

Welcome! We are glad you are here.

# Addressing Youth Anxiety and School Absenteeism with SPACE Therapy

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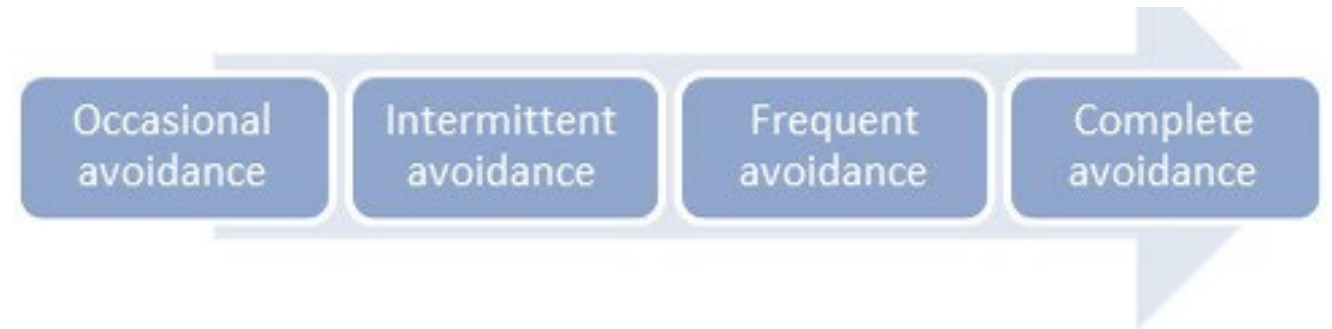
*The planners and speaker for this presentation have no relevant financial relationships to disclose.*

# Learning Objectives

- Identify how anxiety contributes to school absenteeism and its impact on youth development
- Explain the principles of Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions (SPACE) Therapy and how it differs from traditional anxiety treatments

# Emotionally-based School Avoidance (EBSA)

- Not the same as truancy- based in a difficulty attending school due to emotional factors
- Often children want to attend school, but it is the stress, anxiety, and other emotions that makes children feel like they need to avoid school
- Happens when stress exceeds support
- Early signs:
  - Being late for school
  - Being sick on school days
  - Missing some lessons
  - Missing specific school activities



# Emotionally-based School Avoidance (EBSA)

- 1-5% of the school population experiences EBSA at any one time
- 5-28% experience EBSA at some point during their school years
- Is useful to understand the reasons behind school avoidance and understand it as a coping mechanism so as to address the cause
- To promote attending school, may need to provide more support, make adjustments, or put particular interventions in place
- Children who avoid school are likely to have poor outcomes in:
  - education
  - well-being
  - inclusion in society

# Factors that lead to school avoidance



- Avoid uncomfortable feelings brought on by attending school (depression, anxiety)
- Avoid stressful situations
- Reduce separation anxiety or gain attention from significant others
- Pursue tangible reinforcers outside of school (Kearney, Silverman, 1990)

# Functions of School Avoidance

- Avoid situations specific to school that cause high stress (push from school)
  - Environment: noise, crowds, smells, sounds, playground
  - Learning: reading, processing, learning issues, work too hard
  - Expectations: exams, homework, behavior
  - Transitions: between groups, classes, teachers
- Avoid social situations at school that cause stress and discomfort (push from school)
  - Interactions: difficulties making and keeping friends
  - Lack of inclusion: isolation, lack of a group
  - Expectations: working in a group, performance anxiety
  - Negative interactions: bullying, poor relationship with a teacher

# Functions of School Avoidance

- Spend more time with people at home (pull to home)
  - Family dynamics: recent changes, divorce, separation, bereavement
  - Well-being concerns: physical and/or mental needs of a parent or sibling
  - Safety concerns: domestic abuse, substance use
  - Engagement: parents or sibling at home
- Spend time doing more fun activities (pull to home)-this alone not considered to be EBSA
  - Activities: watching TV, video games, physical activities
  - Engagement: spending time with a friend

