

Anxiety in Youth: Impact of Pandemic

**COA 8th Annual Mental Health Awareness
Conference**

Children's Behavioral Health – Ireland Center

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Objectives

- Describe mental health impact of pandemic among youth
- Identify signs of stress and anxiety in youth
- List strategies and interventions to maximize coping with stress and anxiety



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Our Youth are Struggling

- Research shows worsening pediatric mental health over course of pandemic.



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Impact of the pandemic on children's mental health

The pandemic has created a perfect storm of stressors for children and youth and experts warn that it may negatively impact mental health

Stressors:

- Uncertainty
- Social isolation
- School closures
- Familial challenges & economic instability
- Losing a family member to COVID-19

Barriers to Care:

- Lack of internet or technology limiting telehealth access
- Fewer mental health screenings due to school closures & delayed pediatric care

The share of mental health-related ED visits among all pediatric visits increased between mid-March and October 2020 compared to the same period in 2019



24%
among children aged
5–11 years



31%
among adolescents
aged 12–17 years



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Our Youth are Struggling

- Since 2019, we have seen a 50% increase in Psychology consults being ordered for youth admitted to the medical floors.



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COA Psychology Consults Eating Disorders Data

Number of Inpatient Psychology Consults for Eating Disorders:

2019	2020	2021
≤ 1 per month	1 per month	6 per month (so far)



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COA Psychology Consults Trauma Data

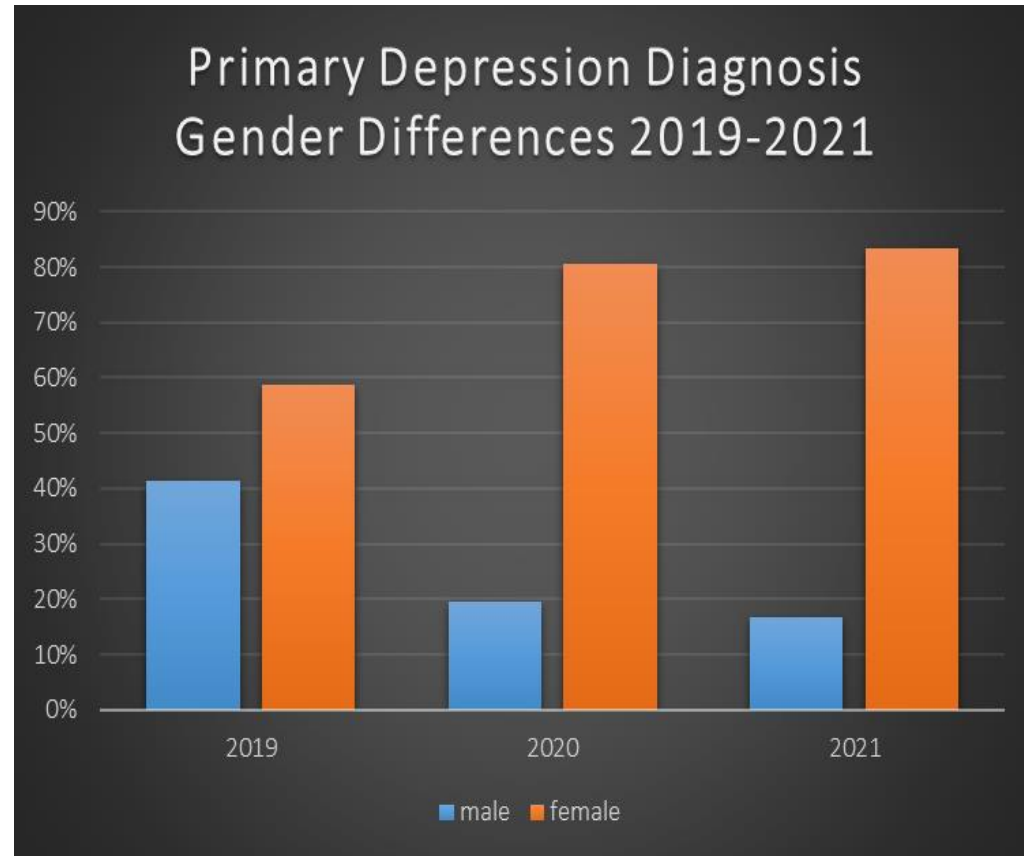
- Over the pandemic, we have seen a 33% increase in primary diagnosis of Trauma
 - Of these, about 50% have been due to abuse (vs. other traumatic incident)



