

How to Address Excessive Reassurance Seeking

Children and teens look to their parents for information about the world. It is normal and helpful for parents to provide children with information about challenging situations. This information may help children understand that those situations are not dangerous, and show them how to handle them effectively (e.g. what to do or say). For some children and teens, however, asking for reassurance about the same situation over and over again becomes an unhelpful way of coping.

What is excessive reassurance seeking?

When your child is feeling anxious, he or she will probably turn to you for help in feeling better. One of the ways in which your child might do this is through reassurance seeking, which involves asking you lots of questions, or asking the same question over and over in order to hear from you that things will be okay.

Some examples of reassurance seeking:

- *“Are you sure you locked all the doors?”*
- *“Tell me again that I’m a good girl!”*
- *“Did you wash your hands before you cooked dinner? Are you really sure?”*
- Calling mum or dad over and over again on the phone from school to make sure they are okay.
- Asking parents to check homework repeatedly to make sure there are absolutely no mistakes.

What is the problem with giving reassurance?

- Most parents already know that giving reassurance over and over again can be exhausting! Giving your child reassurance quickly becomes a bottomless pit: no matter how much reassurance you give your child, he or she will always want more! In fact, the more you give reassurance, the more you’ll have to keep giving it. In a way, it becomes addictive for kids!
- Giving reassurance is a band-aid solution: it only relieves your child or teen’s anxiety in the moment. More importantly, giving reassurance actually keeps your child’s anxiety alive, because it maintains the problem in the long-term.
- Giving your child or teen reassurance also sends the message that there’s actual danger that he or she needs to be protected from, when it is in fact the anxiety that is driving the reassurance seeking.

What is the solution?

In order to help your child face fears and cope with anxiety in a healthy and adaptive way, **YOU NEED TO STOP GIVING YOUR CHILD REASSURANCE**. If your child does not rely on reassurance seeking to relieve anxiety, he or she can gradually learn to cope with anxiety on his or her own: this can give your child a sense of independence and competence.

Easier said than done?

- For most parents, not giving their child or teen reassurance sounds very difficult. When your child asks for reassurance, he or she is obviously very upset, and many parents feel it is “cruel” to deny their children the reassurance they seem to need. However, if you want to help your child manage anxiety over the long term, he or she needs to learn a more effective way of coping.
- There is a way to help your child to stop asking for reassurance without feeling as if you are being “mean” or “uncaring”.

How to Do It!

Step 1: Make a Clear Plan

Before you start any anxiety management skill with your child, you need to have a clear idea of what exactly you will be doing. For example:

- **What specific behaviours are you trying to change?** (e.g., “Whenever my child asks me if the house is clean, I will no longer give reassurance that it is”, or “I do not want my child to call me at work several times every day to make sure I am okay”)
- **Is everyone in the family on board?** If you plan to stop giving reassurance to your child, it is important that everyone else in the family agrees. If your child can simply get reassurance from someone else, this strategy will not work.
- **Make sure your child or teen understands and agrees with the plan.** When he or she is calm (not experiencing anxiety), explain what the plan is, and why you are doing it.

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THE NEW PLAN: AN EXAMPLE

Parent: “We are going to set up a new plan in the house to help you to boss back your anxiety. For example, whenever you get anxious or worried that your homework isn’t perfect, what do you usually do?”

Child: “I ask you to read it.”

Parent: “That’s right. And you do that many times every time you have homework. The reason you do this is because your anxiety starts bullying you around, telling you that you made a mistake and that not being perfect is really bad. But is your anxiety right or wrong when it tells you that?”

Child: “Well, I guess it’s wrong.”

Parent: “Exactly. That’s because anxiety can be a big liar. So we need to stop anxiety from bullying you. We are going to do that by not listening when anxiety tells you to call me. So your job is going to be to try to do your homework without asking me to read it, even if you get anxious. My job will be to help you boss back your anxiety by asking you to read over your homework yourself. This is going to be our new plan, okay? When you ask me to help you, I am going to remind you that your anxiety is bullying you, and that you can do it fine by yourself. Eventually, anxiety is simply going to give up and stop bossing you around.

