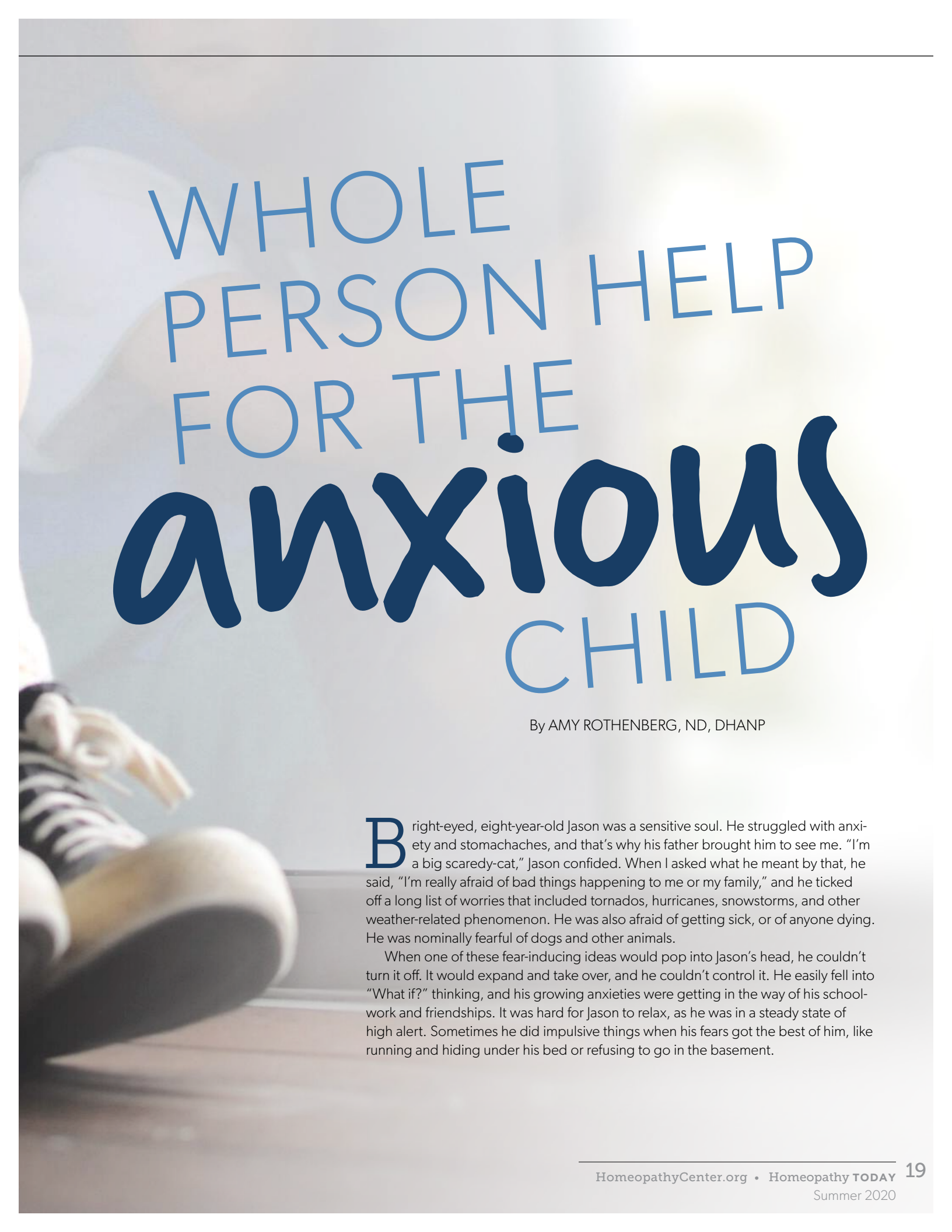


Tools, tips, and
coping strategies:
a natural medicine
approach



WHOLE PERSON HELP FOR THE **anxious** CHILD

By AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP

Bright-eyed, eight-year-old Jason was a sensitive soul. He struggled with anxiety and stomachaches, and that's why his father brought him to see me. "I'm a big scaredy-cat," Jason confided. When I asked what he meant by that, he said, "I'm really afraid of bad things happening to me or my family," and he ticked off a long list of worries that included tornados, hurricanes, snowstorms, and other weather-related phenomenon. He was also afraid of getting sick, or of anyone dying. He was nominally fearful of dogs and other animals.

