared." "I've felt this before and I have gotten through it."

3. Boss It Around

- "Knock it off! Stop trying to scare me!" "I am taking charge now and I am not going to listen to you!" "You are being very clever now worry, but I am not falling for your tricks!"

25

25

Index Card – Talking to Worry

- What are three things you can say to your worry when it shows up?

1. " _____ . "

2. " _____ . "

3. " _____ . "

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Luca – Silenzio Bruno



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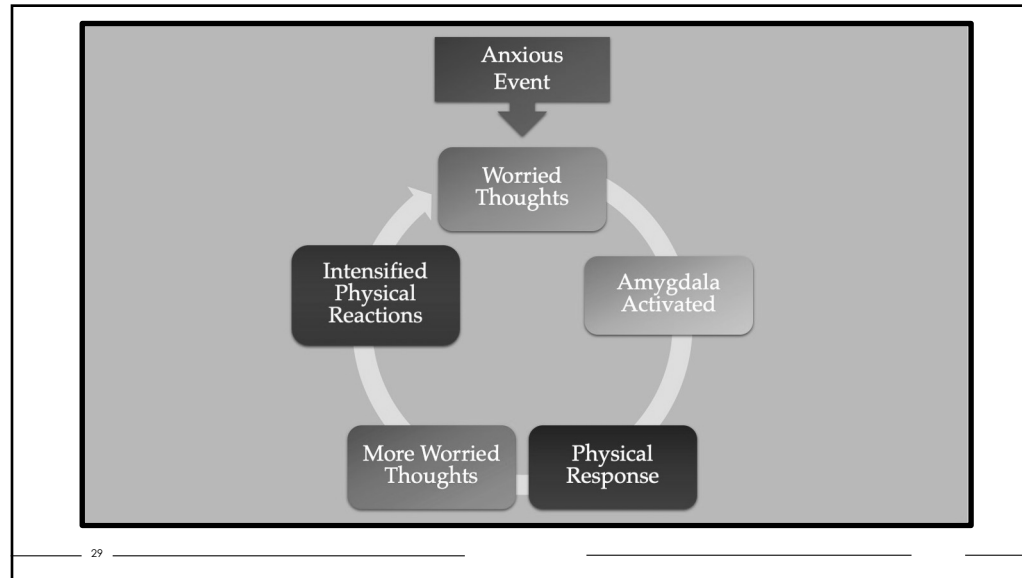


Experiment: Be unsure and uncomfortable on purpose

- Take home message: "I am willing to feel unsure and uncomfortable on purpose." Acting 'as if' is ok!
- Step into situations of discomfort and uncertainty. Then, hang out there long enough for the brain to relearn that it is not an emergency – give amygdala new information.

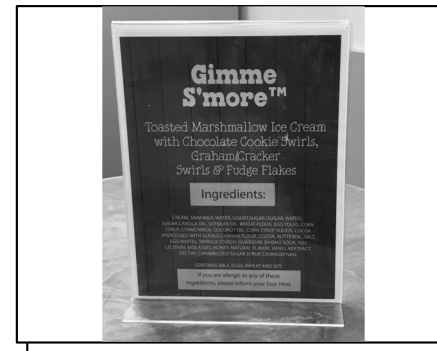
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Which would you choose?



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What's the best thing for brain health?

- PHYSICAL EXERCISE – MOVE YOUR BODY!
- Light exercise, even a 20 minute walk a few times a week if you can, is as good for mild to moderate depression as medications.
- Anxiety, focus and sleep also improve after exercise.
- Peter Levine, PhD (Trauma Researcher) suggests that deliberately shaking the body, like animals in nature after a fight, can shake off the stress response...dancing and rocking can serve the same purpose as well.

Source: How We Grow Through What We Go Through by Christopher Willard, PsyD

31

31

Breath = The Nervous System's Remote Control

- Mood can impact our breath, but the inverse is also true: as we adjust our breath, we can shift our mood.
- Our breath is one place where we have conscious control over a part of our autonomic nervous system, unlike heartbeat or digestion.
- Most research has landed on an ideal breath rate somewhere between 4-6 breaths per minute. i.e. 5.5 second inhale/exhale. (Research on 9/11 survivors found their depression and anxiety significantly reduced when using this breathing ratio.)
- Examples = Chants indigenous to Africa, Asia, and the Americas; Latin Ave Maria; & google songs 60 bpm.