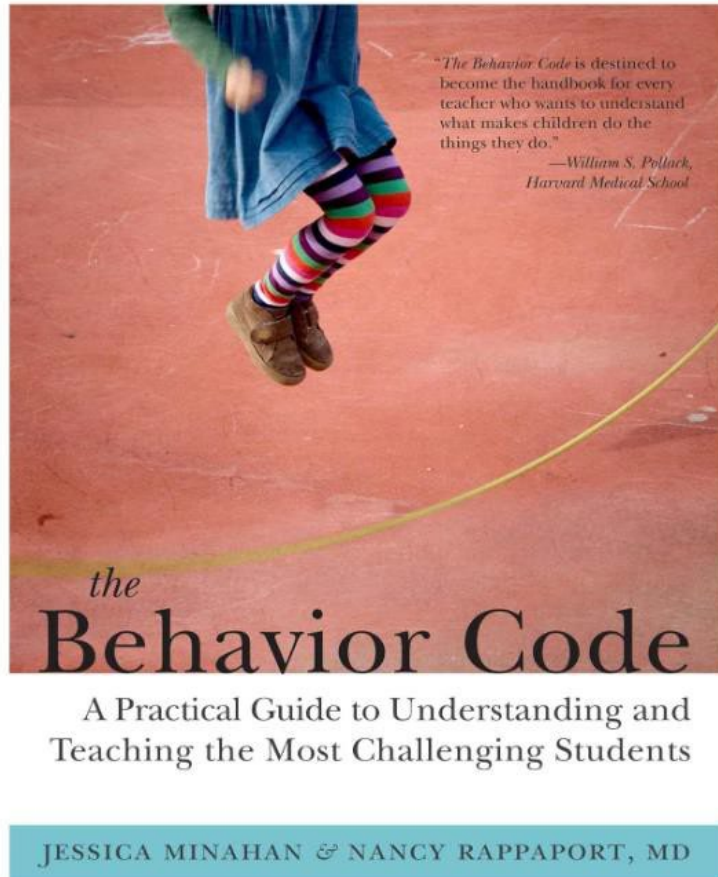
Risk factors which increase the likelihood of EBSA occurring		
Individual	Family	School
Social anxiety	Parent mental ill health	Learning needs not identified/met
Difficulties with emotional literacy (awareness and regulation)	Siblings being educated at home due to illness or EBSA	Requirement to engage with activities the child can't cope with (for example, talking in front of others, assemblies)
Separation anxiety (current or historic)	Absence of a parent	High noise levels
Worries about home situation/family	Family transitions	Difficulties with peer relationships
Being a young carer	Bereavement and loss	Bullying
Low self-confidence or esteem	Limited social interaction	Poor relationships with staff
Physical illness/health needs	Parents appear easily stressed by child's anxiety/are over-protective	Poor organisation/unpredictability in the child's classroom
Previous exclusions	Conflict/family dynamics	Harsh or unfair consequences from teachers



# Is school avoidance always caused by anxiety?

- Anxiety may be the emotional presentation when needs are not met
- For example, if the work is too hard or there are learning issues, over time that condition may lead to anxiety
- Solution would not be to treat the anxiety, but to provide supports around learning or workload
- Assessment includes a functional analysis that addresses underlying reasons for avoidance, which may ultimately cause anxiety
- Once needs are addressed, one may need to treat the secondary anxiety, as the individual may not trust that their needs will be met and continue to avoid the situation
- Natural response to unpleasant thoughts and feelings is to avoid triggers or the situation, which ultimately may lead to cognitive distortions

# Behavior as communication



- Written by a functional behavioral analyst and a child psychiatrist, looks at decoding the causes and patterns of difficult behaviors and how to address them in schools
- Four behavior patterns:
  - anxious
  - withdrawn
  - oppositional
  - inappropriately sexualized behaviors

# Anxiety cycle



# EBSA Formulation

- Trying to understand the root cause of school avoidance
- When did child first start school?
- When did problems first arise?
- How does the child manage school expectations?
- Does the child have friends at school and have these friendships changed?
- Does the child have difficulty separating from caregivers? Has this changed over time?
- Does the child struggle/ thrive in other contexts?
- How does the child do at home? Where are they most relaxed?
- Are there specific triggers or maintaining factors to the school avoidance you can identify?

# Risk and Resilience Factors

Risk Factors		
Family history of MH needs	Family breakdown/stress	Bullying
Learning difficulties	Parental substance misuse	Discrimination
Communication difficulties	Abuse	Friendship issues
Physical illness	Parental criminality	Poor relationships with teachers
Low attainment	Death/loss in family	Deviant peer influences
Low self-esteem		
Child	Family	School
Secure attachments	Family stability/harmony	Schools' environment which enhances belonging/connectedness
Good communication skills	Supportive parents	Clear policies on behaviour and bullying
Experiences of success in school or elsewhere	Strong family values	Whole-school approach to promoting good mental health
Capacity to reflect	Consistent discipline	Having friends in school and/or at home
Sense of control	Support for education	
	Support from extended family/friend network	
Resilience factors		

# Examples of Reasonable Adjustments

- Differentiated learning approaches
- Adjustment of expectations in line with emotional needs
- Starting a few minutes earlier or later than other students
- Reducing sensory stimuli through appropriate class positioning
- Sitting with a peer with whom they have a relationship
- Not participating in a stressful activity until can tolerate better

