

THE RESILIENT KID PODCAST

Season 2 – Episode 4

Anxiety in Adolescence

Hello and welcome to the resilient kid podcast with me, Ashley Costello, psychotherapist of over 25 years, supporting you and your family. So continuing our run-on anxiety. That was the number one requested information on over the podcast. So we have looked at separation anxiety. We've looked at anxiety in our kids, but specifically

I want to go into adolescence.

Now, the first episode on anxiety, we did talk about teens and adolescents, but I want to just specifically talk about why it happens, why you can suddenly see a very confident young person going quite anxious. As they kind of hit puberty and beyond and because I think we think, oh, well, it's school.

It's this. It's that. But actually, there's lots of changes going on for them. And it's why and it's not just puberty. So I think the first thing for me is, is to talk about the brain changes now bear with me because I know if he was anything like me when I. When I was doing my degree in psychology, the brain bit was like, Oh my God, I'm so bored.

I can't listen to this. All these words are just flying around my head now. I absolutely love it. So I do hope that your kind of will listen because I'll try and keep it in an understandable format. I think sometimes quite often people. You know, use these big words and actually we don't need to, we really don't need to.

What we just need is to have an understanding of what is happening, when, so that we can help our kids.

Okay, so there's lots of brain changes going on at this time. And that is to get ready for independence, to leave parents, to go out there in the world. It is why we've survived as humans. And what happens is at this point, there is lots of chemicals released during this period.

Dopamine levels increase, serotonin increases.

So dopamine levels are kind of, we always associate dopamine with rewards, with happiness, things like that. Serotonin is a lot around mood, behavior, things like that. So these are released in various different ways. A lot more.

And there is this other thing called myelination.

Now, that's just a big fancy word for saying. What happens is there's like a sheath that grows around our nerves.

And that really allows us As, as, as they're growing, it allows the kids for nerve information to, to travel faster than it did when they were children. Because you think about that, think about those three things that I've just said.

It is no wonder the happiness. goes in waves, isn't it? You know, one minute at the top of the world, next minute they're crying. You don't know why.

So that's, that's that. Serotonin, suddenly sleep completely changes as well, as well as behavior and moods. And we'll come on to sleep in a minute. And then the third thing is if we want them to grow and be independent, they need to be the ones looking out and reacting to risk. So, you know, when you're taking a child across the road, you grab their hand, you look both ways, blah, blah, blah, they might be singing. As they get older, they've got to take that responsibility. So, reaction times have to be faster. You know, the information that they've taken in, that their processing has to be quicker.

And the most important thing that this helps with, this myelination helps with is communication between our prefrontal cortex, which is the little part just behind your forehead. That is where we make rational decisions from. It's, it's kind of what leads the brain that doesn't develop until the well into the twenties.

And so it's, but this myelination helps. The communication between that part of our brain and the rest of our brain. So, it's really important that we realize There's this huge, huge restructure going on in the brain. Absolute restructure. As well as the fact that our brain, because it is so clever, starts to prune away stuff they don't need anymore.

So, for instance, you know, if they learnt something, but just slightly when they were younger, it will start to prune away stuff that we don't need to make room for this big expansion, this, you know, extension, if you want, it's completely restructuring itself almost as in that teen. So all this is going on as well as the physical body changes.

So you can imagine no wonder the hormones are all upside down. Okay. No wonder they start to feel anxious. Okay, because we've got that going on. We've got the puberty going on. Now, let's just go back to they are now going from childhood to adulthood. This very safe world where somebody else is responsible for is somebody else holds our hand crossing the road.

We are now responsible for, we as a, I say we not,

obviously, I'm not an adolescent, but talking about adolescents, we've gone through that, but they are actually at that point now where they're becoming responsible for themselves. They're making their own decisions. There, they're assessing their own risk.

You know, there's a lot of. A lot of adaptation, a lot of changes, a lot of challenges for them as they get older. Is it no wonder the brain goes into overdrive to try and keep them safe? Because suddenly they are now in charge. Yeah, so we can flip into fight and flight very, very quickly as a teen.

You know, it's a wonder they survive.

You know, you think of all this that's going on for them. Like, bless their cotton socks. I know sometimes it is difficult. If you've got a teen at home, it is difficult. However It's really important that we're patient and actually I think knowing it, not just knowing it, but teaching them like for me, what is the biggest thing that you can do is to teach them that they have got puberty.

Yes, they have got brain changes going on, and this is what it looks like. And then actually to say to them, and you know, everything in you, your DNA, is to identify with that peer group and pull away from us as parents. But understanding that really, really does help. Really helps. So what, what can we do?

