

Is your child's anxiety giving you anxiety? How to cut stress

Rates of anxiety are on the rise among young people, but what about their parents? Therapist **Saskia Joss** has strategies to help

We've heard a lot about the phenomenal rise in anxious children in the past five years — the number being referred to mental health services with anxiety as the primary cause more than doubled from 98,953 in 2019-2020 to 204,526 in 2023-24. But we've heard rather less about their parents.

One recent survey provided a glimpse of what might be going on: of 1,000 parents polled by Clinical Partners (NHS and private mental health service providers) last month, 41 per cent felt their child had struggled with anxiety since the pandemic. But almost 23 per cent felt their own mental health had been damaged too.

There's no doubt that anxious children create anxious parents (and vice versa). Then there's the guilt parents feel when they have an anxious child whom they can't seem to help. But there's something deeper going on here, according to the child therapist Saskia Joss, 36, author of *Help! My Child's Anxiety Is Giving Me Anxiety*, published by Headline next week.

She believes we've all become more anxious in the five years since the pandemic, and that families can become stuck in an anxiety cycle. "Anxiety is meant to be a short-term feeling; it's the way the brain keeps us safe from imminent danger. But with Covid, we were living anxiously for about two and a half years, and our brains have become wired to think that a high level of [the stress hormone] cortisol in the system is normal," she says. "Adults and children are then feeding off each other's anxiety. It's a chemical cycle."

There have always been anxious children, Joss acknowledges, but it was usually temporary and for a specific reason — divorcing parents, for example, or social anxiety at school. "But I think this idea that anxiety is a perpetual feeling, that's new. We're all living with cortisol, so everything feels more scary, more tiring. If your child is anxious they will start making cortisol to make sure the 'danger', whatever it is, won't

happen again. And when you see your child is anxious, you start making cortisol because seeing someone anxious inspires you to consider the idea that there's something to be anxious about."

Joss turned her north London practice into a specialist child anxiety clinic after being inundated by requests for help in 2020. Now she has written her book for the parents she couldn't see in person, to help break this family cycle. "Parenting is relentless, anxiety-inducing, and it's very easy to beat yourself up when things go wrong," she writes.

She sometimes works with parents separately from their children — in fact, sometimes it can be the parent who needs therapy more than the child. "Let's face it, all parents are novices and even a second or third child is an entirely different individual to their older siblings. The first thing I do is to notice all the good things they are already doing as a parent. Just letting them see I think they are compassionate, that they really know their child well and they are doing all they can is enough to relax them and lower their cortisol levels."

A mother of two young children, Joss is also the daughter of the TV presenter Vanessa Feltz, 63 — and she looks and speaks uncannily like her mother. She puts her generally positive outlook down, in part, to the "hippy, progressive" school she went to — King Alfred in north London — plus her mother's distinctive "dopamine focused" approach to parenting, which provided a natural buffer against anxiety.

"It was always, 'What's the next fun thing we could do? How exciting will it be?' My mum is able to find excitement in the smallest grain of rice. It makes it much easier to be happy when you can believe that something good will happen. And if it wasn't good, it was going to get better."

"She was constantly coming up

by Rachel Carlyle

“My mum can find excitement in anything, which makes it much easier to be happy



Joss with her mother, Vanessa Feltz



Saskia Joss

with ideas for fun things to do. She recently went on a 'moon hunt' with my nephew, where they went to go and find the moon in the middle of the night, taking 'moon snacks' with them." She once took Joss's children, five-year-old Amiel and Cecily, two, for a luxury picnic on a bridge over a dual carriageway simply because they often drove past and idly wondered what it would be like to stand up there.

Having random picnics on road bridges isn't necessarily a go-to tool in treating anxiety, Joss stresses, but she does think her mother hit on something important: taking time as a family to do unexpected, simple, but joyful things. It's one of the key messages in the book, which contains practical strategies for parents and children. Here's her advice.

It's natural to feel embarrassed about your child's anxiety

If your child is the only one who doesn't join in at parties, tuck into their food or rush over to hug their grandparents, it's easy to imagine other people are judging your parenting, Joss says. Embarrassment is natural, even if you know they can't help it, but it's important not to get defensive and take that shame out on your child. "It's tempting for parents

to shout or punish their anxious child in public — they do it so no one will think they condone their child's strange behaviour, and they want to signal clearly to onlookers that they are perfectly capable of instilling discipline," Joss says. Instead of projecting disapproval, we need to show our child we're in their corner, she says. "If you must respond to people, say that your child is feeling anxious about school/food/social occasions. It's very common for children of their age and you are working on supporting them through it."

Remember, your child isn't you

Your child's problems and fears can trigger feelings from your own past. One moment, they're telling you they have no friends and, before you know it, you're seven again and panicking because you're alone in the playground. Joss advises parents never to assume their child is feeling the same way they did and hence immediately offer up their own experience. "Rather than assuming we know how they feel, ask them: 'How is this for you? What's it like for you when your best friend didn't invite you to her party? A similar thing happened to me, but I wonder if it's the same for you.'"

Let them explain before offering fixes (it's particularly important not to jump in with solutions with teenagers). If they say they don't have any friends, don't offer up "yes you do — Sophie was here only last week". "That fact is not relevant to the feeling they have now," Joss says. "The important thing is to listen and empathise. Help them to work out if there are