# Examples of Ordinary Supports

- 1:1 teaching- check-in with teacher, reassurance and checking on understanding
- Safe space for when child is overwhelmed
- Lunch time/ quiet time away from busy cafeteria or playground
- Identified adults with whom child can process worries
- Social inclusion activities: buddy program, lunch bunch, structured social activities, peer mentor

# Examples of More Targeted Approaches

- Targeted learning interventions (math tutoring)
- Social skills groups
- Sessions on anxiety management/ relaxations techniques
- Key adult to help child access coping strategies in challenging situations
- Obtaining a 504 or IEP in order to provide appropriate accommodations while child is learning better coping techniques and school is adjusting to needs of the child



# Long term avoidance and learning accommodations

- Goal is to keep relationship and learning on track to support educational goals
- Consider using a separate part of the school to support individual or small group learning
- Sending work home with detailed explanations and expectations
- Google classroom or similar technology to be able to access lessons and materials
- Face-to-face online teaching
- Meeting at home to provide emotional support
- Home tutoring if needed
- May need a reduced or part-time timetable for school attendance

# Graded exposure and habituation

- With longer term avoidance, it is especially important to use graded exposure and habituation
- Gradually expose person to challenging situations to promote tolerance of uncomfortable situations
- Important to stick to the agreed upon exposure
- Work on targeted situation regularly, without long periods in-between exposures
- Easier to work frequently on small goals
- Habituate at an intensity that is tolerable but uncomfortable to the child



# Treating anxiety as a part of EBSA

- Childhood anxiety is a common cause for school avoidance
- Both anxiety and school avoidance can have short and long term consequences for functioning
- CBT for anxiety and medications can be beneficial, but are insufficient in up to half of cases
- Research has shown that familial accommodation plays a part in the maintenance and course of childhood anxiety
- Previous research attempted to involve parents in child therapy treatment, but did not find it more efficacious unless parental anxiety was high
- Newer research has looked at whether parent-only interventions can be efficacious, and what the objectives and focus of such interventions should be
- Randomized 124 participants to SPACE (64) or CBT (60); found to have similar primary and secondary outcomes with greater reduction in family accommodation (Liebowitz, 2020)
- Thus.... comes SPACE!

# SPACE

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- Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions
- Developed by Dr. Eli Lebowitz PhD at the Yale Child Study Center
- Parent/guardian-based treatment
- Found as efficacious compared to CBT for anxiety in randomly controlled studies

# Origin of Space

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- Dr. Eli L. is an OCD specific therapist practicing CBT
  - Examined fear responses in adults & children
    - Young children rely on parents for protection and coregulation
    - Parents become involved in their child's anxiety process
    - Anxiety in children is an interpersonal event
  - Parents can become the biggest tool in treating their child's distress

# Who is it for?

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- Space was originally designed to treat OCD and Anxiety
  - Separation anxiety
  - Social anxiety
  - Generalized anxiety
  - Fears and phobias
  - Panic disorder and Agoraphobia
  - Selective mutism
  - Obsessive-compulsive disorder
  - School avoidance related to anxiety

# How does it work

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- SPACE is broken up into two parts, coached to the parents in segments
  - Supportive Response
  - Challenging Accommodation

# Supportive Response

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- Two components: Acceptance and Confidence
- Acceptance: acknowledge your child's feeling & validate
- Confidence: convey to child that they can handle being anxious



# Accommodations

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- Changes caregivers make in their own behavior (big or small) that reduce their child's short-term anxiety

EX: social anxiety & ordering at a restaurant

# Accommodations are natural



## So why are we trying to reduce them?

- Research suggests accommodations may alleviate anxiety in the short term
  - As parent accommodate anxiety driven behavior, children tend to stay anxious
  - And frequently the anxiety worsens over time, requiring more accommodations
    - Avoidance reinforcement

# So how do we reduce accommodations

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"Won't my child just freak out?"

