

School Refusal: An Overview and strategies for parents

RVC Wellness Night 3/15/22



Cohen Children's
Northwell Health®

Agenda

1. School refusal
2. Anxiety
3. Oppositional Behaviors
4. What adults can do to prepare
5. Coping skills for children and adults
6. How to know if your child needs more help
7. Resources
8. Questions & Answers

What is school refusal?



Term used to describe significant avoidance of school

2-5% of students each year

Rates are same in boys/girls

Most common ages are 5/6 and 10/11

Usually driven by anxiety, depression or oppositional behaviors

Not the same as truancy

Can take many forms

Can happen after an event (vacation) or with less clear trigger

May be indicative of a mental health difficulty or something troubling at school (e.g., social difficulties, academic pressure)

Impacts academics and social-emotional skills, has long term outcomes

We have treatment that works!

The functions of school refusal

To stay away from objects or situations at school that make the child feel unpleasant physical symptoms or general distress

To avoid social or evaluative situations at school that is painful to the child (school-related performance situations)

To receive attention from a parent or significant other

To obtain tangible rewards that make staying home more enjoyable/comfortable than going to school

What is anxiety?



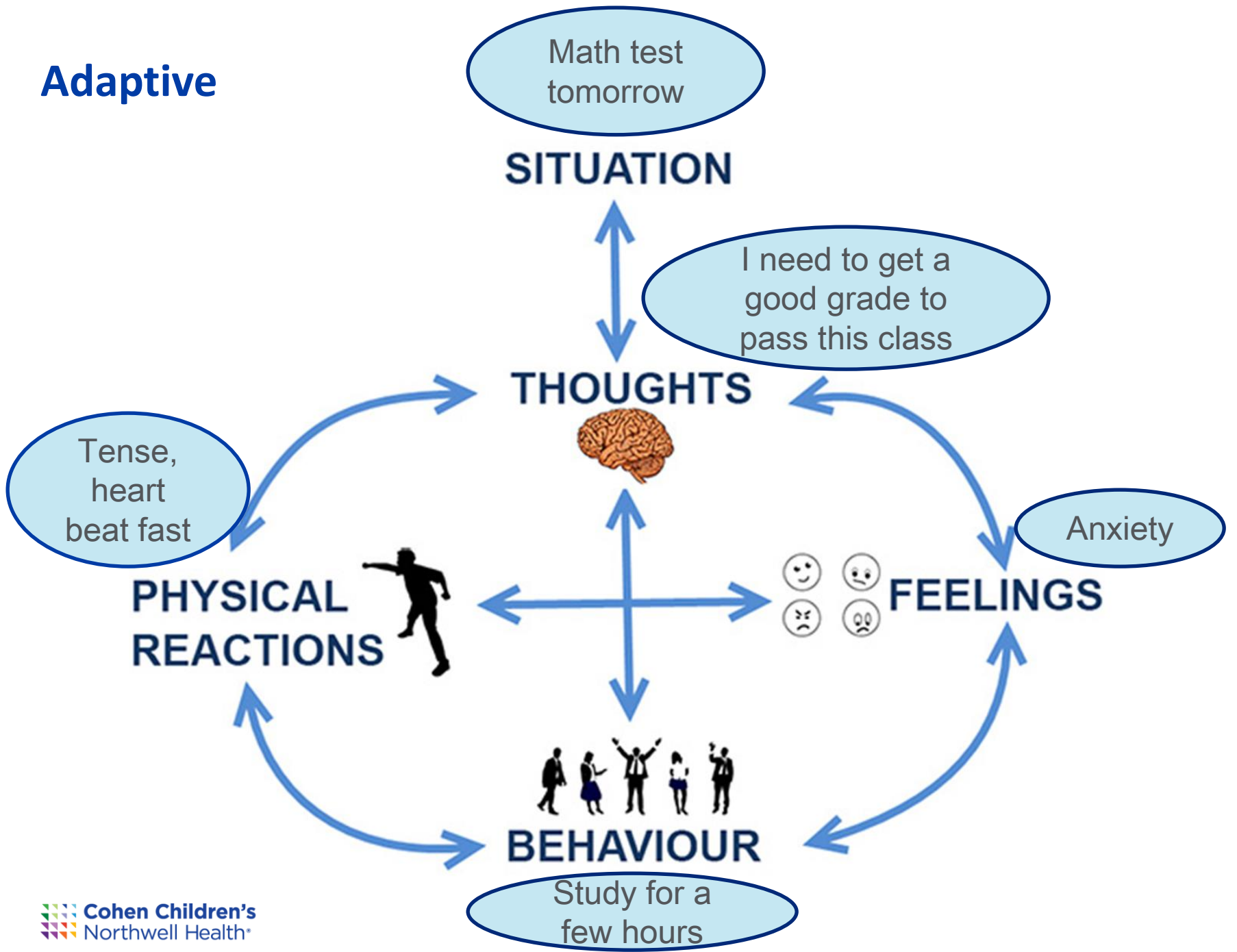
Anxiety is a normal part of daily life

Anxiety is like an alarm, alerting us to danger/important events

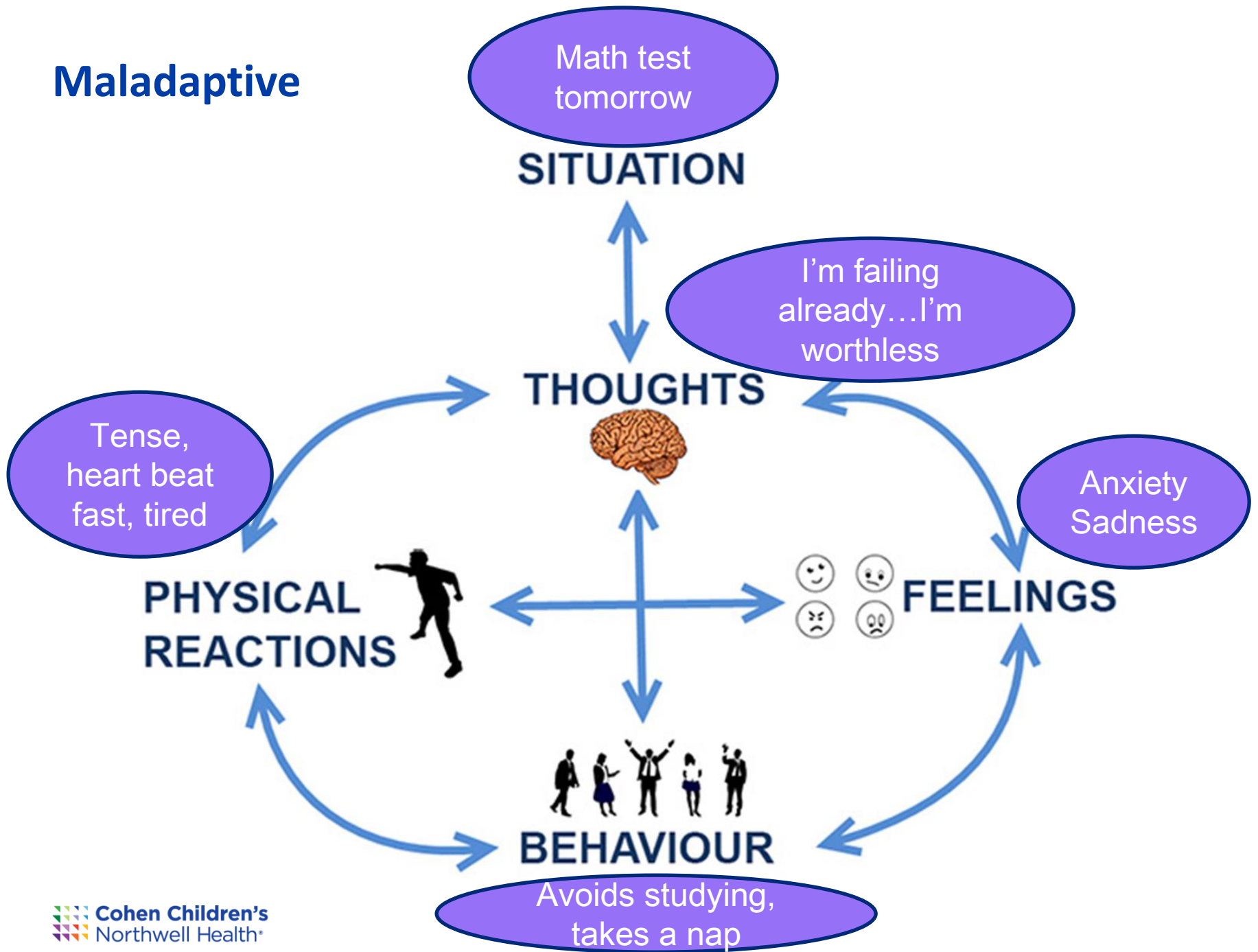
Anxiety affects our thoughts, feelings and behaviors