Yes. So let's have a look at what we can do. First of all, we can explain. Second of all, sleep, sleep is so, so important, right? The area of our brain. Now I always. I

always go to Dr. Dan Segal's hand model of the brain and the area of that our fight and flight is, is kind of here, which is our amygdala. But our fight and flight center are the most sensitive part of our brain if we've not had enough sleep.

If we're tired, it really struggles to tell the difference between a threat and a perceived threat. It struggles anyway. It struggles anyway. However, when it's tired, it will be highly sensitive, as the teens are.

You know yourself, if they've not had enough sleep, and you ask them to do something, it's like you know, or they'll start burst out crying for, and you're like, I don't even know what I've said.

I've not even said anything. I've not even spoke. How, why are they crying? So absolutely think around sleep, speak to them about the importance of sleep. Now, why is sleep so important? Well, the only time That melatonin, the chemical that is released to help us sleep changes really without external impacts is during adolescence.

So when we're children, when we're adults, it's exactly the same. When we are adolescents, it shifts by two hours. It's not released until two hours later. So at the time that we're kind of just settling down. They're still wide awake. So they are not going to want to settle down until 10 and 11. This is why I have to really be careful not to get political here.

This is why. It is too early for them to be going to school. School really should not start until 10 am at the earliest for adolescents. When they're younger, absolutely, they're wide awake, get them to school early, of course. But during adolescence, because they're melatonin, so Physic, you know, we've got physical proof of this.

This is why I don't understand why schools are still starting early. But we've got physical proof that the melatonin is not released until two hours later. They're not settling down till 10, 11. They need at least nine hours sleep. If they get 10, that's what we call golden, golden hour. Excellent. 10 hours sleep is perfect for them.

Now what, if we're not careful, what happens is they go past that and into the early hours if they're on the phone a lot and then that impacts the next day. So have a chat to them about sleep and how important it is. You understand, you know, that they don't wind down until a little bit later. However, we've still got constraints.

So of getting up and going to school the next day, be very careful. Around that, but I find that having conversations around that and then, you know, encouraging that self-care really helps and getting them to notice the difference with, with teens. It's always about evidence always. Okay. Try it for a few days, see what you feel, and then you make that decision.

And they honestly give him that responsibility. They're usually really, really good. Okay, next one. Oh, friendships. Yeah, so friendships for me is quiet, no matter why I've been brought in with a family, you know, it can be anxiety it can be behavior issues, lots and lots of different things to why I'm brought in.

Friendships always come up. pretty much always come up. And so I think it's important when we're thinking around adolescents and the changes that they're going through. So you think about this massive upgrading software that the brain is having. Okay. As that's happening, it's very, very easy for our adolescents to misinterpret facial expressions.

Now, this is something that I only recently, well not recently, but in the last few years realised this. As mine are getting older, as mine, you know, are teens now and stuff and doing some reading around it. And actually what happens is it doesn't always get it right. So for us, as adults, we use our prefrontal cortex.

I've already told you today that actually that's not developed until they're in the 20s. So, is it any wonder they get it wrong sometimes? Now, if it's us, we can talk that through. If it's friends, oh, that doesn't work as well. You know, because teens don't want to, the worst thing you can do to a teen is isolate them socially.

Like, that is their biggest fear. In the world, you know, it doesn't matter what phobias they've got about bees or heights, the biggest phobia for a teen or adolescent is that they are isolated socially. And that is for very good reason, survival. You know, we need a pack, we need that herd to survive. As complicated and as sophisticated as we are as human beings, and as much as we've evolved, that's what it comes down to, is very much that cave time.

We stay together, we stay in a herd, safety in numbers, etc. So, it's really easy for them to misinterpret social cues, and that is before we even get onto social media. Let's. Leave social media till for a little bit later, but they, so, but watch out because sometimes I know, for instance, if I'm listening to something, so like, say I'm cooking and I'm listening to a podcast or whatever one of my teens will come

in and she does this all the time and she'll go, you're okay. And I'll go, yeah, fine. And she'll go, are you sure? I'll go, yeah, I'm just listening to something. Oh, okay. And you can see, because she thinks I'm cross. She thinks I'm; I know it's literal concentration, you know, apart from having the little tongue stuck out, concentrating you know, it's just concentration.

That's not that I won't say hello or whatever, but she, she thinks that there's some disconnect and, you know, Kids pick up vibes really, really easily, but they, there's a mismatch sometimes between what they're seeing facial and, and what they think's going on. So, you know, as parents, we need to communicate if we're not happy or we're fine, you know, with them, but just when they're looking for that reassurance, it's because they can't face it, they can't get it facially.

