Reassuring Anxiety in Children Can Make It Worse Transcript

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Why Reassurance Backfires

You answer the question, you reassure them, and you explain again. Five minutes later, they ask the same thing. Sound familiar? If reassurance worked, your child would calm down and move on.

You wouldn't see all those anxious behaviors and need for constant reassurances with every question they asked. So why does it often make things worse when you give reinsurance?

Because reassurance doesn't regulate the nervous system. What it actually does is surprising for most people. And this is a conversation I have with people with anxious kids, with highly emotional kids with kids Reassurance has become the standard in parenting.

Validation and reassurance aren't the same thing. But why does it happen and why is it keep happening? Because it temporarily feeds the anxiety loop at a deeply subconscious reinforcing level.

I'll explain more. You basically are falling into a reassurances trap and you don't kind of know it. until you know it. And you what I always say, we know better, and we can do better.

So parents think I'm helping them feel safe, so distressed. If I just answer the question, they'll feel better." They need me to answer that question.

But what the anxious brain hears is, there must be danger, And we need to keep checking. That's what it says. Reassurance becomes a short-term dopamine hit.

Biologically, they get some relief. They get an increase in those feel-good brain waves, a quick relief from anxiety, intrusive thoughts, upset, and the brain learns anxiety.

Ask a question, get reassurance.

The Anxiety Reinforcement Loop

I feel better. And so what happens in biology when the brain says, oh, I feel better? I mean, we know this isn't the right feel-better, it's going to repeat it.

It's gonna repeat, and repeat and repeated some more because it is a habituation in the bringing towards that behavior. So that's reinforcement, not regulation.

We're not actually helping them to get internal relief. It's just a temporary relief, and not only are they getting a dopamine hit, but we take our baseline.

So here's our upset. And I have a whole section on this in my book, The Disregulated Kid. And it's really a playbook in so many areas and how to break accommodation.

Reassurance and accommodation are the same thing. What's happening in the brain? Let's get into it, let's talk about it. So when a child is anxious, the amygdala is on high alert.

The prefrontal cortex, our logic brain, not working, offline. And the nervous system is stuck in threat mode. It's stuck that sympathetic dominant activation overdrive.

You know I've done over 10,000 brain maps. you can just see it right on a brain map when somebody's like this. Pretty incredible. So, reinsurance gives that temporary relief, but it doesn't teach the brain how to tolerate

uncertainty, and tolerance is a skill that reduces anxiety long term.

And without that skill, the need for reassurance grows. I'm thinking of common things people will tell me their kids. A lot of times it's around bedtime rituals.

So we'll say, are you going to stay in the room with me tonight? And you say yes, of course I will. They have a spike of anxiety, it gets high, and then there's a little bit of dip, but it actually stays up there.

When we not accommodate the behavior over time, the child will learn, okay, nothing bad is going to happen, whatever their thinking is. There's all kinds of worries that kids have at all different developmental ages around sleep.

They may also just use you as a life preserver because their stress cup is so full from constant dysregulation, nothing related to sleep, that that just is the point where they show it.

But what you don't realize is when you provide this over accommodation and reassurance, Now, we don't just say, hey, see you later, I'm out of here, there's a whole way to approach it, but we give into it.

We actually cause the baseline to go up and up, and that's where you see kids move from anxiety to OCD. There's such a fallacy that OECD is predominantly inherited.

I don' see that. all over the world with OCD.

Brain Science Behind Reassurance

What I see is anxiety gets inherited and O CD is a more extreme form of anxiety. I also see almost always see anxiety morphing into depression or O C D or multiple layers of things, or many of my kids with pans and pandas have a history of Anxiety and other things.

Many of them don't have anything. So, but I would say the majority of him had a little something sign before. Even my old Max had an intensity to him.

He was only a baby when he got bitten by a tick at 22 months. But geez Louise, that kid was intense and he wasn't a good sleeper. What does reassurance look like in real life?

Questions like, are you sure I won't throw up? Are you sure I didn't offend them or say the wrong thing? Kids worry a lot about what they say to people and how it affects them.

