The Age of Anxiety

By Ahuva Reich

Even before the advent of the coronavirus, too many children were exhibiting signs of anxiety and stress. What are schools doing to promote good mental health in our children in general and to help them cope with the stresses of Covid-19 in particular?

When Rabbi Yitzie Ross, a fourth-grade rebbi at Yeshiva of South Shore in Hewlett, New York, started teaching this past September, he noticed that his students were very restless. "I never had a class lose focus so quickly," says the veteran rebbi. He generally encourages students to follow along in the siddur with their "fingers on the place" while they daven; during the first weeks of this school year, few were able to do so. In Chumash class, a number of children were distracted and had difficulty paying attention. Rabbi Ross realized that all those months of not being in a school setting caused many students to have a hard time readjusting to the academic rigor of school. "The kids forgot how to sit in their seats and follow rules. They are worlds behind. They have no idea how to behave in a classroom."

But while the students’ lack of focus didn’t come as a shock to Rabbi Ross, he found the level of their anxiety surprising. A nine-year-old student, seated behind plexiglass and wearing a mask, went through a sixteen-ounce...
Anxiety: How Much Is Too Much?

While anxiety is a normal emotion, there are times when serious intervention is necessary. When anxiety is severe, such as when it begins to interfere with one’s daily life, one should seek professional help.

At age nineteen, college student Ahuva (not her real name) began experiencing anxiety attacks. There were days when she was nauseous and tearful, and just wanted to stay in bed. “I couldn’t identify a trigger,” she says, although she admits to having been bullied relentlessly during elementary school. Ahuva realized she needed help. She entered therapy and was eventually prescribed medication by a psychiatrist. It was a rocky adjustment until the dosages were fine-tuned. When things began to stabilize, her best friend got married and left town. Then her aunt died after a battle with cancer. “After that, I had a breakdown,” she says. “I couldn’t get out of bed, had no appetite and cried all day. My therapist thought I should consider going to a facility, because on a twenty-point scale of anxiety, I was a nineteen.” Ultimately, Ahuva was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Her medication dose was increased, and she attended more frequent therapy sessions. She also joined a support group for people who suffer from anxiety disorders.

“My life is not over after you get diagnosed,” she says. “With anxiety you go up and down, but I’m in a good place now.” This fall, she started a master’s program in mental health counseling.

bottle of hand sanitizer in two days after a student coughed near him. “There was real fear in his eyes,” says Rabbi Ross.

For some children, anxiety may be rooted in trauma; they may have experienced the sudden death of a grandparent or other relative, sensed their parents’ financial stress, or been subjected to a chaotic home environment for months on end.

“There are students who returned to school with genuine worries,” says Carly Namdar, an educational psychologist who serves as director of middle school guidance at Hebrew Academy of Long Beach (HALB) on Long Island, New York. In recent weeks, Jewish day schools in certain zip codes in the tristate area considered “red zones” opened briefly only to shut down again and resume Zoom school, which further contributed to the apprehension students might have already been feeling.

“Kids have lost so much these last few months,” says Tzivy Reiter, a licensed clinical social worker who is the director of children’s services at Ohel Children’s Home and Family Services, a large social service agency in New York City. “They’ve lost skills—social-emotional skills. They’re under duress.”

Reiter herself has become an unintended expert in disaster relief in the last twenty years—she was an active participant in the agency’s post-disaster work in the aftermath of 9/11, Hurricanes Sandy and Harvey, and the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting. But nothing prepared her for the pandemic of 2020. “This is different than anything I’ve seen. Every acute crisis has a beginning, a middle and an end.” In the case of Covid-19, however, the crisis is going on for so long—“there is an open-endedness.”

Additionally, she notes that in many ways the Covid scenario has no rule book. It is unusual, for instance, that the helpers or mental health professionals are affected by the same trauma as those they are helping. “It’s a shared traumatic reality,” she says.

Rise in Anxiety

Even before the onset of the pandemic, however, there was a noticeable rise in anxiety and stress among children and young people. “Anxiety disorders have become more prevalent, complex and severe over the past few years,” says psychologist Dr. David H. Rosmarin, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and founder of the Center for Anxiety in New York. “Approximately one third of teens today and one in six primary school-aged children have significant distress or impairment from anxiety symptoms.”

“Everyone agrees that kids are suffering from a higher level of anxiety,” says Rabbi Avi Landa, middle school mashgiach at Talmudical Academy of Baltimore (TA) and counselor at TA’s high school. “They feel stressed trying to stay on top of homework and tests. Principals cannot be referring students to therapists outside of the school en masse,” asserts Rabbi Landa, who has a master’s in counseling psychotherapy from Johns Hopkins University and a license in clinical counseling.