When one of these fear-inducing ideas would pop into Jason's head, he couldn't turn it off. It would expand and take over, and he couldn't control it. He easily fell into "What if?" thinking, and his growing anxieties were getting in the way of his schoolwork and friendships. It was hard for Jason to relax, as he was in a steady state of high alert. Sometimes he did impulsive things when his fears got the best of him, like running and hiding under his bed or refusing to go in the basement.



Childhood anxiety climbing

We have seen a rise in childhood anxiety in recent years. About 7% of children in the United States are diagnosed with anxiety, but this number does not include all the other children who are intensely worried, scared, or anxious but have not seen a doctor about it. And this data was compiled prior to 2020's worldwide pandemic and social upheaval, so it is probable that those numbers have climbed substantially. Only about 60% of children between ages 3 and 17 years who complain of anxiety reportedly receive treatment.¹

Common anxiety indicators in children include:

- Not sleeping well or having bad dreams
- Finding it difficult to focus
- Appetite changes
- Easy anger or irritability
- Emotional outbursts
- Worrying about things large and small
- Negative, pessimistic thoughts
- Feeling fidgety or restless, or using the toilet often
- Crying a lot and/or being clingy
- Physical complaints, such as tummy aches, skin problems, headaches with no apparent cause.

Anxiety is more common as children age, with a higher incidence in communities below the poverty line. There is a growing effort² to integrate mental and behavioral health services into the pediatric setting, to ensure more children are assessed for and receive services for mental health issues if needed.

As a licensed naturopathic doctor, I am always interested in working with the whole

child, so it would be a routine part of any office visit to inquire about mental health and tendencies for irritability, depression, or anxiety, regardless of the chief complaint bringing the family into the office. We look at anxiety in the context of the whole child and within the family dynamic. Our treatment approaches emphasize lifestyle efforts and gentle natural medicines, including homeopathy. That said, if the situation is severe, if there is also depression, the risk of self-harm, or evidence of self-harm, a team approach with a child psychologist and/or psychiatrist will also be indicated.

An anxious "people-person"

Along with being sensitive, anxious, and somewhat impulsive, Jason was "a big crier," according to Jason and his dad. If Jason was upset or anxious, having a good cry (with mom or dad there to console him) left him feeling better afterward.

Jason had stomachaches at least once a week. The pain was often accompanied by a lot of gas and bloating, feelings of nausea, and the sudden need to have a bowel movement (often greenish and loose), which left him feeling tired and drained.

Jason's dad reported that his son was healthy, robust, and curious as a baby. Once able to crawl, Jason had eagerly explored his surroundings. Jason was up to date on his childhood vaccinations and had never taken an antibiotic. The family ate a whole-food based diet and often spent time together outdoors. The parents limited Jason's and his brother's screen time.

"Jason seems happiest when he's with other people," his dad reported. "He's often the life of the party. He can be silly and funny and enjoys making other people laugh. But it all comes crashing down when he starts to think about something that scares him. He gets increasingly anxious...and this scenario is playing out more and more often, so we started bringing him to a child psychologist." The therapist was using art therapy to help Jason unwind some of the stressors and learn appropriate coping strategies.

Jason always had a good report from school, although his teachers described him as easily distracted by classmates. They also said he was pleasant and helpful, and a generous and kind friend.

Jason had a cute and funny way of raising his eyebrows and popping his eyes out a

bit when he talked about the things that scared him—he actually looked a little scared. It was a quirky facial expression, somewhat akin to a tic, and I took note of it.

In other regards, Jason was in good health. He was growing well, did not have allergies, and was rarely ill. He was warm blooded, he loved sweets, and he loved salty snacks. He slept well, except when a scary idea or image got in his imagination, then his anxiety was off and running.