Step 2: Following Through on the Plan

Once you have explained the new plan to your child or teen, you need to follow through on it. There are a number of things you can say to your child when he or she comes to you for reassurance. Here are some examples:

- “You already know the answer to that question. I am not going to answer that.”
- “What if you didn’t do your homework perfectly -- what would happen?”
- “Maybe you did make a mistake on your exam; what could you do to cope with that?”
- “It sounds like your anxiety is acting up. What could you do to boss it back? Could you maybe do some relaxed breathing? Are there any helpful thoughts that you can tell yourself?”
- “What do you think? How could you handle that?”
- I guess you’ll just have to wait and find out.”

Active ignoring involves deliberately ignoring the question and not paying attention to your child’s demands. However, once he or she stops asking for reassurance, give him or her lots of praise and attention. Return to not giving your child attention or reassurance if he or she starts asking you questions again. This strategy quickly teaches your child that reassurance will not be rewarded or answered by you, and that it is more beneficial not to repeatedly ask the same questions.

Step 3: Give lots of praise!

Because this is hard work, make sure to repeatedly praise your child for any efforts made to not seek reassurance from you, or attempts to manage anxiety independently. Some positive comments you can make are:

- “You are doing such a great job!”
- “Look how well you bossed back your anxiety!”
- “I’m so proud of you!”

What to expect...

When you first stop giving reassurance, your child or teen will probably be very anxious. In fact, he or she might become very angry or frustrated, and even throw a temper tantrum. This is normal. It is important that if you have decided NOT to give reassurance, that you stick with it! Children and teens often get very angry when they do not get the reassurance that they have come to expect. If you keep at it, and stick to the plan, your child will stop seeking reassurance from you, and start managing anxiety in more healthy ways.

THE GOLDEN RULE: CONSISTENCY!

Sometimes parents will say they tried to stop giving reassurance, but it didn't work, and that their child or teen simply kept asking for reassurance. This usually happens when you have given in once or twice, and gave reassurance. Many parents will "break down" and give reassurance if their child has a really bad temper tantrum, cries, or delays a task that needs to get done (for example, wanting reassurance before going to school in the morning). This is understandable because it can be very difficult for parents to stop themselves from soothing their upset child or teen. Nevertheless, it is necessary.

REMEMBER... For this strategy to work, you need to resist giving reassurance every single time!

HELPFUL HINT: THE PROBLEM WITH INCONSISTENCY

If you give in to your child's demand for reassurance even once, your child has learned a powerful lesson: "If I persist and ask enough times, eventually I will get the reassurance that I want". So, rather than getting rid of the problem behaviour, you have increased and strengthened it!

This is why if you give reassurance, even once, your child will keep asking until he or she gets it. However, if you consistently stick to the plan, your child or teen will start using other strategies to cope with anxiety, and stop asking you for reassurance.

Teens and Reassurance

Anxious teens seek reassurance just as younger children do, and parents need to use the same strategies to deal with this, using language and examples that are appropriate for the teenager's age. Because they are older, parents can give their teen a more detailed explanation of why excessive

reassurance-seeking is not a helpful coping strategy. Some of the points you can talk about are:

- Reassurance seeking only works in the short-term: the more you ask for reassurance, the more you will want it in the future.
- We ask for excessive reassurance when we feel that there is a danger; but, in fact, anxiety is driving the need for reassurance.
- When you stop receiving reassurance, it is normal to feel anxious. However, this might be a good opportunity to start using other, more helpful coping skills.

HELPFUL HINTS:

FOCUS ON POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR, NOT ANXIOUS BEHAVIOUR

Because your child will probably be quite anxious at first when not getting reassurance, your first instinct might be to soothe him or her in other ways (for example, giving lots of affection and attention, treats or rewards).

- By doing this, you are actually rewarding the anxious behaviour.
- If you stick to the plan, resist giving reassurance, and encourage your child to handle anxiety on his or her own, you are ignoring the anxious behaviour.
- Encouraging your child to reassure him or herself, and to problem solve independently will help your child to become independent and confident.
- After your child has calmed down, or if he or she is using a coping tool to deal with anxiety, then you can praise this positive behaviour!