In fact, the rise in anxiety has not gone undetected by Jewish educators. While day schools and yeshivot have traditionally focused on academics way more than on students’ mental health needs, a shift had taken place in the
world of Jewish education, long before anyone ever heard of the word Covid. “It used to be a stigma if a school had a guidance counselor,” says Shira Berkowitz, LCSW, who is based in Chicago and serves as the director of school-based programs for Madraigos Midwest, an organization that supports the emotional, social and spiritual health of adolescents and young adults and program director of Darcheinu and Our Path, two social-emotional learning curricula for Jewish day schools. “Nowadays, the majority of Jewish day schools and yeshivas have at least one mental health professional on staff. Many of these schools have mental health professionals on staff, though the students may not be aware of the actual role of those staff members. (Some kids won’t speak to a therapist but will confide in a mechanechet [Torah educator] or mashgiach [spiritual advisor].) Relief Resources partners with Torah Umesorah, the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, to conduct training for mechanchot and yeshivah mashgichim who serve in a quasi-mental health role. “The fact that such a program exists is evidence of how things are changing,” says Rabbi Landa.

Of course, there are still some pockets of resistance. Some schools, says Berkowitz, insist that their students “don’t have issues.” A classroom rebbe recalls that a parent once told him, “I have a rav. My child doesn’t need a counselor.” But such resistance, says Berkowitz, is far from the norm. “In practically every school, there are at least one or two
Giving Up Control

One way to alleviate anxiety is giving up your need for control and strengthening your belief that God is in control. “Nowadays we can predict markets, the weather, et cetera,” explains Dr. David H. Rosmarin, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and founder of the Center for Anxiety in New York. “We’re obsessed with control. We don’t realize that emotional fluctuations, unpredictability and failure are normal parts of life. We’ve lost tolerance for uncertainty and feel anxious when we can’t control every outcome.” Remarkably, clinical science points to the importance of giving up control and “accepting the uncertainty of life as the foremost antidote to anxiety,” he says.

Students out during the year because of mental health conditions.” As a result of the prevalence of mental health issues, “as a community, we have tried to stop sweeping problems under the rug. Frum publications discuss these issues openly.”

Covid has helped move Jewish schools along in this area, making teachers and administrators more aware of and attentive to mental health concerns. “A child is not available for learning if he’s in an unhealthy place,” says Namdar.

Skills for Life

“Social-emotional skills are really skills for life,” says Reiter, who is a firm believer in “universal intervention,” the notion that schools must play a proactive role and provide all students, not only those who seem to be having a hard time, with social-emotional support. With this approach, it’s not just the stereotyped “problem child” who gets support. “All children get some level of support and social-emotional skill building,” says Reiter. “A school with a more progressive, resilience-based environment is going to have this mindset.”

Piggybacking on the national push to have social-emotional learning (SEL) in public schools, some Jewish day schools, in addition to having mental health professionals on staff who meet with students one on one, have begun introducing SEL into the curriculum. In these weekly or biweekly sessions, social-emotional skills, including managing emotions, developing compassion, knowing how to handle conflict, building healthy peer relationships, and responsible decision-making, are taught in a classroom setting.

Studies show that SEL programs not only improve social and emotional skills, they also improve academic performance. Even more importantly, they give kids the keys to future accomplishment. “We believe that social-emotional skills are a greater predictor of academic success and life success than IQ,” says Reiter.

The Darcheinu web site states that students who have completed SEL programs are nine times more likely to report bullying, and fifteen times more likely to prevent bullying. Additionally, their grade point averages are thirteen percentile points higher than those who have not taken SEL programs.

Do the lessons stick? According to Reiter, there’s no question they do. She tells the story of a mother of a young child who participated in Ohel’s Smile Club, a weekly program held over Zoom several months ago when everyone was sheltering in place that helped children develop emotional regulation and problem-solving skills. The mom was having a hard day and looked somewhat down. Her daughter handed her a piece of paper and said with an air of authority, “Mommy, draw how you feel. It will make you feel better.”