Precipitating stressors?

When hearing a story like Jason's, I am interested to learn how and when the problem started, because symptoms do not typically arise out of thin air. Did something happen that might have caused or contributed to this kind of anxiety? Sometimes the answers to these questions will help us understand why or when a symptom complex began—and helps fill in the story.

When asked about this, Jason's father said his son had taken a turn for the worse two years earlier when a tornado came through the next town. Many houses were destroyed, businesses ruined, and trees uprooted. Jason began asking if this could happen on their street. He started to obsessively watch The Weather Channel, and he asked his parents many times a day about the weather for that day and the next, saying, "Are we going to be okay?"

Jason's dad also mentioned that Jason's mom was on the anxious side but controlled her anxiety by a lot of exercising, refraining from caffeine in her diet, and practicing mindfulness meditation. So, Jason had some genetic predisposition to anxiety—you can think of this as both nature and nurture working against him.

In a sensitive person such as Jason, the precipitating event for the onset of symptoms could be just about anything—perhaps something in the environment like the weather or pollution or a virus going around, or maybe a loss or sorrow or other bad news. But *it's always less about the actual event or experience, and more about how the sensitive individual responds to that experience.*

Homeopathic options

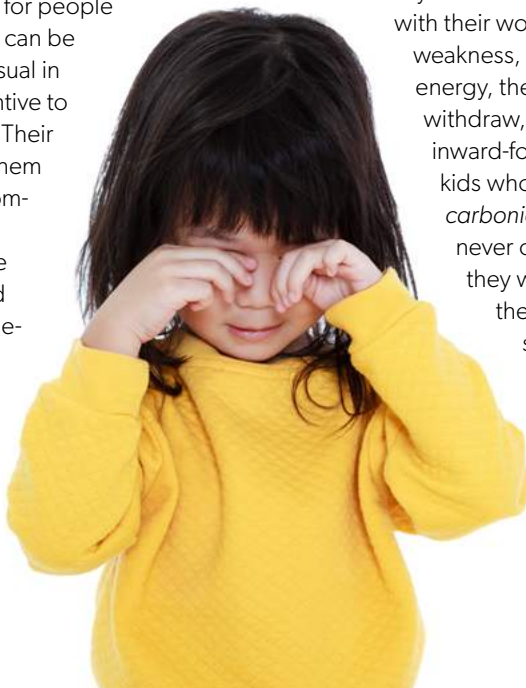
There are many remedies for anxious children (and adults) in our homeopathic *materia medica*. For anxious kids, I most

often consider the remedies *Aconite*, *Arsenicum album*, *Ignatia*, *Lycopodium*, *Baryta carbonica*, *Silica*, *Stramonium*, *Phosphorus*, *Carcinosin*, or *Argentum nitricum*. What follows are thumbnail sketches of the symptom profiles of these remedies, focusing on the anxiety angle. Please realize that the full symptom profiles would be broader and more nuanced, and would include physical complaints and other psychological, emotional, and cognitive issues. Those other non-anxiety symptoms, however, would carry the same modalities (i.e., qualifiers or what makes them better or worse) and the same physical general attributes (e.g., temperature preferences, quality of pain, time of day when worse, etc.) that the anxiety symptoms have. Also, please remember that each of these “remedy types” manifests some lovely and wonderful attributes, too, but those are not the ones we are trying to help with!

Aconite babies or children, like adults who need this remedy, often get stuck in a panic mode after a scary event such as after a traumatic birth, after any kind of accident, or after witnessing something scary. They may have intense and sudden fears or panic, and they may have dry skin and a dry mouth, along with a fast heartbeat.

Arsenicum album is a remedy that comes to mind for “Nervous Nellies” whose focus of anxiety is on their own health and well-being. It may appear that these kids are worried about others when they ask “When will Mom be home?” but in truth it’s because they need Mom to take care of them. They can seem selfish, with a strong need for people to help them. They can be chilly (which is unusual in kids) and very attentive to all the little details. Their anxiety can make them demanding and complaining.

