



The  
Family  
Psychology Place

Est. 2008

*Come for answers...  
stay for solutions*

# Managing Avoidance and Accommodations in Anxiety, OCD and Tics

**Dr. Cheryl Gilbert MacLeod**

Registered Psychologist



The  
Family  
Psychology Place

*Come for answers...  
stay for solutions*

## Disclosures:

I am the primary owner of The Family Psychology Place, a private practice clinic in Calgary Alberta.

# Goals

01

Understand what avoidance and accommodation means when parenting children with Anxiety and OCD

02

What to do instead of avoidance and accommodations

03

Role of reinforcements and rewards when parenting

# AVOIDANCE

- ▶ Avoidance is a behavioral component in anxiety and OCD
  - ▶ However, it looks somewhat different in each of these disorders
  - ▶ Children typically use avoidance to manage symptoms of distress
- ▶ Avoidance is when your child avoids a person, place or thing out of anxiety
- ▶ It works because you or your child feels safe in the short term, but avoiding results in keeping your child anxious over time

# Avoidance - how do you know when it is a problem?

- ▶ We all avoid people, places and things
  - ▶ Avoidance is a fact of life
- ▶ How can we tell if avoidance is maintaining anxiety?
  - ▶ Check the frequency of the behaviour
  - ▶ Does it "have to be done this way?"
  - ▶ Is there a level of flexibility to the avoidance?
  - ▶ Look at your family values
    - ▶ Values can help you determine if you or your child are avoiding things or simply making the necessary choices about who and what you allow into your life

# Avoidance in Anxiety Disorders

- ▶ Examples include:
  - ▶ Child has a fear of dogs, so they always walk on the sidewalk across from the house with dogs
  - ▶ Child is afraid of speaking in public, so they do not raise their hand in class
  - ▶ Child is fearful of talking with peers, so they will not go up to someone their age at the playground
  - ▶ Child is worried about trying new things, so they refuse to go somewhere they haven't been before
  - ▶ Child is afraid of loud noises so they will not use a public washroom in case there is an automatic flushing toilet

# AVOIDANCE in OCD

- ▶ Child will not sit on the couch if someone else has sat there
- ▶ Child will not eat from a plate that a parent has touched
- ▶ Child cannot touch a door handle unless they use a paper towel
- ▶ Child will not use a hand towel someone else used
- ▶ Child is unable to wear a piece of clothing if it touched the ground

# Avoidance in Tics

- ▶ Child does not want to go places where tics are more likely to happen
- ▶ Occurrence of a tic is a reason not to do a TB
  - ▶ A tic happens regularly in the classroom, child realizes he/she will be asked to leave the classroom (which they like), so they don't want to use tic blocking strategies
- ▶ Parents have been told “do not bring attention to your child's tics” so now everyone avoids talking about them
  - ▶ Children with tics often report that it isn't the tic themselves that bothers them, it is the responses of others.
  - ▶ Acting like nothing happened, is just as confusing with children with tics as worrying about what other people might do.



# ACCOMMODATIONS

- ▶ Your child asks you to do or not do something to reduce their anxiety.
- ▶ When any family member makes a change to their own behaviour to help a child/sibling/relative avoid feeling anxiety or to help decrease the child's anxiety
- ▶ When we change our behaviour to accommodate a child's anxiety we prevent them from learning:
  - ▶ You can tolerate discomfort
  - ▶ That their feared predictions most likely do not come true

# Accommodations Continued

Participation - this is when we actively engage in behaviors that allow the child to avoid

- We order for them in a restaurant
- We lay with them at bedtime
- We send a sibling to go upstairs with them when they are afraid to be alone upstairs
- We participate in a nonfunctional routine
- We answer the same questions each day
- We give neck massages to alleviate pain from a tic instead of helping them with a TB

Modification - this is when we change family routines / expectations to minimize a child's anxiety

- Do not go out to restaurants because child finds the experience stressful
- Only use grandparents as babysitters
- Child doesn't have to take the garbage out because of fears of strangers/dark
- We give the child his/her own bathroom to use
- Your child is allowed to eat in his/her room because he finds "ticking" at the table too stressful

# What parents can do instead of avoidance and accommodations:

- ▶ Set realistic goals for our children with what they are avoiding:
  - ▶ Identify a goal and break it into steps
  - ▶ Stepladders are a great way to help our child learn that they can handle the discomfort and that the feared outcome isn't as likely as they think it is
- ▶ Replace accommodations with supportive responses that:
  - ▶ **VALIDATE** your child's distress
  - ▶ **DEMONSTRATES** that we have confidence in their ability to cope with anxiety

# What parents can do continued....

- ▶ Use rewards and positive reinforcements when your child uses coping tools
  - ▶ Each step or “actively trying” needs a reward / positive reinforcement
  - ▶ For tics, trying to use a tic blocker is what we reward, not the decrease in tics
  - ▶ We can reward when children are willing to talk about the situation as well



**Time for Questions**