Joining the SEL Movement

Aiming to help schools “catch issues before they become problems,” Berkowitz is on a crusade to make SEL an integral part of every Jewish day school curriculum. She has helped bring Darcheinu and Our Path, comprehensive SEL curricula designed for fifth through twelfth grade, to thirty schools nationwide. Schools in London and Melbourne have reached out to her as well.
future mental health issues,” states Berkowitz, who has taught the curriculum in various schools since 2003. To illustrate her point, she tells of a class she once gave to teenage girls on the subject of body image. A few weeks later, a girl approached her and said that one of her friends is barely eating and is significantly underweight. Together they figured out a way to guide the young person in question toward help. Berkowitz tells her students that her classroom is a nonjudgmental environment and they can share anything they’d like and she will respect their confidentiality. However, if someone is in danger, confidentiality will have to be broken.

“If students have a good, solid sense of self, they can withstand peer pressure and are less likely to fall into negative behavior patterns,” she explains. “And if they learn how to manage their anxiety, a full-blown anxiety disorder can be prevented.”

“Those classes can literally prevent behavior,” says Rabbi Landa, who teaches an SEL-styled course at TA. “I can’t tell you how many boys come to me after class and discuss things they wouldn’t

A child should never be made to feel guilty about his feelings. Don’t respond dismissively by saying “you are fine” or “calm down.” Instead, try “this seems really hard for you. Tell me what’s going on.” Validate feelings, not necessarily behavior.

—Dr. Leah Haber, PsyD, a clinical psychologist practicing in Ramat Beit Shemesh

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Are We Coddling Too Much?

By Barbara Bensoussan

Modern parents have become much more protective of children on every level. The result: children are emerging less able to cope with life’s stresses. “Not very long ago, 50 percent of people lived in dire poverty,” says Dr. Rosmarin. “It was normal for life to be imperfect, for people to struggle. Today we’ve become so accustomed to comfort that we’re hypersensitive to anything that isn’t just right in our lives.”

Baby Boomers will remember that during their childhoods no one used car seats or wore helmets to ride a bike, and kids were allowed to play outdoors for hours far from parental supervision as long as they showed up for supper.

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Modern safety regulations have clearly been effective. Dr. Mariana Brussoni of the Child and Family Research Institute in Vancouver told the New York Times that research bears out that “there’s never been a safer time to be a child” (“Making Playgrounds a Little More Dangerous,” May 10, 2019). In the same article, however, she argues that modern playgrounds are so safe that children, who need to test their bodies and their skills, get frustrated and start engaging in more daredevil behaviors—which ironically leads to more injuries compared to “less safe” playgrounds. Similarly, a 2014 Atlantic article entitled “The Overprotected Kid” states that today’s helicopter parents are afraid to let their children explore on their own. “Failure to supervise has become, in fact, synonymous with failure to parent,” writes author Hanna Rosin. “The result is a ‘continuous and ultimately dramatic decline in children’s opportunities to play and explore in their own chosen ways,’” she says, quoting psychologist Peter Gray. Few children today play outside regularly, exercising their bodies and imaginations, or challenging themselves—even if the challenge is simply to catch a toad, climb a tree or make a fort with old branches.

In the absence of the kinds of economic necessities known to previous generations of teens—putting yourself through college, earning your own pocket money, helping with housework and the care of younger siblings—few teens today are asked to take on significant responsibility beyond doing their homework. But responsibility is what builds confidence and resilience. “We have to ask, are teens being asked to step up to the plate?” says Rebbetzin Dr. Adina Shmidman, a longtime educator with a doctorate in educational psychology who currently serves as director of the OU’s Women’s Initiative. “They need to be tasked with responsibilities if they are to develop a sense of control and confidence.”

Yet modern parents tend to be indulgent and permissive. “Many kids don’t hear the word ‘no’ often enough,” says Rebbetzin Aviva Feiner, rebbetzin of Congregation Kneseth Israel (the White Shul) in Far Rockaway, New York, and a well-known educator and speaker. “So they don’t learn to deal with frustration or having to delay gratification.” Parents give their children plenty of positive stroking yet protect them from the challenges that would toughen them up and develop resilience. The result has been a “snowflake generation”—“Each one is unique, each one is beautiful, but if you touch them, they melt,” she says. A Jerusalem-based therapist draws a parallel with the process in which baby birds peck their way out of the egg. Doing so requires them to develop muscles that will later be crucial to their survival. If the mother bird were to “help” her babies by breaking the shell herself, those muscles would never develop. “Parents have good intentions,” she says, “but kids need to struggle a little. If parents do all their kids’ dirty work, they never develop competencies of their own.”

The result of coddling is that children remain childlike much longer than they used to. Dr. Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, analyzed data from a survey of 11 million young Americans from 1976 through the present, looking at adolescent behaviors and development. Her data reveals that eighteen-year-olds today are less likely than previous generations to achieve milestones like getting a driver’s license or finding a summer job. They generally grow up more slowly. “They look more like fifteen-year-olds than eighteen-year-olds,” she says.