Ignatia kids are perfectionistic, and you might feel somehow judged by them. They have high ideals about how everything should be done, how people should



It’s always less about the actual event or experience, and more about how the sensitive individual responds to that experience.

act, and how the household, classroom, team, or friend group should function; that’s why they are often disappointed by others! Both the little girls and boys who need this remedy might be described as “high maintenance,” moody, and tense. Their anxiety has to do with trying to control everything to meet their high standards. I have seen kids as young as age 4 or 5 presenting like this.

Lycopodium kids might feel a lack of self-confidence, which causes feelings of anxiety. They cover up their anxiety by bossing others around and acting a bit superior. They can be irritable, especially on rising and in the later afternoons, and they might very well have coined the term “hangry.”

Baryta carbonica children display shyness and nervousness that arise from not having a clear sense of who they are. They lack self-agency and seem younger than their years, at whatever age they are. They are worried about making the wrong decision, so they often cannot make a decision at all, about things large or small. They can get panicky in new settings, not knowing what to do with themselves. They need and do well with a lot of reassurance.

Silica kids may appear similar to *Baryta carbonica* kids in terms of worry and low self-capacity, but their worry results from an underlying weakness—a weaker body and mind. In order to cope with their worry and feelings of weakness, they conserve their energy, they don’t engage, they withdraw, and they stay more inward-focused. Much like kids who benefit from *Baryta carbonica*, *Silica* kids will never cause trouble, and they won’t be a bother; they will recede to keep safe. [For more help in differentiating between anxious kids who need *Baryta carbonica*, *Silica*, or *Pulsatilla*, see

my Autumn 2013 article, Beat the Back-to-School Blues, in the *Homeopathy Today* online archives. <https://www.homeopathy-center.org/homeopathy-today-magazine/>]

Stramonium is a remedy to consider for children with tremendous fear and anxiety, especially related to the dark, going to sleep, and the idea of death. They have deep feelings of not being safe. The anxiety causes kids needing this remedy to act out, sometimes violently, and to have night terrors or other wide-awake expressions of anger and violence. It seems an odd juxtaposition, but the fear and anxiety pushes the child needing *Stramonium* in this direction. [For a more in-depth view of the psychology and physical ailments of people who benefit from this remedy, see the book, *Stramonium: With an Introduction to Analysis Using Cycles and Segments*, by Paul Herscu ND, MPH.]

Zeroing in on a remedy

In deciding on a homeopathic remedy for Jason, I ruled out the ones I just described because they didn’t seem to fit him and the way he experienced anxiety. I was looking for a remedy for an upbeat person who is sensitive by nature, is easily impressed by outside events, and might tend to have digestive issues. This led me to consider *Phosphorus*, *Carcinosin*, or *Argentum nitricum*.

Phosphorus fit the criteria, but in my understanding of the cycle of this remedy, the person has a strong desire to connect with others and puts out a lot of energy, which leads to a kind of burnout. From that place of weakness, the anxiety mounts, manifesting as the need to be taken care of, coddled, and adored. This did not fit Jason’s kind of anxiety at all, so I ruled out *Phosphorus*.

Carcinosin anxiety is more related to wanting and needing to be taken care of. And because they need that so strongly, they become somewhat suppressed by the people around them (not typically on purpose, but by default). This was not Jason either.

TOOLKIT FOR Anxious Kids & THEIR FAMILIES

by AMY
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13 practical steps for parents and caregivers

Many homeopaths and licensed naturopathic doctors are now offering telemedicine services, so it's easier than ever to find someone to work with you and your child. Here are some recommendations and tools you can use alongside homeopathic treatment.

