

ANNA-ROSE MCCHESEY FOR THE TIMES; DAVE HOGAN/SHUTTERSTOCK; GETTY IMAGES



Ask yourself, does anyone in your family ever relax?

"A family that's full of cortisol is feeding off each other's anxiety," Joss says. "The first thing I do is find a way to calm everyone down. Often that's by allowing parents to take things off the list. Are you always in a rush, always running between things? Is it because you're not waking up early enough? That could be one simple change to make. Is it because your child has five extracurricular activities? No one needs that. If you need them for childcare reasons, fine, but when they get home, how are you letting them relax? How are you relaxing and resting yourself?" It could be something as simple as a 15-minute family walk after dinner or watching TV together, without any phones. "Ask what you can do to make your home feel a calmer space for everyone — because it's the parents who are steering this ship."

Did your own childhood make you hyper-critical?

We are all products of our own parents' parenting, and unpicking these relationships can often provide the answer to our own parenting difficulties. "We come from a generation where [parental] criticism was an important part of growth," Joss says. "When we were kids, the premise was, 'You're not good enough, and I'm teaching you you're not good enough, and if you listen, you'll get there.'" This self-critical script can create an atmosphere of anxiety in the home and be passed on to our own children.

Joss recalls a client who was convinced his rude, angry teenage daughter needed therapy, but ended up having therapy himself instead. He came to see that his complicated relationship with his dismissive parents was at the root of his own anxiety, which he was trying to conceal with authoritarianism that his children were railing against.

Don't be afraid to seek out therapy for your internal voice is causing problems. "Therapy is often not what people expect — they worry it will expose them or unhide them. But an experienced therapist

can help you learn about yourself and your history, and support you to make you feel less anxious and more content with your life. Therapy or counselling can help you achieve the feeling of safety you are hoping to offer your children."

“If your child is anxious, it's easy to imagine other people are judging your parenting



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Show your children that you enjoy your own life

Many parents will agree with the American singer Chappell Roan, 27, who said recently she didn't know any parents her age who enjoy parenting ("I have not met anyone who has light in their eyes"). There is something in her observation, Joss says. "Have we, as a generation, decided that to be a good parent you're kind of meant to be punished in some way, that you mustn't enjoy yourself or have anything that you do for yourself?"

"Doing things that make you happy — seeing your friends, going out — is modelling something useful to children," she explains. "We're showing them they're allowed to have a nice life. So ask yourself, what are you putting in place to make your life actually enjoyable? What would someone who was caring for you do for you?"

What made me happy before having children and why don't I do those things any more? Then timetable them every week. You don't have to lose the colour of yourself just because you grew up and had children."

Do you only get 'snatch moments' with your child?

"One of the things I ask parents to do when they have an anxious child is get their child to look at their weekly timetable and colour in the bits they actually enjoy," Joss says. "There are often not as many as you would expect. And they're doing 17 extracurricular activities!" Her son Amiel does no extracurricular activities during the week. "This is on purpose, as I think it's a choice between 'snatch moments' with kids or real moments. If you're always rushing, when your child says to you, 'Then my teacher said this to me ...' you haven't got time to listen and digest because you're too busy saying, 'Get your shoes on!' What do we lose in our relationships if your children remember that the only times they chatted with you

during the week was while they were shovelling in half a sandwich on the way to a sports club?"

Have chillout Thursdays and Fridays

The week can be an uphill climb from Sunday evening for anxious parents and anxious children, especially sensitive and neurodiverse children, who get exhausted from continual exposure to other people and masking their feelings. Joss advises her clients to keep Thursday and Friday evenings as free as possible, and build in relaxing activities such as calming music, crafts and bubble baths. One idea she finds works really well with small to medium-sized children is to designate one evening "make your own sandwich night". Everyone chooses and makes their own sandwich for dinner and washes up afterwards. "Dinner is fast, bedtime is earlier and there are no food disputes. And choosing what you want — even if it's jam and tuna stuffed with raisins — and preparing it yourself builds a pleasing sense of autonomy and independence."

Board games are great for calming anxious brains

There are plenty of calming activities that families can do together but board games come with their own special sauce. "There's a really lovely chemical called GABA [gamma-aminobutyric acid], a bit like serotonin, that makes you feel very calm and happy," Joss says. "We get GABA from playing games with rules — something like Uno or Monopoly, where everybody knows what everyone else is going to do. We are able to know the variables of the situation we're in — what's going to happen next, how it will work, how long we will be sitting here — so everyone can calm down. It's why you see Gen Z embracing games nights; they're trying to access that feeling of calm. And, of course, for those with social anxiety, it takes away a lot of the pressure of thinking of something to say because you can talk about the game."

Help! My Child's Anxiety Is Giving Me Anxiety by Saskia Joss (Headline £20). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

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