Source: How We Grow Through What We Go Through by Christopher Willard, PsyD

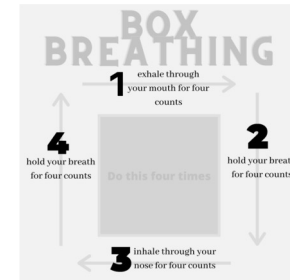
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32



Take a Breath

- Hands on Head –
 - Fleet Maull, PhD (associated with trauma-sensitive mindfulness/prison work) recommends putting hands behind your head and leaning back as you breathe...without much effort, this posture stretches the vagus nerve; deepens/slows/regulates your breath.
- Counting Breathing = Deliberate Breathing
 - 7/11 – inhale 7 seconds, exhale 11 seconds.
 - Box breathing – inhale, hold, exhale, hold 4 seconds each.



33

33

COMMON
COGNITIVE
PATTERNS
ASSOCIATED
WITH
ANXIETY



RIGID



GLOBAL



CATASTOPHIC



PERMANENT



RUMINATION

34



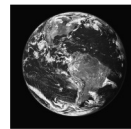
Rigid vs. Flexible



- Rigid thinking = only see one way or one perspective;
“My way or the highway” type of thinking.
- Goal = Flexible thinking:
 - I can adapt.
 - Change is tricky at first.
 - I’ll see what happens.
 - I’ll get used to this.

35

35



Global vs. Parts



- Global thinking = View a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat; Overthink to next level.
- Global language = “always” or “never”
- Goal = Parts thinking:
 - I can accept the good with the bad.
 - I’m unsure with this part of the project.
 - Let me just get this part done.
 - Take it a step at a time.

36

36

We have a negative bias...

BEWARE OF
PESSIMISTIC CERTAINTY:
When we assume not only the bad
things will happen but also that
we will be powerless to fix them.



37

37

Four Roses & a Thorn



38

38



Catastrophic vs. Problem-Solving

- Catastrophic thinking = Exaggerate the importance of things; Make commonplace negative events much bigger by going to the 'worst case' scenario. It's the 'mountain out of molehill' concept.
- There's a lot of "safety chatter."
Examples – "Be careful, Watch out!"



39

39

Goal = Problem-solving thinking

- "I can handle it!" "Think a step ahead, Pay attention to..."
- We want to demote anxiety/worry from a CRISIS to a normal, albeit very annoying, yet part of many aspects of life. When worry arrives = allow, acknowledge & pivot.



40

40

Me: What could possibly go wrong today?


My anxiety:



IFORHER.COM


41

41



Permanent vs. Malleable/Temporary

- Permanent thinking = Believe that things are not in our control AND cannot be altered.
- Goal = Malleable thinking with Positive Expectancy:
 - Afterwards, I will know more.
- We are constantly evolving and changing!
- The power of "YET."



42

42

Beware of Overpathologizing

- Sometimes it is just normal, albeit awkward development.
- Sometimes schools get frozen until diagnosis.
- Be thoughtful about diagnosis: What is the purpose of knowing? Will it impact the situation? What are the long-term consequences? Do I need to deal with my own curiosity? Do I have 'rescue fantasies'?
- Beware the same mindset with medications.
- A diagnosis is not their identity.