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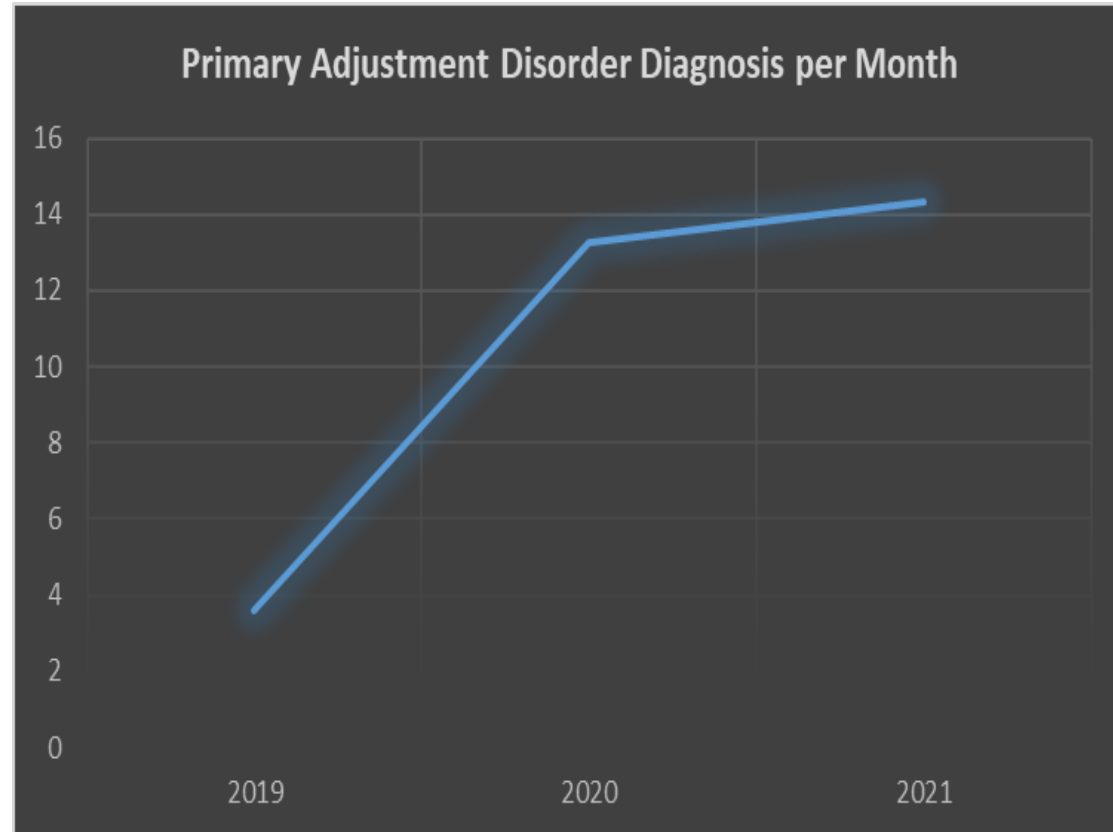
COA Psychology Consults Depression Data

- Since 2019, we have seen:
 - 81% increase in consults with primary diagnosis of Depression



COA Psychology Consults Anxiety & Adjustment Data

- Since 2019, we have seen:
 - 76% increase in consults with primary diagnosis of Anxiety



Basic Facts

- Anxiety and fear meet the criteria for a clinical anxiety disorder when the concerns are **persistent and excessive**, causing notable distress or impairment in day-to-day life.
- Anxiety disorders are the **most common** psychiatric disorders with onset in childhood, and prevalence estimates ranging from **10 to 30 percent**.



DSM-5 Categories

- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Social anxiety disorder
- Panic disorder with or without agoraphobia
- Agoraphobia without a history of panic disorder
- Specific phobia
- Separation anxiety disorder
- Selective mutism



Comorbidity & Course

- Anxiety disorders in youth
 - **Frequently co-occur:**
 - Other anxiety disorders
 - ADHD, ODD, language disorders, learning disabilities, and depressive disorders
- Childhood anxiety disorders associated with:
 - **Educational underachievement, increased risk for depression, substance abuse and/or dependence, and suicide**
 - More severe/ greater impairment → persistence into adulthood



COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Anxiety

- Exacerbates existing anxiety and/or can trigger new anxiety
 - Increased isolation
 - Promotes avoidance
 - Chronic, unknown nature of pandemic
 - Sense of vulnerability, especially if loved ones have died



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Special Populations Affected

- Youth with Special Needs:
 - Loss of structure/ routine.
 - Decreased access to necessary resources/ therapies.
- Underprivileged Youth:
 - Housing and food insecurity.
 - Limited access to distance/ virtual learning.
 - Increased separation from parents, who may be seeking or working additional jobs.



