

How to Stop Being an Anxious Parent



By Daniel Wong

Do you find yourself constantly worrying about your children? You think to yourself: Are my kids progressing well academically and socially? Will they be able to get a good job in the future? I hope they're not mixing with bad company... Should I impose a stricter curfew to make sure they don't start smoking and doing drugs?

Then you start telling yourself that you're being paranoid. Your children are doing fine. There's nothing to be overly concerned about. But you simply can't stop worrying, although you know you really should.

Sound familiar?

Anxiety runs in the family, but it's not genetic

I've spoken to and worked with thousands of students and parents, so I know it's common for parents to feel anxious about their kids' development.

Anxiety is a curse that strikes all parents. As a parent myself, I know this too well. Anxiety is serious because if you don't deal with it, it gets passed on to your children.

Anxious parents lead to anxious children.

Parents who are apprehensive about every aspect of their children's lives tend to overemphasise the importance of performance and achievement. This achievement pressure results in children whose self-worth is defined by how they're perceived by others and by how they "measure up".

I've mentored numerous youths who are anxious about their grades, anxious about how popular they are, anxious about not living up to the expectations of others, anxious about the future, anxious about life.

Anxiety hangs over these youths like a dark cloud, causing them distress and — in some cases — emotional torment. It's heartbreaking to witness.

Breaking the curse of continuous worrying

Don't get me wrong; academics are important, and so is learning other skills that will prove useful later on in life. I'm also a firm believer in the value of discipline and hard work.

But when children become obsessed about accomplishing more in order to gain acceptance and approval, we've crossed into dangerous territory. This obsession can lead to psychological problems, including depression, low self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness.

There's good news, though. The curse of anxiety can be broken, and it starts with the parents. Based on my experiences, I'll share with you four ways to stop being an anxious parent.

1. Choose your friends wisely

I've heard it said that you're the average of the five people you spend most of your time with. This isn't a scientific fact, but it's true in general.

It's no wonder that if you frequently hang out with other parents who are obsessed about their children's grades and about ensuring that their children don't "lose out", parents who teach their children that winning counts for everything — you're going to become like them too, more quickly than you might imagine.

Our environment shapes our thinking and behaviour in quiet but powerful ways!

This might sound harsh, but it's necessary advice: If your friends are like the parents I've just described, find new friends. Talk to people and search online to find a support group who will encourage and propel you to be the best parent you can be. Don't settle for being an anxious parent who gets caught up in a vicious worrying cycle.

There are parents out there who have a holistic approach to parenting and education. They care about their kids' grades, but they also understand that education is a lifelong process, which isn't only about how many A's you get or how many degrees or diplomas you earn.

Make a committed effort to become one of these parents, and seek out a support group that consists of these parents.



2. Set aside time each day to worry

If you find the urge to worry uncontrollable, I recommend that you set aside a specific time each day to worry. For example, you could schedule the ten minutes after dinner each day as your “worry session”. If you’re tempted to worry outside of this specified time, remind yourself that you’ll have a chance to worry during your worry session.

This might sound like a strange technique, but it’s effective because it allows you to compartmentalise your worrying. During these worry sessions, write down all the fears or concerns you have, and brainstorm possible solutions. If you can’t think of any solutions to a particular worry, make a note of this. This is probably a worry that you shouldn’t spend too much time mulling over, since there’s nothing you can do about it.

Anxiety arises when you get overwhelmed by your worries. Scheduling daily worry sessions allows you to combat these negative emotions by explicitly stating what you’re worried about, so that you won’t feel as if there is an infinite number of things causing you anxiety.

3. Stop comparing your children with others

It’s natural — but not healthy — for parents to compare their children’s development with that of other children in the areas of academics, co-curricular activities, physical growth, social skills, etc.

Many of the youths I work with confess to me that they feel as though their parents’ love is conditional. These youths believe that their parents would love them more if only they were as smart as John, as motivated as Peggy, or as well-behaved as Isaac. They feel a need to earn their parents’ love and approval. This causes them to feel insecure, a feeling that can affect their overall development for years to come.

For a start, make a commitment not to compare your children to others in your children’s presence. It’s all right if you make these comparisons in private to your spouse, but eventually you should try to stop making comparisons completely. Keep a count of how many times you compare your children to others, and make an effort to reduce this number on a daily basis.

4. Keep a gratitude journal

I’ve observed that the opposite of anxiety is gratitude. How many extremely grateful people do you know who are also chronic worriers? Not many, I’m guessing.

Being thankful helps you to focus on the positive, on what you have instead of what you don’t have. In fact, there’s plenty of research that shows that grateful people tend to be happier people.

I recommend that you keep a daily gratitude journal, where you write down one thing you’re thankful for in general, and one thing you’re thankful for with regard to your children.

A sample entry might read:

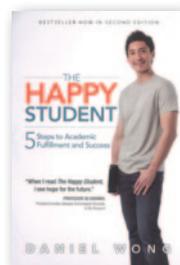
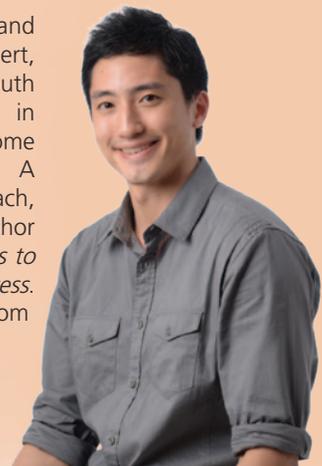
- I’m thankful that I have a stable job that enables me to provide for the family.
- I’m thankful that my daughter, Jessica, is becoming more mature. She offered to help wash the dishes after dinner.

Keeping a gratitude journal is a simple habit that will take you just two minutes a day, but will reap tremendous benefits in the long run. You’ll become less anxious and more joyful — what’s there to lose besides a couple of minutes each day?

In closing...

Worries are weeds that can run rampant and become a destructive force in our lives. I hope that by applying the four tips in this article, you’ll be able to better manage these weeds, so that you can focus your time and energy on bringing up healthy, happy and successful children.

Daniel Wong is a learning and personal development expert, as well as a certified youth counsellor. He specialises in empowering youths to become both happy and successful. A sought-after speaker and coach, he is also the bestselling author of *The Happy Student: 5 Steps to Academic Fulfillment and Success*. Website: www.Daniel-Wong.com



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