43

43



Rumination vs. Action

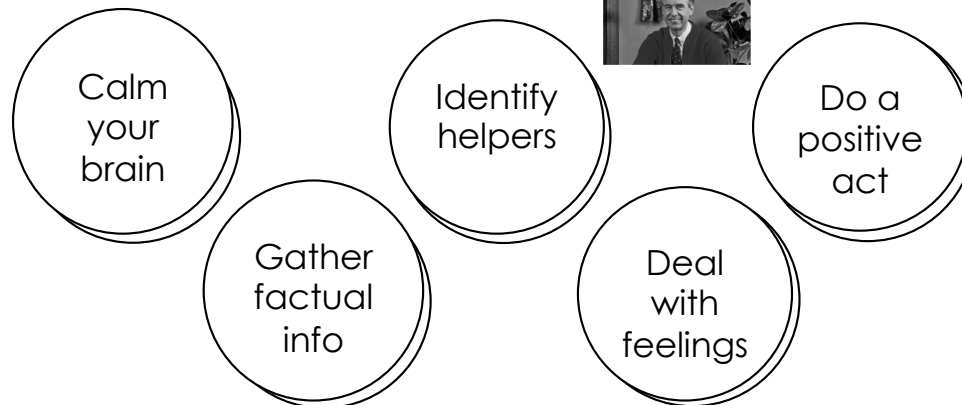


- Rumination = Overthink about the past, sometimes obsessively. The ruminator hopes to THINK their way out of the problem, but they are just chewing cud.
- Rumination is helpful for animal digestion; not helpful for wellbeing.
- Ruminating is related to regret, frustration & depression.
- Goal = Action & unhook in the moment. Pivot to anything that doesn't primarily focus on your own thoughts/feelings. Get curious about something. Try a short burst of physical activity.

44

44

When something bad happens:



45

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Individual Interventions

- Read books together and/or give reading assignments.
- Teach the puzzle pieces & do an 'anxiety management puzzle.'
- Watch recommended YouTube videos based on anxiety/cognitive patterns.
- Explore sleep hygiene, physical activity and social media use.
- Watch that coping skills are actually **skills** – often about avoidance or distraction.
- Remember to collaborate with families and support systems!
- If they say a strategy didn't work, they likely had an expectation that it would eliminate anxiety.



46

46

Discussion/Writing Prompts

- Recall the first time you did something that you are now pretty good at; then map out the steps you took to advance from the beginner to your current level.
- Explore the fight/flight response in animals.
- Share a time when you were outside your comfort zone and how you got through it.
- Share something you would love to do if you weren't worried/unsure/afraid.
- What is good about anxiety? Can anxiety be helpful?
- What advice would you give your younger self...your middle school self...your freshman self?
- What's something your parents do for you that you could do for yourself?

47

47

Behavior Plans/504s/IEPs



Make sure anxiety
isn't high-fiving
everyone at the end
of the meeting!

- Goal/Vision Statements –
 - Come to school without anxiety vs Come to school **despite** anxiety
 - What would it look like if anxiety was managed at school?
 - What would it look like if the student was happy at school?
 - What skills are still needed to meet that vision?
- Accommodations –
 - Beware of accommodations that support anxiety
 - Example extra time is for those with processing issues, not for perfectionism.
 - Remember to use only **temporary** plans while you are building skills.
 - Use breaks/time out of class effectively by promoting use of skills and making it time limited – i.e. not a place to simply be until feeling comfortable. Calm is a high bar!

48

48

School Phobia/Refusal

- Psychoeducation with parent & student = #1- They need a new understanding & empowerment. Frontloading and honesty is crucial.
- Select school contacts for parent & student.
- Develop graduated exposure plan – learn high anxiety patterns/locations – i.e. gym, cafeteria, classroom, etc.
- Provide information to parent & student – i.e. transportation, drop-off, pick-up, etc.
- Provide prespecified “reset” areas that are about skill building.
- Avoid “safe space” language – implies school is not safe.

GOAL: Be at school

49

49

#My Younger Self



50

50

Talk Less, Smile More!

Pay attention to how much talking you are doing around someone who is feeling anxious.

Research show that smiling, even when feeling down, can help our bodies produce serotonin, which increases positive moods and emotions.



51

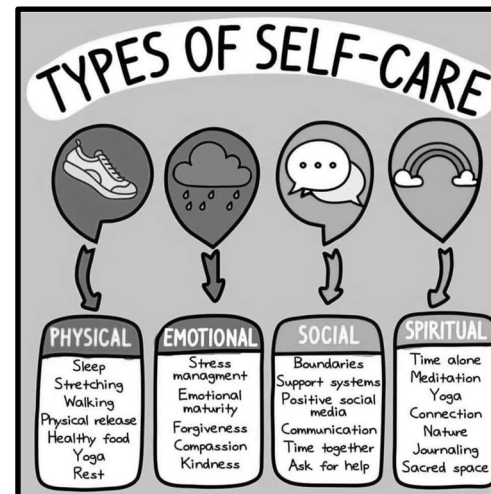
51

**Remember self-care...
and the role of joy &
hope in our lives.**



52

52



A glass of water



You
deserve
it!