A longtime Jewish Action contributor, Barbara Bensoussan is the author of a food memoir entitled The Well-Spiced Life, describing her discovery of Sephardic food and faith, and Pride and Preference, a novel reimagining Austen’s classic in today’s Orthodox world.
Parenting the Anxious Child
By David H. Rosmarin

We are living in an era of anxiety. In each and every calendar year, one in six grade-school children and one in three teens nationwide has anxiety symptoms that warrant professional attention. While point-prevalence rates in the Orthodox community are unknown, referrals for anxious children certainly are at an all-time high and severity of symptoms is increasing over time.

What should parents do when their children have anxiety? I have yet to meet an anxious child that does not have at least one anxious parent. This happens for a variety of reasons, including the well-known psychological phenomenon of social or vicarious learning—the process by which people adopt behaviors of others they look up to. But before any Jewish parental guilt sets in, consider the positive side of the equation: Overcoming your own anxiety could be all that’s needed for a child to overcome his or hers.

To that end, there is even more good news. The gold standard in anxiety treatment (for adults and children) is a relatively simple and typically brief psychotherapeutic approach known as exposure therapy. While exposure therapy does not work for everyone and some individuals may benefit from medication as well, more than 80 percent of patients respond to treatment such that their symptoms no longer interfere with day-to-day life. In our clinic, we routinely observe such benefits by the end of just seven sessions.

The main method of exposure therapy is to face one’s fears over and over again until anxiety dissipates. Worrywarts are encouraged to intentionally think the worst for a few minutes each day. Panickers are challenged to panic and “let go” until anxiety subsides on its own (typically panic attacks last less than ten minutes). Individuals with social anxiety are taught to engage with others and subject themselves to the possibility of negative evaluation and judgment. And individuals with obsessive compulsive disorder are pushed to let their distressing thoughts come into their minds without engaging in repetitive compulsive behaviors. Children with any of these symptoms receive the same approach, but there are two main caveats for treatment to be successful: Kids typically require a bit more hand-holding in exposure therapy, and parents need to provide a unified front together with the therapist.

In these and other cases, the mechanisms of effect with exposure therapy are well established. By approaching anxiety-provoking situations, we increase our tolerance of uncertainty and our ability to withstand distress, and thereby strengthen our resilience against anxiety. Tolerating uncertainty is a life skill that, unfortunately, has fallen by the wayside in our current culture. Technological advancements have made us feeble and unable to handle being “out of the know” or out of control. We are so used to having information at our fingertips that when things are uncertain or unknown, we become easily unmoored. As for distress, our culture is all but allergic. Our immediate resolve when faced with strain or pain is to resort to medications, or otherwise do anything we can to stem the tide of discomfort. These macro-level trends could very well be the primary reasons why anxiety is so widespread and severe today.

Children need to learn to tolerate uncertainty. . . . Children don’t need to know everything and parents don’t need to explain everything to them!

To these ends, children need to learn to tolerate uncertainty. Beyond exposure therapy, which is typically reserved for cases where anxiety is causing significant distress or impairment for at least a month, it’s advisable to habituate children to not having all information at their fingertips. Putting the ubiquitous issue of technology access aside, children don’t need to know everything and parents don’t need to explain everything to them! Moreover, using the art of surprise has many benefits to children (e.g., taking a family trip without mentioning where you are heading).

Children also need to tolerate discomfort. Simply sitting with distress is a life lesson that can prevent anxiety from getting out of control. The reality of life is that it is uncomfortable at times, and sparing children from any degree of failure ironically increases the likelihood of emotional struggles down the line. Of course, don’t gratuitously cause harm, but when distress occurs it’s important to allow kids to struggle through it as opposed to always providing a bailout. Along these lines, it is important to teach and reinforce and reward bravery, courage, patience and grit. When children (or adults) face their fears, tolerate uncertainty and withstand distress or pain, it’s worthy of recognition and praise, since they are taking active steps to thrive in the era of anxiety.

David H. Rosmarin, PhD, is founder/director of the Center for Anxiety in New York and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. His clinical work and research have been featured in Scientific American, the Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times.
To welcome students back to school, Margolin Hebrew Academy in Memphis, Tennessee sponsored a parade. Courtesy of Jessica Baum/Margolin Hebrew Academy

When Your Child Is Feeling Anxious

By David H. Rosmarin

If your child doesn’t want to go to school or take a test, for example, due to his anxiety:

Validate that he is having a hard time by conveying that you understand and appreciate how he feels.