So we often think of. You know, children and adolescents with autism struggle with this. But in adolescence, everybody does, everybody does, so just be aware of that as well. Now the next little topic, this is quite funny. I've put Alice in Wonderland, and the reason I've put this is because when Lewis Carroll first wrote the book, Alice in Wonderland, I think everybody thought he was on drugs, but actually he goes, he tells the story of adolescence, of, of going from childhood to adulthood.

And lots of psychotherapists have, and psychologists have had a look at how he's done it. And he, he's Bob on, it's absolutely Bob on for that journey through adolescence. And the biggest thing I think Alice in Wonderland shows us is that sense of self that is developing and changing constantly, like constantly, you know, she does all the lovely things that teens have, you know, curiosity, you can see their problem-solving skills are really growing.

She has, you know, a lovely lightness about a lot of the time. But it is the first period in growth from kids where they start to reflect a lot, where they start to look at themselves and how taking in the feedback from the world around them as well. And that can change their sense of self, you know, taking that constant, well, feedback that sometimes criticism, you know, is Changing their own concepts of who they are.

So if you think that they are going through all these changes, they're suddenly feeling anxious and they're not sure why, they have can't always pick up social cues, you know, this kind of feedback is coming in constantly. It is changing the way they feel about themselves. And then social media. So, yeah, it's funny,

actually, if you have a look at Alice in Wonderland, you'll never be able to watch Alice in Wonderland again in the same light.

But if you have a look, the white rabbit, you know going, we're going to be late. We're going to be late. We're going to be late. That's anxiety. That is the anxiety that you see adolescents go through. The white rabbit absolutely represents that. If we look at the caterpillar, that is about that.

Uncertainty, that sense of self that I'm talking about here, you know, at one, I think there's a few times where he says, who are you? And, and Alice doesn't know, she doesn't know because it's constantly changing and constantly the environment, she's in is constantly changing. That kind of represents that feedback that they're getting in all the different environments they're going from parents to friends to teachers, you know, to coaches from sports clubs, things like that.

So it's quite funny. And then the Mad Hatter who has six o'clock, has tea six o'clock every night. That represents those being an adult, being those restrictions, the things that the expectations that you have as an adult and the whole kind of story, you know, whether it's book or film that you worked in is around the struggle that Alice has of who she is because she's no longer a child and she's not yet an adult.

But she's definitely hurtling towards that. So I think if you, if you think around those restrictions, it really does highlight the struggle. And is it any wonder they suddenly have this spike of anxiety as adolescents? Okay. What else is important? Gut health. So I was going to put here diet, but diet has such connotations, doesn't it?

And actually we talk about in our gut is like our little brain. The gut brain access is massive. It's really, really important. And what we need to think about really is what they're eating and, and speak to them about it as well. So, you know, so my youngest. Absolutely adores pizza, born on International Pizza Day, is it any wonder?

So that's his food, that's his go to, that's his food of choice. However we do also talk about he's choosing his own meals at high school. So actually, you have got a really busy day. What is it that you need? To do that. So when he has stuff after school, so on a Monday night, it's quite late and it's full-on day.

Make sure you're getting those, you know, energy loading kind of pasta, jacket, potato, carb loading so that you've got enough energy because if not, he's absolutely, he's like. Spent absolutely spent. You know, halfway through and he can't give it his all and that's when you know He will get upset. He'll get anxious and things like that.

So talk to them about the importance between gut health Having you know natural stuff because of course they want to go to junk food Of course they do and there's nothing wrong with having that in moderation, but what else can you put in there? What proteins? What, you know, the fruit, the carbs, what is it that you need for your day?

So if it's exams, we talk about porridge and salmon and things like that. And there is a podcast on that. So go and have a look at that. If you've got a long day, think about the kind of food that you choose in. You know, stuff like that. So, yeah, just be aware of it. And, you know, hopefully, as adults, we can get some stuff in to them as well at night time that will just help.

Okay. Perceived pressure. Now, what do I mean by perceived pressure? Well, we've talked about exams a little bit, haven't we, there? And I think that is perceived pressure. I find from about year nine, so around 13 onwards. There is a constant talk about exams. Now, they don't take them for three years. But there is a constant talk in schools about exams.

And I get this. I get this from a teacher's point of view because they want them to take it seriously. But actually, what they don't understand is that pressure, that perceived pressure they're putting on. We, let me give you an example as an adult that probably feels similar. Don't know about you, but I, I was with my hubby, then boyfriend for quite a while. The minute that we hit kind of a year, two years, it was, are you getting engaged the minute you get engaged, when you get married, the minute you get married, when you're having a kid, the minute you, and I mean, literally the same day you have a kid, when you have another. Right. And it's just, it is relentless and you think, oh my God, just stop, stop with the pressure.