53

53



What do Chickenpox,
Coronaviruses, and Joy
all have in common?

They are
contagious!



54

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55

How can we put joy in our work?

- Remember/Re-evaluate your “why” - What drives us to do what it is we do?
Note: The ‘why’ you had pre-pandemic may not meet your full purpose post-pandemic because the needs of our students have evolved in unforeseen ways. Knowing your ‘why’ brings joy because it gives you purpose.
- Use your creativity.
- Be about the small. Collect small moments...write them down and reflect. How can you create more authentic, positive moments? Of all the things a student will remember about us and our classrooms, those ‘small’ moments will probably be at the top of the list.
- Rediscover your joy – you deserve, your students deserve it. Bring intentionality to your joy. There is a lot out of our control – you control your joy and excitement in working with your students, organizing your area, etc.

56

56

It's official: **YOU GOT THIS!**



57

57

Raffle Time!

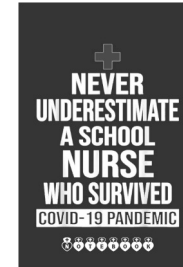
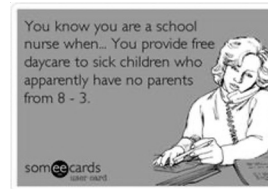
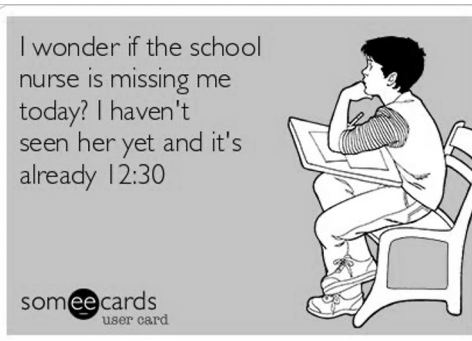
AND THE
WINNER
IS.....



58

58

THANK YOU FOR
ALL YOU DO!



59

59



CONTACT INFORMATION:

Bridget Matte -
bmatte@rfkcommunity.org

60

60

Recommended Books



- Outsmarting Worry: An Older Kid's Guide to Managing Anxiety by Dawn Huebner, PhD
- Dr. Dawn's Mini Books about Mighty Fears by Dawn Huebner, PhD (Fears about Health & Throwing Up)
- Anxiety Relief for Teens by Regine Galanti, PhD
- Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD: A Scientifically Proven Program for Parents by Eli Lebowitz, PhD
- The Anxiety Audit: Seven Sneaky Ways Anxiety Takes Hold and How to Escape Them by Lynn Lyons, LICSW
- Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves by Trevor Romain & Elizabeth Verdick
- Something Bad Happened: A Kid's Guide to Coping with Events in the News by Dawn Huebner, PhD
- Anxious Kids/Anxious Parents: 7 Ways to Stop the Worry Cycle and Raise Courageous & Independent Children by Reid Wilson, PhD and Lynn Lyons, LICSW
- Playing with Anxiety: Casey's Guide for Teens and Kids by Reid Wilson, PhD and Lynn Lyons, LICSW

61

61

Recommended Online



- YouTube: The Anxiety Cycle in 2 Minutes – Therapy in a Nutshell
- YouTube: The Backwards Brain Bicycle (Flexibility – Learning Something New – Neuroplasticity)
- YouTube: Brain Basics: All About Anxiety – with Lee Constable
- YouTube: Child Mind Institute – #My Younger Self; Bill Hader; Kristen Bell; Emma Stone (Famous People reflecting on their relationship with Anxiety)
- YouTube: Fear vs. Anxiety – What's the Difference? (The Body's Response to Anxiety)
- YouTube: Luca - Silenzio Bruno (Talking to Worry from Movie)
- Anxieties.com (Website – Reid Wilson)
- LynnLyons.com (Website – Lynn Lyons)
- Flusterclux.com (Website - Lynn Lyons Anxiety Podcast)

62

62