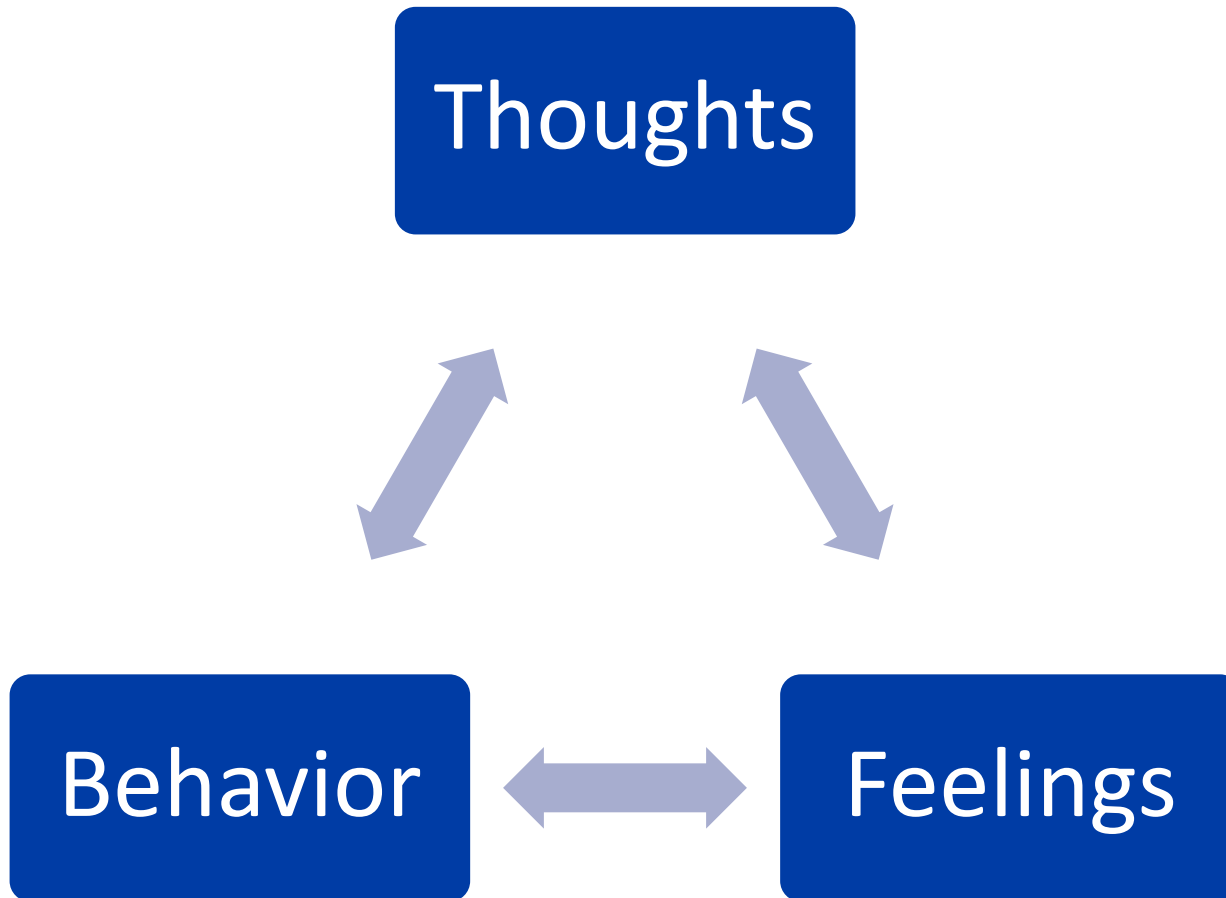
Adaptive



Maladaptive



How anxiety gets worse



Best friends: Anxiety and Avoidance



Anxiety urges people to avoid what they fear

Avoidance leads to relief – it's rewarding!

Acting opposite → approach/exposure

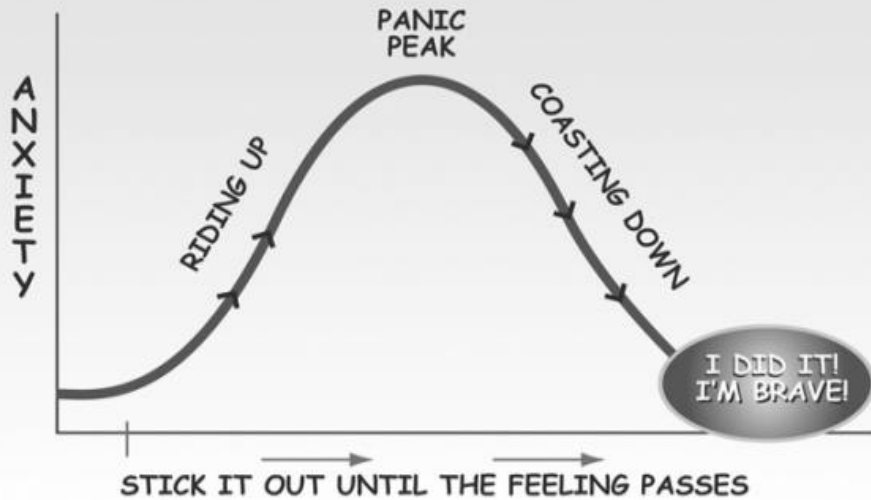
Exposure gradually decreases anxiety

It is uncomfortable

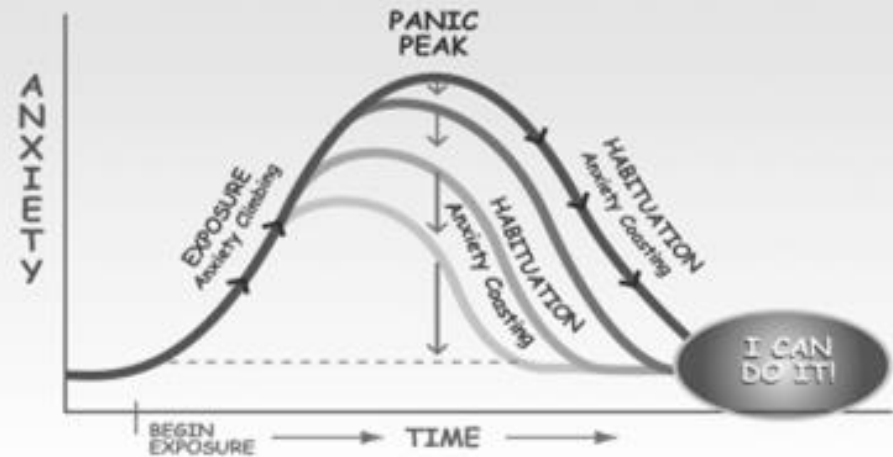
A team approach AND consistency is key

Face your fears

RIDE: Up and Down the Worry Hill®



Practice Makes it Easier



Help kids change their worry thoughts

Recognize and label anxiety

- It's my feeling brain
- It's just anxiety
- It's a false alarm

Question anxiety

- How likely is it to happen?
- What else can happen?
- What is most likely to happen?
- How would I handle it if it did happen?