We'll do it in our own time. And I feel like that's what we do with teens. Sometimes it's like, you know once they get to high school, it's talking about exams. It's talking about options, then your exams, then what you're going to do after, what do you want to do as a job? Oh my God, are you joking? Like give them, just let it lie for a little bit.

They will get there, whether you talk about exams, whether you talk about what they're going to do after school or what they want to do as a career or not, they will eventually get there. So sometimes I think we need to be aware of just letting the pressure go a little bit. I go into one of the local schools and one of the local colleges and they, in the maths department, have a leaderboard.

And I understand, from a teacher's point of view, how they think this will be really motivating, but actually, it has the opposite effect. It has the opposite effect, because that leaderboard, then they then start to, because there's going to be some kids on that leaderboard that's never going to get to the top, so they've already stopped.

Like, their motivation is not there, you know. The pressure, if you're number two or three, is actually worse than being on the top sometimes. And then, if you're on the top, the pressure to stay. So, why? So, what I'm saying is, be aware around the language and the conversations that we use around future. Let them live now.

Let them.

because we will cause perceived threats. Us talking about those future things, those future, I go future you, yeah, those future them kind of stuff is causing the brain to think that they are under threat. It is a perceived threat. So they will flip into anxiety really, really quickly. I hope that makes sense. Oh, big one. This makes me feel a little bit sick.

Social media. We know, you know, I didn't have social media growing up. I think I got a mobile phone at 22 for me like first proper job. And I, we just certainly didn't have social media. Facebook wasn't a thing. And it was a phone and you text and you thought that was amazing. So this is not a trip down memory lane.

But but think about how much coverage, how much exposure, how much did other people know what's going on with your life? So very little for me. When we left school. We caught the bus home, we got into school, the only way that other people could contact us was on the phone. And all the pressures of school stayed there until the next day.

That doesn't happen now. It leaks in constantly, constantly. So that's the first thing. Second thing is, there's these perfect filters. The body shapes, the whole lot. We'll come on to that in a minute. So be careful of that. And also You know, the

expectation of posting, the expectation you're on social media. I've got a couple of friends who are in the place they don't have social media accounts for obvious reasons.

And I actually thought, oh wow, that's so cool. Imagine not having it. Yeah, I like the idea of that and not to have the pressure of posting. I mean, mine's mostly business, so it's not a big deal, but you know, for kids to be posting, to be on the Snapchat streaking you know, constant, like taking streaking is, if you don't know, sorry, it's just literally, it can be anything you could take, you know, a picture of the top of your hair to send it to your mate.

Does not matter, but it's to keep it up every day. That is relentless. That can be relentless for them, they have to do it every day. Being left unopened, that feeds into that anxiety of social isolation already, doesn't it? So, yeah, I think for me, we just have to be really, have those open conversations.

Have them open conversations. And also, remind them about perspective with social media. It's a filter, it's just one day. A single, single snapshot. That's all it is. It is not life. We don't get to see the, the gritty, grimy side of life on Insta, you know, or Snapchat and stuff like that. So, it's just being aware and having those conversations.

Okay, next one. Body image, which Obviously comes into a lot, can be affected by the internet, by that social media and it can be brutal. It can be absolutely brutal. And just as we were talking about how they, their sense of self changes constantly with the feedback and stuff. Imagine the effect that social media can have on how they feel.

about themselves, how they feel about their body. So it's really important that we are positive in the language that we use with them. You know, we talk about their intelligence. We talk about how they can do hard things, being brave, being strong. Don't you know, we know you can do this. You don't give up blah blah blah.

Okay, but also think about when it comes to body images is that I don't often comment on their body or their shape or anything like that. I will say that they are beautiful. And that's boy and girl. I'll say that's beautiful. But it will be backed up in something like You know, you are so beautiful when you laugh.

You are so beautiful when I see you concentrate. And I know that you're really engaged in what you're doing. And I think it's really important that, we give them that sense of confidence, that sense of who they are, without the filters, without anything else. That, that comes back. And I think we need to, you know, if they're getting all this information from social media, we need to be challenging what beauty looks like for them.

You know, we need to go. We need to be the voice of reason and the voice of perspective. Okay. So

lastly, be there, be there. Yes, of course. Keep open dialogues, have the conversations around what's happening. One of the things I always say, and I repeat this, repeat this, repeat this. So sorry, if you've heard it before on the podcast, they're coming in to talk to you. There's three things you can do.