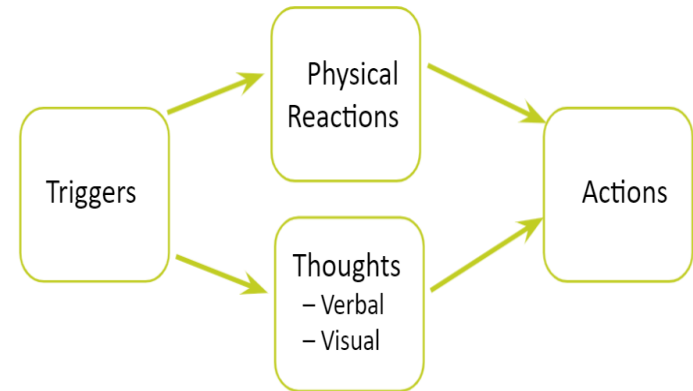
Clinical Manifestations of Anxiety

- Expressed fears and worries
- Avoidance, escape (**FLIGHT**)
- Clingy, excessive need for reassurance
- Irritability and oppositional behavior (**FIGHT**)
- Silly behavior or dysregulation
- Poor school performance, difficulty concentrating
- Sleep and eating problems
- Somatic symptoms
- Panic, shutting down, withdrawal (**FREEZE**)



What Happens When Kids are Anxious?

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) Symptoms



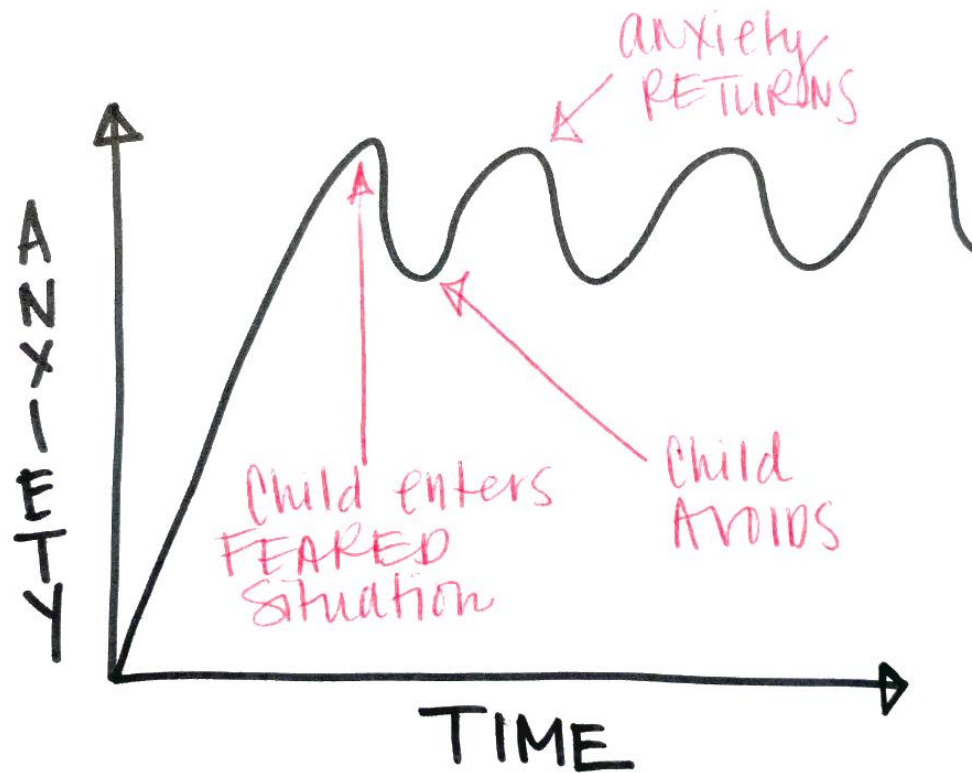
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What Maintains Anxiety?