Respect feelings without empowering fears

The goal is not to eliminate but to help a child manage anxiety

Avoiding things just because they make a child anxious, breeds more anxiety

Express positive—but realistic—expectations

Respect their feelings, but don't empower them

Don't ask leading questions

Don't reinforce the child's fears

Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety

Try to keep the anticipatory periods short

Help think things through with the child

Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety

What are oppositional behaviors?



Oppositional Behaviors

“Refusal to be compliant with the wishes and direction of adults”

Negativistic, defiant, disobedient, and hostile behaviors

Present for more than 6 months

With some children with ODD, disruptive behaviors may be a “proactive” attempt to avoid going to school.

By being disruptive or behaviorally out of control, the child hopes that parents may acquiesce and allow the child to stay at home.

These behaviors may be openly defiant, excessively disruptive, and may escalate to aggression

They may also be passive aggressive (stalling, oversleeping, missing the bus etc.)

While students with anxiety-based refusal may be avoiding negative experiences, students with oppositional behaviors may also be pursuing positive experiences (attention seeking behaviors, tangible reinforcement outside of school (i.e. sleeping, spending time with friends, watching TV, playing games etc))

Truancy Vs School refusal

Behavioral Characteristics of School Refusers and Truants	
<i>School Refusal</i>	<i>Truancy</i>
Severe emotional stress about attending school: may include anxiety, temper tantrums, depression, or somatic issues	Lack of excessive anxiety or fear about attending school
Parents are aware of the absence or the child convinces parents to allow him to stay at home	Children often attempt to conceal their absence from parents
Absence of significant behavioral or antisocial problems	Frequent antisocial behavior, often in the company of antisocial peers
During school hours, the child stays home because it is safe	During school hours, the child is somewhere other than home
A willingness to do homework and complies by completing work at home	Lack of willingness to do schoolwork or meet academic expectations

How has school refusal changed?





School refusal almost triples since COVID-19 lockdowns, say parents and expert

Covid has impacted all aspects of daily life

Covid has increased worries about safety

In-person school means new routines

Virtual education has been more available

Increased academic and social demands have been hard to keep up with

Potential changes in caregivers' routines



What can I do to
prepare for a smooth
transition?



Help provide structure and predictability



Get information from school about the school day



Help your child create a school day routine and sleep schedule



Start your routine in advance of school starting and re-enforce after breaks and weekends



Set clear and reasonable expectations around behavior and academics



Prepare for transitions/difficult times with work and back-up supports

Model healthy coping



Stay aware of your emotions



Talk about emotions, label them



Use coping skills in a visible way



Limit exposure to media/screen time



Be kind to yourself

Set the stage for healthy communication



Make time for regular check-ins about everyday topics and emotionally-sensitive topics



Limit judgements



Use open-ended questions to stimulate conversation

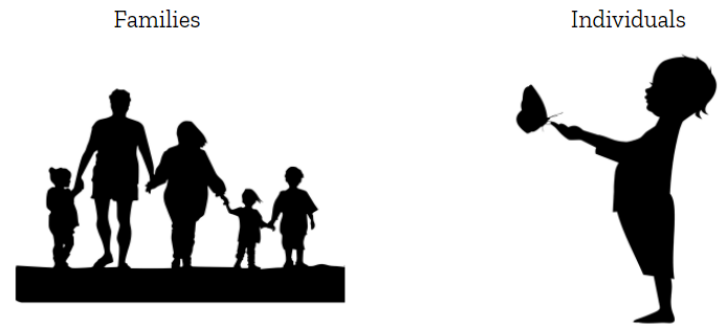


Validate emotions

("It makes sense you feel _____ because _____")