Are sure you locked the front door? Are I sure won't fail? And no matter how many times you answer, it's never enough. Because the brain isn't looking for the facts.

It's looking regulation. I hope that's a mind-blowing thing for you. It's Dr. Rowe's sound effect. I need to have my team here when I'm filming this so they can do all the cool sound effects.

Why it gets worse over time is, again, every time you reassure, the child avoids sitting with discomfort so that they don't know how to manage discomfort.

They're just avoiding it. The anxiety cycle strengthens from a nervous system, rabbit in the brain perspective. The brain learns, I can't handle this alone.

I need my life preserver. My mom, my dad, and my teacher, whoever it is. A lot of teachers get sucked in this reassurance sand trap, but you know, stuck in there for sure.

Reassurance shrinks resilience. It shranks that capacity to be able to tolerate things, problem solve, figure things out. it accidentally teaches dependence instead of coping.

What if The most loving thing you could do is stop answering the question. Ouch. I know you're freaking out. You know your kid's going to freak out, it's not so easy.

Not saying that it is, but it really is the most lovely thing that you can do. And when you know, you are in that reassurance sand trap. So, here's a little bit of a refrain for you.

Your child isn't being manipulative, they're dysregulated, but anxiety grows when it's over accommodated. So we regulate feelings, we don't reinforce fears.

Number one, always going to be the first thing, because if you do it out of order, wasting your time, people. Stop trying to search it. Get some crazy AI talking head.

Can't even tell the difference anymore between fake people online.

Bedtime Anxiety and Over-Accommodation

Uncredentialed people, stop doing that. Listen, this is biology, okay? I've been doing this for three decades. There's a reason why people come and fly in all over the world, or NBC and CBS calls me, listen to what the freak I'm talking about.

I am using science, and you need to use science and stop chasing other things. You need be consistent. And regulation first is that path. So before responding, help the body calm, slow breathing, sitting close, soften your tone, using rhythm.

An anxious brain can't process logic. Remember that? So we have to calm the buddy before addressing the question. And actually, you don't have say a lot.

You can just be there. So two, validate the feeling, not the fear. Instead of, no, nothing bad will happen. Oh, the door is locked. There's no robbers coming in.

Try, I can see your brain feels worried right now. We got through this yesterday, what can we do right now to get through it? And let your kids sit with some uncomfortableness for a minute.

This is much better than spending months or years, people spend years before they come to me dealing with this. So you validate emotion, you don't confirm the threat.

You have to get out of that sneaky little reassurance loop that you're in with your kid. Three, shift to coping. Instead of answering, what can you tell your brain right now?

That's what you got to say. What can tell you brain? Right now. So you worried the doors open. Okay. Tell you a brain. Right. Now. And you can help them.

Oh, yesterday you told your. I slept great and I'm going to sleep good tonight. Okay, that's great. Let's do that right now. And I love to say kids that like to kids like, how long do you think you're going to be uncomfortable?

And they might say six hours. Okay. Well, yesterday, How many minutes do think it was about 15? Okay? You got through it. You don't have to rescue. They are not drowning.

Don't get caught in the reassurance sand trap. So we can say, what do we do when we worry, when worry shows up? Let's take three slow breaths together.

Let us figure out a solution together, you don not have reassure and do not get up in that. I swear, I'm going to say it a hundred times because it is so critical.

Do not do that. So this is the way to build internal regulation, not external dependence on you. Okay.

How Reassurance Fuels OCD

Number four, you're going to get them to tolerate the discomfort. It's going spike before it drops. I show people a nice little graph. You don't answer the question.

it's gonna go up, but then the baseline gets lower every time. And that's actually for anybody who knows behaviorism, if you took Psych 101, it is extinguishing the behavior.

So it's normal. But when you stop reassuring them that anxiety, again, may temporarily increase, but that's extinction learning. And that what we need to put this down.

The nervous system learns, I can survive this feeling. This is only gonna last a couple of minutes. That's how we get resilience. If you don't squash this, you get out of the sand trap, This is going to turn into OCD if it's not already.