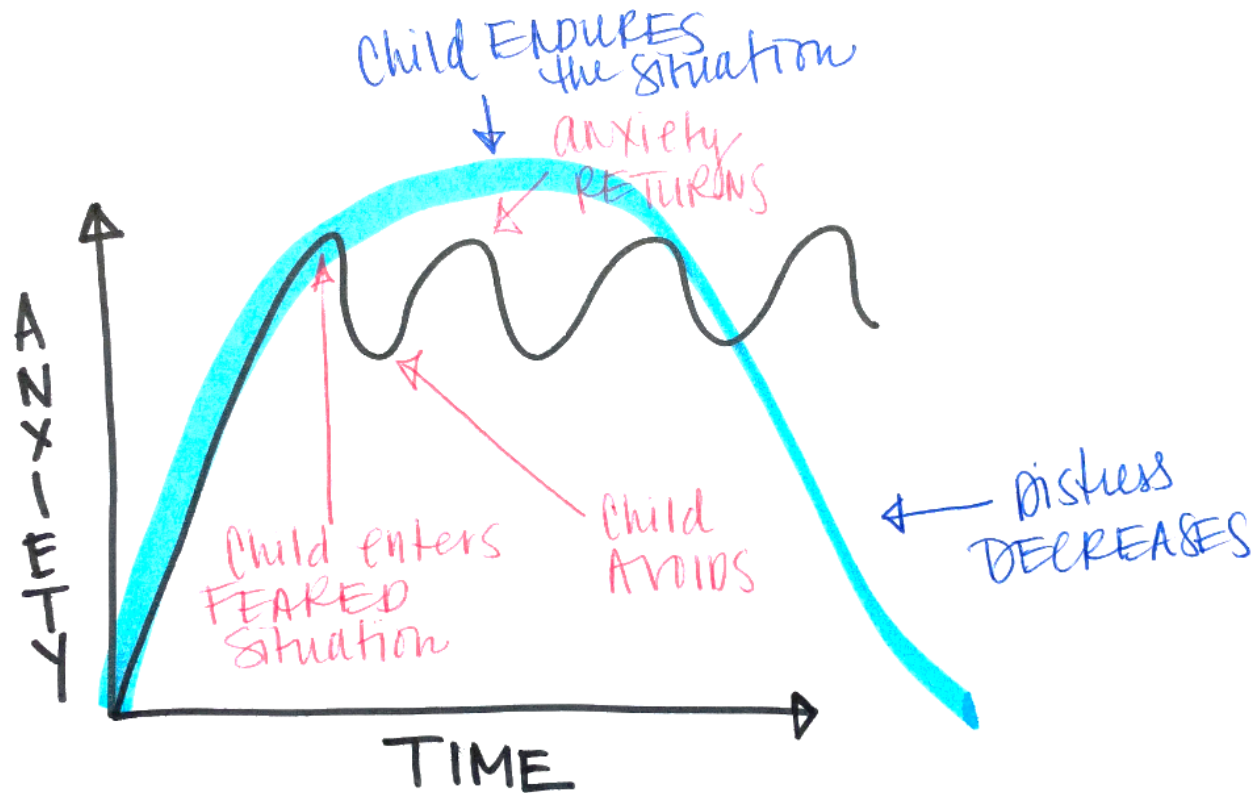
- Cognitive distortions
- **Avoidance**
 - Caregivers allowing/ inadvertently supporting avoidance
- Rescuing/ “taking over”
- Excessive reassurance
- Limited or poor coping skills



Avoidance



Exposure



CALM Strategy for Caregivers

- Catch your breath:
 - Pause to think and plan a response
- Accept negative feelings:
 - Wait, listen, respond “I see, ok, uh-huh”
- Label emotions:
 - “You seem nervous” or “your body seems scared”
- Model coping skills:
 - Show child how to remain calm by using a coping skill



General Coping Skills

- Get the basics down
 - Sleep, healthy food and exercise
- Create routines!
- **Talking about anxiety... to a point**
 - Can create “worry time”
- Limit access to news, scary shows/movies, etc.
- Connecting with family, friends, animals, and nature
 - FaceTime, letters
- Build on strengths and interests
- Leaving time to “just be a kid”





When your body gets worked up,

- ➡ Heart beats faster.
- ➡ Muscles get tight or feel shaky.
- ➡ Breathing gets faster.
- ➡ Face gets red and hot.

Body Awareness & Relaxation

- Teach children about physical signs of anxiety
- Model/ teach relaxation
 - Deep breathing
 - Hot chocolate / soup
 - Muscle relaxation (passive or active)
 - Imagery



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Managing Anxious Thoughts



Catastrophizing

If I go in public, I
will get the virus
and die!

Examine the data

I am young,
healthy, wearing
my mask and
washing my
hands.

Balanced Thought

I am healthy and
if I get COVID, I
will not likely die.



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Reward Good Coping

- It's important to remember that it takes hard work to use coping skills – so it's important to reward our children for doing it!
 - Praise and attention
 - Can use small, tangible rewards for daily/weekly coping
 - Larger rewards for bigger, future events



Educators

- Anxiety can look like inattention.
 - Child may need extra time to complete work if anxiety is interfering.
- Giving a “heads up”
 - E.g., you would like for them to answer a question on a topic that they are familiar/ interested in – to help them practice speaking up in class
- For the perfectionists, model that making mistakes actually HELPS learning!
 - Praising effort





When to Seek Help

- Level of interference
 - How much is anxiety getting in the way of everyday life
- Not responding to trialed coping strategies
- Prior or comorbid diagnoses impacting functioning
- Increased family distress

Psychiatric Intake
Response Center (PIRC)

205.638.PIRC (7472)

PIRC

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HOPE
Anne B. LaRussa
FOUNDATION OF HOPE

Navigating mental health resources for those who care for children and teens



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Questions?



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