Focus on strengths and resiliency

- Remember that kids (and all of us) are resilient!
- Engage your child in collaborative problem-solving
- Focus on what's staying the same
- Encourage independence
- Encourage your child to foster relationships with peers and adults

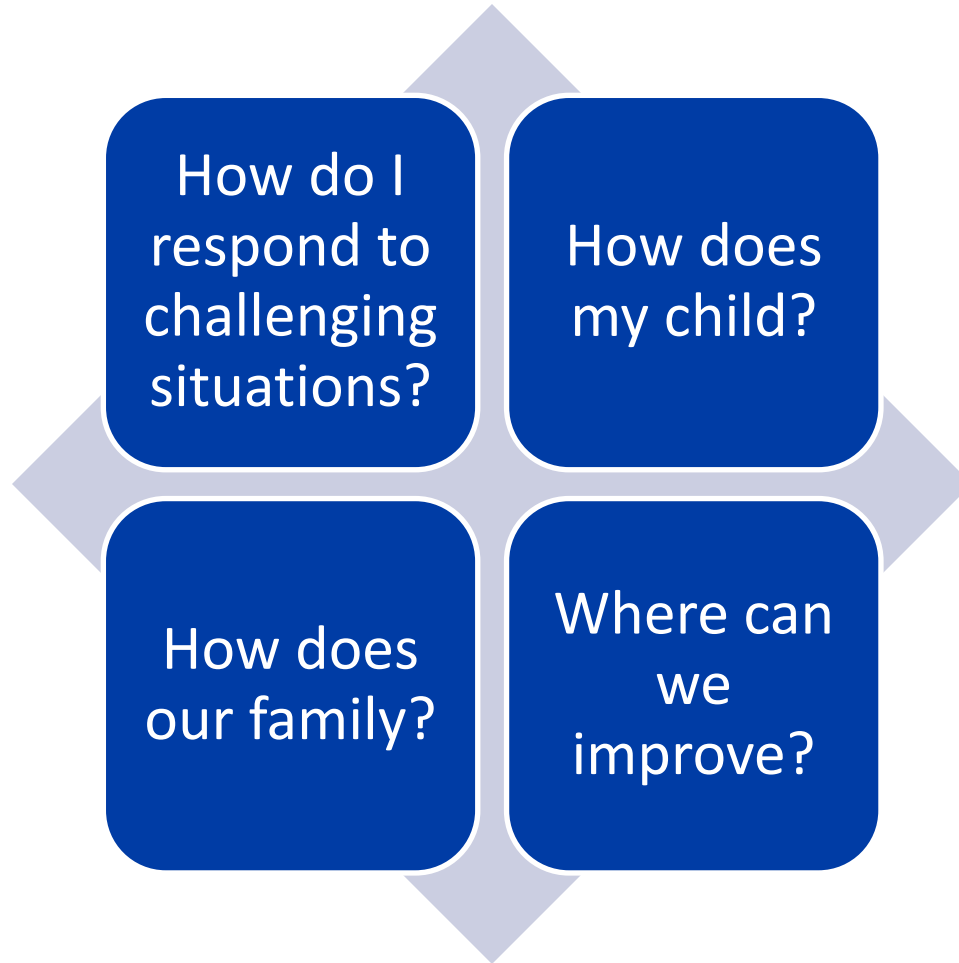


Resilience Exists at Multiple Levels

What are some
concrete tools to help
my family and I cope?



PAUSE TO REFLECT



Reduce Vulnerability to Intense Emotions

Get good sleep

Eat healthfully

Get regular exercise

Avoid excessive or illegal substances

Build in fun

Do things that help you/your child feel a sense of mastery

Make time for relationships

Take care of physical health

Cope ahead for stress

Practice mindfulness

Cope in the Moment



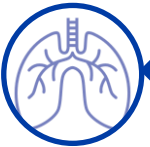
Distract to take your mind off upsetting things



Self-Soothe with 5 Senses



Positive self-talk



Deep breathing



Muscle relaxation



Build a Support Network



Friends



Extended family



Teachers and other school staff members



Coaches



Club advisors



Religious figures



Neighbors

Anticipate	Plan mock school days, play dates, etc.
Seek support	From school and outpatient providers for gradual exposure plan
Limit	Reinforcers at home (e.g., screen time)
Reward	Small steps
Allow	Natural consequences or enact punishments
Manage	Your own emotions and think long-term

How do I know if my
child needs more help?