Don’t bail her out; rather, find a way to help her engage. If she can’t or won’t do all of the task, encourage her to do as much as possible.

When a child faces his fears, sits with discomfort or tolerates uncertainty, appreciate it and reinforce him with praise (catch him being “good”!).

When a child can’t or won’t engage in important aspects of life for a month or more, consult a mental health professional for guidance.
also see the need to support our teachers. . . how do they balance their own emotional health? They have to take care of themselves so they can be there for their students,” says Dr. Hindin.

A Covid Curriculum
Along with collectively spending millions of dollars this past summer on facilities upgrades, additional space, PPE (personal protective equipment) and additional staff due to the Covid crisis, Jewish day schools and yeshivot recognized the need to invest in helping students cope with the challenges of the past few months.

This past September, TAG increased the presence of mental health staff in the classroom, preparing teachers for the potential impact on students. In addition, the mental health professionals on staff helped students process their experiences through creative expression, via journaling or art projects such as collages.

The Margolin Hebrew Academy took a creative approach to reducing kids’ anxiety as they returned to school: it sponsored a parade. Since the community is located within a relatively small area, head of school Rabbi Benjy Owen and other administrators stood on a flatbed truck, decorated with colorful posters and balloons, and circled the neighborhood. Teachers followed in their cars. As the truck passed each child’s home, the administrators waved and distributed popsicles and frisbees.

“We wanted to reduce kids’ anxiety and build some excitement for the start of school,” explains Rabbi Owen.

In the beginning of the school year, Reiter, as the director of Ohel’s school-based programs, became a major force in helping schools prepare for reopening in a safe, emotionally comfortable way. She oversaw the development and dissemination of a school reopening toolkit that included lesson plans for different grades. The lessons take students through various stages in an age-appropriate way, acknowledging the trauma (“What happened to us?"); allowing them to express their feelings (“How do we feel?"); and finally, bringing them emotionally to a place of hope (“Looking forward”). “There must be an acknowledgement of the trauma,” says Reiter. Some 140 schools downloaded the toolkit, made available by Ohel free of charge. Additionally, in conjunction with Metiv: The Israel Psychotrauma Center, Reiter produced a “Resilience Workbook,” an activity book for children in kindergarten through fifth grade that aims to help students build resilience. Based on the latest research on self-regulation, the workbook is comprised of various coloring pages where children learn not only to identify feelings but to understand that feelings “don’t just happen to them, they can regulate those feelings,” explains Reiter.

Many schools are simply drawing upon their existing SEL programs to bolster students’ coping skills and resilience. “Some of the skills we teach in our Road MAPP program include mindfulness, relaxation techniques and self-talk,” says Namdar. The teachers at HALB, she says, are at an advantage since they’ve already received significant training in mental health awareness because of the pilot program. “Our faculty has a strong foundation in adolescent mental health. This is just continuing the conversation.”

Drawing upon the work of positive psychology guru Tal Ben Shahar, Namdar insists that there’s no rule book with regard to how one should be feeling at this time. Her advice for both children and parents? All emotions are okay. Express your emotions. Draw them. Paint them. Write them. Exercise regularly. Have some way to engage in self-care. And finally: Express gratitude.

Gratitude research shows that the more gratitude we express in our lives, the happier we are, she says. Keep a gratitude journal, she advises—there is always something to be grateful for.

Anxiety, like most feelings, is contagious. Anxiety in our children can trigger a similar reaction in us. Before you respond, make sure to give yourself space, don’t say the first thing that pops into your head.

—Dr. Leah Haber

Overcoming Fears  By Leah Haber

Often, our instincts as parents are to “make things easy” for our kids and avoid uncomfortable situations. For example, if our child is anxious about going to sleepaway camp, we may simply allow him or her to stay home. However, by doing this, we bypass the problem rather than help our kids manage their anxiety. It’s more constructive to let our children experience some emotional discomfort, which implicitly gives them the message: “I know this is hard. I believe you can figure this out.”

When we say “fine, don’t go to camp,” a child might think: “I don’t believe I can do this and my parent doesn’t either.” A more productive way to deal with anxiety is to talk it through and possibly problem solve with a child. We might say: “I get that you’re nervous. Going away to camp is a big deal. Are there any specific parts of camp that you’re nervous about? What do you think might help you in that situation? Would you like to hear what worked for me when I was a kid?” Often, anxiety can be diffused just by talking things out and giving ourselves and our child enough time and emotional space to think, plan and problem solve.

Leah Haber, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist practicing in Ramat Beit Shemesh.