And if your child is spending an hour or more a day doing this, this is OCD, regardless of their age, toddlers can have OECD, 57-year-olds can OCED or it's gonna turn into clinical anxiety or clinical depression.

That is what happens. Or you're activating the nervous system so much that you are opening the door to autoimmune diseases and other things because we know the link between stress and disease called the psychoimmunology study.

One mom told me that her daughter asked 40 plus reassuring questions a night. Are you sure I'm not sick or you're sure won't die in my sleep or are you going to die and your sleep?

And she just stopped answering directly and then said, your brain is feeling worried. Let's breathe. That's all that she could tolerate. and her daughter was pretty annoyed that she wasn't answering the questions and the first week was rough.

No lying. It takes about 10 days. From behaviorism, we know this takes about 10 days to really start to break a habit and during that 10-days it can be rough.

Buckle up. The second week the questions decreased and by week three her daughter started saying, my brain is doing that worry thing again and that's growth.

And then they worked on coping skills. It didn't happen overnight. Stop looking for a pill and a magic wand. This has to be addressed at a nervous system and behavioral level.

You cannot separate those out. These behaviors will keep happening because the nervous systems is activated. So reassurance feels kind to your child. which is why so many of you do it.

Replacing Reassurance With Regulation

I get it, you love your kids. But the real safety comes from teaching your child that they can handle discomfort without constant external confirmation.

And you're not withdrawing support, your building capacity. So reassurance quiets anxiety for a moment, but regulation quiests it for lifetime. You really build somebody with emotional resilience.

These are kids that are going to understand when something significant is happening and be able to take action on it. They're going know what danger is because we are living in a freaking dangerous world and you want your kids to be alert and able to take action instead of just getting shut down, but also to really feel good about themselves.

And it's really hard to feel about yourself when you are activated all the time. So if your child struggles with anxiety, OCD, constant reassurance loops, this is exactly what I teach inside of my book, The Disregulated kid, it's also part of the dysregulation insider newsletter.

If you're not signed up, why the hell are you not signing up? It's free. I write it. It is good stuff. And you get all the insights on the book and you can go to drrosanne.com forward slash newsletter and get on there.

if you sound up and can't find the newsletter, go look and spam and go look in promotions. And if anything resonated with you, please drop an email about it.

If you're on YouTube, leave a comment. if you want to hear something specific that I didn't cover, Tell me because I really want to know. And if you want be part of my book launch, street team, the regulators, please just respond back to an email.

If you're in my natural solutions parenting group, would you go to drrosanna.com forward slash group. Please answer all the questions. We're not letting you in.

You don't answer the question. Let me know because i'm looking for people to help support my buck and what does that mean to share an e-mail, share a social media post, have me come speak to your megachurch, your school, you're company.

Building Tolerance and Resilience

So we can't continue to live like this. If you heard me talk about my book, we are going to move from absolute what feels like just the edge of complete chaos in the world in America.

We're moving from More than one shooting a day, I believe we're going to be having a lot more than that. If we continue to on this dysregulation pathway, and it does not have to this hard people.

I break it down in this book, there is no excuse for people not to regulate. Regardless of your history, regardless of what's going on with your child, Now, regulation doesn't look the same for everybody.

It's a developmental pathway. And if you, as a parent, had something getting in the way of that, I'm sorry, because that should not have happened to you.

But you gotta put your big girl and big boy panties on, and you've gotta take care of it. You've got to break that cycle, okay? And you can do it, You absolutely can.

And you can listen to this pod, this show. You can get onto the insider, you get by my $21 book when it, please pre-order it if you, and there's some great resources.

But if want to be part of my regulator street team to really just change the freaking world, Please reply back. Drop me a link, whatever it is, and we will get ahold of you to be part of this because we can all be regulated.

And wouldn't it be nice to just be around calm people? And if you're already calm, you know exactly what I'm talking about. So thank you for being you and I hope I'm inspiring you to move your Cooley and regulate first.

Want more insights and solutions? Well, subscribe to our dysregulation insider and it will show up in your inbox every week.