Right? One, listen. When I say listen, I don't mean jump in, don't mean interrupt, I mean listen. Reflect back what they're saying to you. Oh, so she said Oh, okay. And yeah, just reflect back what you're hearing. So they know you're listening, give them eye contact, give them your full attention. That doesn't mean say, if you're in the middle of something, if it's important, of course, if you can stop, stop.

If not say, listen, give me two minutes, let me finish this and I'll come and speak to you. You know, so give them full attention, eye contact, the whole way. Two, help them problem solve. That is not jump in with your size, whatever, feet, and problem solve it for them. Help them problem solve because that is future proofing them.

That is when we're not around, when we're not there, when they're in a risky situation. We have already helped build those pathways in the brain. We have shown them, walked them through the way of how you problem solve. So, okay, well, what would you like to do? How could you have done that differently? Ask questions.

Don't give them the answers. And then finally, if it is something big, if it's bullying, something like that, we as adults in their life, who care about them have to take over at that point, of course, but. Listen, help them problem solve, keep that communication open, really help keep that communication around what's going on for them, be interested, be engaged.

Yes, you probably don't want to listen to the drama that happened at school. However, they need to tell you the drama. You don't have to get involved. Just listen. The other thing I think particularly about anxiety is getting out there and making sure that they've got extracurricular so this for me kind of helps three ways because if they are doing extracurricular stuff, they're more likely to eat better because they need that fuel.

They will make friends outside of the school, which helps when we compare and contrast in how people treat us, and it gives them an extra support network. Often. It is that exercise that helps when we are anxious, worried, all those chemicals that are then released, that, that super fuel that's released is then dispersed through the body instead of sitting there, you know, and we've talked about that in previous podcasts.

So any extracurricular really helps, especially if it's kind of exercise or, you know, of that nature. And then, you know, things like making sure that they're eating plenty of protein in the morning before they go to school. That really helps balance them out. Things like making sure they've got downtime to decompress.

So quite often we go, you know, they get in and you go, get your homework done. Give them that time to decompress first. Give them that time then because they'll be in a better place. They'll be able to learn. They'll be able to do it quicker and better if we give them that time to decompress. All right. And also, you know, I think the biggest thing, oh, So I am playing for those of you who are listening on the podcast and not watching on YouTube, I have got a little pair of socks in my hand.

And this is, these socks have like toes in them. So they have been really proven to help with anxiety, by the way. My kids hate them. Well, no, that's it. That's, that's. It's wrong. The eldest hates them. I used to have these for yoga. When I do yoga, I have little yoga shoes and I wanted socks to go with them, but it does help with anxiety for those, especially, especially those whose kids, you know, wouldn't mind wearing them.

And they really make you feel safe. They, they send in those signals back to the brain to say that you're safe. So yeah, I had it in my hand to remind me to tell you. So that's another thing, you know, stuff like that. Making sure they've got sleep, making sure they're getting a good diet, making sure that that perceived pressure for them is, is less in the household.

You don't have much influence over school, unfortunately, but less in the household. Less with older relatives as well who are going, oh, what are you going to do? Just back off grandma. Okay. I know they come from a good place, but sometimes it's too much. Have conversations around social media, have conversations around what's happening at school, what's happening in their friends, because remember, they are constantly adjusting their sense of self.

Right now. They're trying to find their identity. So what I would say to you is if you don't hear anything else I say today, one talk about. What happens? What anxiety is for the teens in your life? And two, let's not talk about it as a disorder. Anxiety is a physical feeling that erupts because our brain thinks it's under threat.

Not that it is. It thinks it is. It may be. But anxiety is spiked because we think we are under threat. So let's not turn it into a disorder. Let's normalize. Of course you feel anxious. You've got a lot going on. And that's okay. It's not a disorder. You don't need to run off and get tablets or anything else.

You know, if it gets out of control, then go and get help. Go and get help because they need to learn the tools to calm that part of the brain down. Because we can see there is a lot going on for them. But normalize that everybody feels anxious at times, you know, and this is why. So thank you for listening today.

Really hope that that's giving you food for thought and any questions, please always, always drop me a message. You can do it at Ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk. You can find me on Insta the Resilient Kid UK or Facebook. You can message me. Or you can do it underneath the if you're on Spotify, you can do it in the comments.

But yeah, please ask away. I would love to hear. And if you have got any ideas that you want me to cover, whether it's kids or teens on the podcast, absolutely. I will. Thank you for listening. Lots of love from my family to yours. Take care for now. Bye.