- 1. Be aware of your own anxiety.** As parent or caregiver, examine your own level of anxiety and how it manifests. Secure treatment for yourself, as children absorb your feelings and actions just as much as what you say!
- 2. Create a peaceful oasis.** Foster a peaceful home environment by reducing mess and clutter, sticking to a predictable daily schedule, and limiting exposure and access to the news cycle. While we do not want to raise uninformed children, they do not need to know all the bad news related to violence, politics, poverty, and the environment. It's overwhelming for adults, and that much more so for children. Consider outlets like the *GoodNewsNetwork.com*, *National Geographic Kids*, *Sports Illustrated Kids*, etc., for your world-curious child.
- 3. Tamp down stressors.** Assess the main stressors in the family (e.g., money, the state of the world, sibling rivalry, caretaking of relatives), and work to troubleshoot them if possible. Keep adult conversations between adults; it does not help children to worry about things they cannot control.
- 4. Get on the same page.** Set age-appropriate expectations for children and teens, especially related to screen time use, helping out around the house, doing schoolwork, and spending time with family.
- 5. Limit social media.** There is a strong correlation between social media use and anxiety and depression, so delay introduction with children as long as possible. For older kids and teens, monitor and assess their social media use, and work creatively to reduce access and texting time. Model and make evident how you limit your own use of social media and constant connection to being online.
- 6. Make room for feelings.** Use language to describe a range of feelings in age-appropriate ways, articulating some of the more nuanced words that describe difficult feelings, starting when children are very young. Make time and space for conversations that take place in a "judgment-free" zone.
- 7. Get outside.** Research study after study shows the positive health effects of being outdoors. Time outside ensures time away from screens, provides sunshine and Vitamin D, exposes children to nature, and offers opportunities to learn. The health benefits are generally more attainable by those who have access to safe, nature-filled places; sadly, these are unevenly distributed across the country. Some of my favorite outdoor activities for kids beyond the usual running around, using playground equipment, and engaging in sports include: I Spy, treasure hunts, and learning to use field guides to identify birds or plants.
- 8. Get moving.** The importance of being physically active cannot be overstated. Exercise raises the threshold for feeling stress and dissipates the stress already there. It also helps the body to be more perfused (improved circulation) which helps to circulate the improved nutrition and supplements your child may be taking (more about that later). Any physical activity is better than none, from running to jumping rope to mini-trampoline bouncing, and from dance to martial arts to circus arts—really, it's all good. Mostly it's a matter of introducing your child to all kinds of activities to help them find things that they enjoy, that they might develop some skill at, and that might help take their mind off their anxiety.
- 9. Cultivate creativity.** Artsy, creative, and calming activities are important because they occupy the mind and relax the mood, putting a person "in the zone" where they don't even realize where the time has gone. Examples include painting, drawing, making things, cooking, baking, making music, listening to music, journal writing, creating videos, taking photographs, learning computer programming, learning how to use apps or programs—and just about any such engrossing activity. Children and adults need these outlets now more than ever. Adults can model this behavior for children; bring kids along when you're engaged in your creative interests, hobbies, and pastimes, so they see how you can enjoy activities beyond work and housework.
- 10. Give kids self-agency.** We want to empower our kids and give them the gift of self-agency. As parents or authority figures, we need to watch our criticism, be mindful of tone of voice when offering feedback, and resist constantly correcting kids' ideas, creative expressions, or choices. We all can work on encouraging kids to take healthy risks by learning something new and getting comfortable reaching out to others.
- 11. Cultivate a culture of gratefulness.** Introduce and practice a posture of gratitude in words and deeds, such as writing thank you notes, finding opportunities for family community service activities, and more.
- 12. Breathe and be mindful.** Mindfulness meditation for kids has gained popularity and shown evidence of efficacy in recent years. Breathing exercises, such as square breathing, counting breaths, or alternate-nostril breathing can all be taught to even our youngest children. Giving kids tools such as these to manage overwhelming feelings

is a good idea. And practicing as a family at less anxious times builds those “muscles,” so that the skill will be easier to access when it’s needed most.

You might also introduce your child to positive self-talk, which you can write for or with them. Examples are: “I am strong and peaceful, and my home is safe,” or “I am breathing in peace and healing, and breathing out stress and worry.” If it is within your belief system or family tradition, prayer can be an enormous help.