Is your child...

- Upset with no clear reason or out of proportion to the situation?
- Upset a lot of the time or intensely?
- Unable to do age-appropriate things due to upsetting emotions?
- Making comments about death or suicide?

*Upset can mean any negative emotion such as anxious, sad or angry

Who can I turn to if we need more help?



School supports

- School-based staff
- Committee on Special Education (CSE)

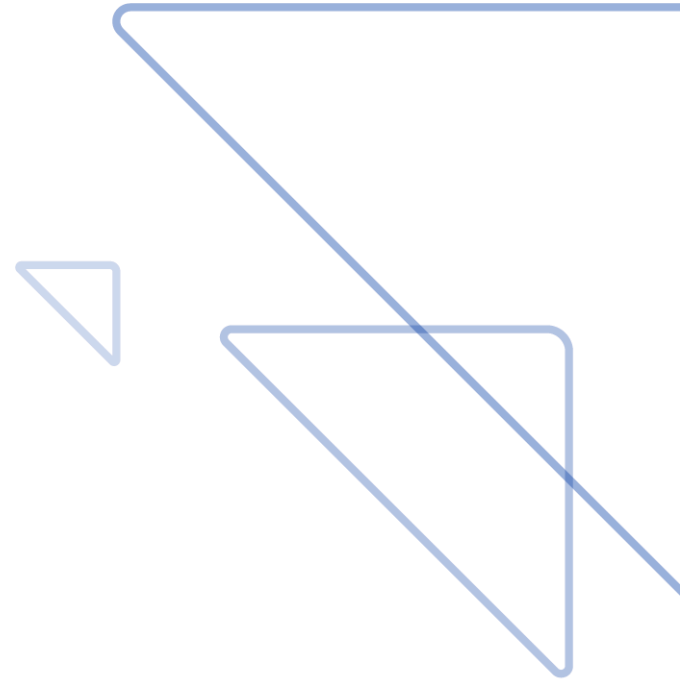
Health/Mental health professionals

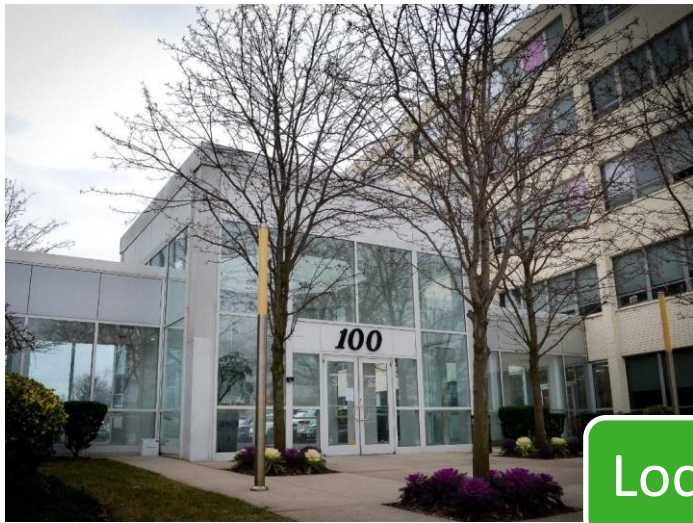
- Pediatrician
- Therapist
- Psychiatrist

Crisis services

- 911/Emergency Department
- Cohen's Children's Behavioral Health Center at RVC
- Cohen Children's behavioral Health Center at Mineola

The Behavioral Health Center





Location

- 100 Merrick Road, Suite 101A Rockville Centre, 11570

Hours of Operation

- M, W, Th, F 9:30-5:30
- Tu 8-8

Contact Information

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Questions??