- Reducing accommodations happens in small steps
  - Pick one challenging behavior & accommodation
  - Work with therapist to develop appropriate plan (think when, where, how much, who)
    - Communicate that plan to the child being open, clear, and supportive
    - Be consistent and communicative

# SPACE for School Avoidance

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1. Educate the Parents About Anxiety and School Refusal
2. Identify Parent-Child Interactions and Accommodations
  - Observing Parent Responses
  - Recognizing Avoidance Reinforcement
3. Gradually Decrease Accommodation
  - Reduce School Avoidance
  - Setting Firm Expectations and holding to them
  - Gradual exposure to school

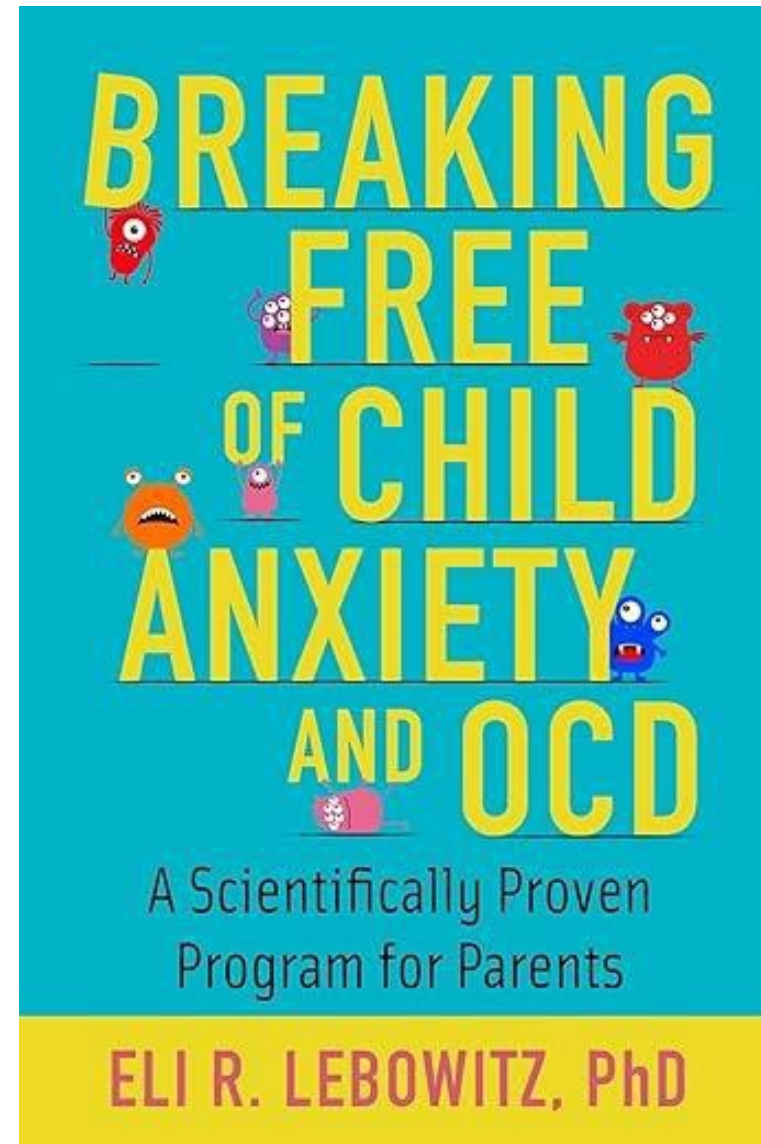
# SPACE for School Avoidance

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4. Support Emotional Regulation and Independence
5. Create a Supportive Environment at Home
  - Fostering emotional validation and support
6. Regular Communication with the School
7. Reinforce progress

# Resources

- [www.spacetreatment.net](http://www.spacetreatment.net)
  - Has a list of SPACE providers in Maine



# References

- Feeney, J, Dosi, R, Morgan, H, Stenning, A. Emotionally-Based School Avoidance: A Toolkit for Schools, Royal Free Hospital Children's School UK. Version 1, 2023
- Halligan, C., & Cryer, S. (2022). Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA): Students' Views of What Works in a Specialist Setting. *Continuity in Education*, 3(1), pp. 13–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/cie.38>
- Lebowitz ER, Marin C, Martino A, Shimshoni Y, Silverman WK. Parent-Based Treatment as Efficacious as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Childhood Anxiety: A Randomized Noninferiority Study of Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2020 Mar;59(3):362-372. doi: 10.1016/j.jaac.2019.02.014. Epub 2019 Mar 7. PMID: 30851397; PMCID: PMC6732048.



## Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) Toolkit for schools

Version 1: March 2023

Please submit Data Survey for CME/CEUs

Next Webinar: Thursday, February 27, 2025 - 7:30-8:30am

# Caring for Adolescents with Substance Use

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Youth Substance Use Disorder Specialist  
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**1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday @ Noon  
ECHO Learning Collaborative**

**February 5<sup>th</sup> ECHO  
Maine's System of Crisis Care**

**Christina Cook, MSW**  
Director Maine Crisis Line  
The Opportunity Alliance

**Carrie Swarthout, MA**  
Director Cumberland County Crisis Response  
The Opportunity Alliance