Here are some more great resources for teaching the tools of mindfulness, meditation, and self-calming:

- *Alphabreaths: the ABCs of Mindful Breathing*, by Christopher Willard, PsyD, and Daniel Rechtschaffen, illustrated by Holly Clifton-Brown. This delightfully illustrated book is a wonderful resource to read and share.
- 9 Books to Calm Anxious Little Ones, a *New York Times* list. www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/books/childrens-books-anxiety.html
- HeadSpace for Kids—a children’s version of the popular meditation app, plus other resources. www.headspace.com/meditation/kids
- Insight Timer for Kids—a children’s version of the popular meditation app and website. insighttimer.com/meditation-topics/children
- Smiling Mind—free mindfulness app, tools, and courses for young people and their families, offered by a not-for-profit organization in Australia. www.smilingmind.com.au



13. Eat healthy food. One trigger for anxiety can be food allergies, so it can be helpful to work with an expert who can help you figure out if that is a likely factor for your child. Processed foods, excess dyes, and preservatives can also be irritating to some kids, especially sensitive kids, so gradually replacing those foods with healthier, less processed options can be key. Decreasing refined sugar is also important, as sugar adds to mood dysregulation. For those of you just starting out with a family, put off introducing sweets as long as possible! Though I am a firm believer in the idea that the body reflects the habitual, not the occasional, a problem sweet tooth is easy to develop!

14. Tend the miraculous microbiome. Our microbiomes affect everything from immunity and inflammation to energy and mood. There is also a very clear connection between the brain and the gut, so keeping the microbiome as robust and diverse as possible can help with anxiety. Think probiotic supplements as well as offering food and beverages that are fermented or cultured each day, such as yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kombucha, miso, etc.

15. Consider botanicals. Certain kid-safe botanicals can be used as teas or essential oils, or in capsules if a child is old enough to swallow them. The main herbs we consider for anxious kids are lavender, chamomile, and passionflower.

Argentum nitricum anxiety typically begins as a cognitive thing, where small ideas get planted in the mind, become stuck, and then grow and grow and take over as anxiety-infused thoughts. There is a bubbly, connected quality to the person needing this remedy, and people are drawn to them. People needing this remedy are often kind of twitchy, a bit impulsive, and might have tics or tremors. This described Jason perfectly. In addition, the sense of abdominal bloating followed by loose stools is characteristic of this remedy. His warm-bloodedness and strong desire for sweets and salty snacks were also strongly characteristic of this remedy.

I sent Jason home with one dose of *Argentum nitricum 200c* and shared a number of recommendations tailored to him. (For examples, see “Toolkit to Help Anxious Kids and Their Families beginning on page 20.) I wanted to give both Jason and his parents some approaches they could use to complement the homeopathic treatment, and they were game!

A more relaxed Jason

When the family returned to see me five weeks later, I could tell Jason was better. He came right up, gave me a hug, and said, “Thank you, Dr. Amy! I’m not a scaredy-cat anymore!” His mother described how he seemed more focused and less distracted by worrisome thoughts. She added that they’d been incorporating some of my suggestions about diet and the microbiome, and they had introduced some mindfulness practices.

I love to use homeopathy in the context of naturopathic medicine—there is no reason not to. For anxious children, giving patients and their families effective supplemental approaches that encourage self-agency, self-regulation, and self-soothing makes good sense, too.

Over the next eight years, I saw Jason for tune-ups every year or so. His family would reach out when he had an acute ailment or if he began to feel a little of the old anxiety creeping back. I most often gave him another dose of *Argentum nitricum* as his constitutional remedy, but a few times I gave other remedies when he had a true acute illness. Although he remained on the sensitive side, Jason flourished in school and sports as the years progressed, no longer hobbled by fears and anxiety. Last I heard from his mother, Jason had graduated high school and was heading for college in the coming year.

Anxious kids often become anxious adults, so giving kids the right homeopathic remedy, alongside age-appropriate, adaptable tools to help prevent and address anxiety, is good medicine!

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