

Strategies to assist the School Refusing Student who is struggling with anxiety.

I think we can all relate at some point of feeling intense fear, anxiety and or even panic. For a good portion of the population those sort of intense sensations are totally appropriate in specific contexts (e.g. when going for a walk and a dog charges at you off its lead barking incessantly showing its teeth). Or perhaps you have a near miss, as a car brushes along- side you far too close for comfort that evokes the accompanying sensations of shallow breathing, heart racing, shaking, feeling faint or dizzy along with nausea just to name a few.

The above symptoms are often associated with anxiety that gets activated in response to a near miss or a perceived legitimate threat. Yet for our school refusing students whose school refusal is driven by anxiety, this can be the sensations that accompany them from the moment they open their eyes in the morning of a school day hitting high intensity once they get closer to the school gate. Is it really any wonder that forging a 'tummy ache' or resorting to a full blown meltdown becomes one of the employing strategies that students will resort to using as a means to avoid their perceived threat? For them the unpleasant symptoms are real and have the equivalent emotional charge of the 'teeth showing-charging dog running off the lead'. Humans are acknowledged for having the drivers of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. Even if that perceived pain seems illogical to others.

Despite the challenges that exist in relation to school refusal one thing remains... avoidance is not the answer. Avoidance is a double edged sword- on one side it can look like 'someone is exercising control' on another, it can contribute to a cascade of problems for students later in life. Avoidance is actually the loss of control. In its extreme form, it can result in people being house bound as in the case of agoraphobia.

So we know that avoidance isn't the answer, so despite the perceived **comfort zone** (e.g. avoiding school or anything associated with it) having its own incredible appeal it doesn't assist anyone's mental health to stay in that zone for periods of time. We all have our own unique **stretch zone**, and our students are no exception to this. Unfortunately students with anxiety induced school refusal, perceive attending school as hitting their '**danger zone**'. Most of the work lies in assisting students to start to feel safe again via graded exposure, increasing their 'stretch zone' (or window of tolerance) whilst not inducing their anxiety response to a point of overwhelm where they find themselves back in the perceived 'danger zone' again.

The reality is that getting students back to school requires a concerted team effort- that includes the parents of the child and teaching staff all being on the same page.

So what can we do to assist students in stepping out of their comfort zone into the stretch zone with success?

- **Ensure that students maintain a routine.** This may include getting up at the same time as if it were a normal school day (for those not attending school) and where possible doing some academic learning so that the gap between what other students are learning and what they are learning doesn't become too great. Shifting out of a habitual poor sleep habit is often fraught with issues when trying to get a student back to school.
- **Provision of frequent positive reminders and encouragement from all adults connected with the child** (e.g. parent, teacher, counsellor or school leadership/ wellbeing team). If the child feels all the adults in their life are encouraging and conveying the same message the seesaw is more likely to tip towards school being perceived as slightly less daunting.
- **School Drop off-** When it comes to school drop off in the morning, sometimes it can be advantageous for another trusted adult to provide the transport. Oftentimes, the student will have associations of experiences with a certain parent (e.g. mother). Getting another trusted person to do the drop off can assist in breaking down the association between perceived 'difficult' or 'negative' experiences' with someone who is more 'neutral' or where a heightened anxiety experience has not occurred with.
- **The offering of perceived choice.** I think it would be fair to say that most people appreciate the offering of choice. Choice does give people a sense of autonomy and control. Whilst we cannot 'offer' children the choice to return to school or not return- we can be creative with the illusion of choice. This can include choices about who is dropping them off, which school gate they enter in, which teacher/ education support staff will be there to offer support and perhaps even which subjects they can attend that do not generate heightened anxiety.
- **Picking the days...** Research has suggested that students struggle most in returning to school after a weekend, after school holidays or where there has been a break in attending (hello Covid!!). We are more likely to have success if we encourage the child to perhaps attend later in the week rather than a Monday. Starting on a Monday can generate a sense of overwhelm.
- **Mantra's and self-talk.** Students can be encouraged to map out their 'what if's' that are perpetuating their anxiety and to brain storm alternatives to these concerns. Reality testing is a great example. If a student is worried about attending because 'something might happen', we can invite them to consider how many times they have actually walked through the school gates with no untoward events actually occurring. Using numbers and facts is also a great way to provide evidence that a student in all probability is going to be okay.
- **Be aware of what we model.** Mirror neurons essentially help us tune into what is going on with those around us. It is our mirror neurons that assist us in picking up on the energy/ vibes of another person and acting accordingly. So if a parent is anxious (or a teacher is anxious), then there is possibility that the student may pick up on this, which triggers the students own fight/flight or freeze response). In a nutshell the more we can keep ourselves calm, the more likely we are to co-contribute in generating a sense of safety in a student.

One thing is for certain, if we intervene early with students displaying school reluctance before it escalates into full blown school refusal we can certainly mitigate against further psychological, emotional, educational and social disadvantage that students are likely to experience as a consequence of school refusal.