PART ONE

All about Anxiety

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Anxiety and Fear

The Dragon

This book must begin with the Dragon, because without the Dragon there is no problem. The anxiety Dragon is the cause of the disability and the distress that your child exhibits. Of course, the Dragon is an imaginary creature. Our explaining that anxiety is like a Dragon may strike some people as simplistic—or, even worse, as condescending. We see the functions of the Dragon, the Wizard, and the Research Notes quite differently. These tools are invaluable in explaining the complex biological, psychological, medical, and research components of anxiety. The field is changing rapidly, and changing for the better, as you will see in Chapter 2. For now, however, the best way to explain anxiety is to begin with the reason you picked up this book: you care about a child who is in distress. We know many children like this. Throughout the book, we give examples of kids with anxiety problems, because it is inspiring to read about other children with similar problems who got well. We have tried to keep these stories nonthreatening. We do not downplay how distressed the child was, but we also show how many options the child had, even in the tough situation in which he found himself. In this book we share with you the stories, strengths, and hopes of people who have overcome anxiety disorders.

Hello! Glad to meet you. I don't really want to hurt you or your child. I just want to protect your child—in my nice prison! It's a scary world out there. My prison is very safe.

We have taken all of the stories in this book from our many years of clinical practice. We've made changes in each story to protect the confidentiality of the families involved. To understand the power of the Dragon, you must be aware of the devastation that anxiety disorders can cause in a child's life. This book is about anxious children and the intense physical symptoms that can cause them to avoid normal activities and the pleasures of childhood. We use words like *devastating* and *intense pain* throughout the book. It is too easy for adults or people who do not have an anxiety problem themselves to underestimate the suffering that these problems can cause.

We once worked with a thirteen-year-old boy named Kurt. His parents had adopted him when he was a baby. He was African American and his parents were Caucasian. No one knew much about his biological parents, so there were no genetic clues to help anyone sort out his problems. And Kurt had problems that year. He liked to wear baggy clothes because he had gained a lot of weight over the last year when he felt bad about himself. His psychiatrist said that he was depressed. Kurt had been a worrier all his life. He also had a learning disability. That handicap made it hard for Kurt to do well in school. He had to work harder than the other students to learn things. The kids teased Kurt for being shy and worried all the time and for not being able to spell or to do math easily. Then, when Kurt gained weight, the other kids teased him even more. All Kurt really wanted to do was stay home with his mom, who loved him. He was safe at home. Kurt and his mom had fun together sometimes, but when Kurt was really sad, even being with his mom wasn't much fun. Kurt's psychiatrist helped him by having him take a medicine and then recommended that Kurt see a therapist.

Kurt was worried about seeing the therapist, especially when she asked him to keep a Journal of how he was doing. That sounded a lot like school, and right now he didn't like schoolwork. The first week Kurt didn't fill anything out in his Journal and brought it back empty. He didn't know how his therapist would react. To his surprise, she said that she had set up the Journal wrong. Instead of asking him to write in it, she wrote in it for him while they decided on goals and tasks for the week. She wrote down what Kurt told her. His words were in the Journal, but the therapist wrote them. That made it a lot easier for Kurt. She put check boxes next to the assignments so that Kurt could gauge his progress. She left a blank line for him to record, from 0 to 10, the amount of anxiety he felt during each practice session. This Kurt loved. He liked trying new ideas at school when other kids teased him. He loved having homework that asked him to play outside with a friend. After a few sessions with his therapist, Kurt felt much better. In fact, he realized that he was worrying less than he ever had in his whole life.

Kurt looked at the last assignment on the list: think about the good parts of having anxiety. When his therapist first asked him to do this, it made no sense to Kurt. What could be good about being tortured by the Dragon? It was fun finding out how to get his Wizard to fight back, but, overall, it was a lot more work and pain than not having the Dragon to begin with. Kurt spent a lot of time that week thinking about what was good about his anxiety. He thought about the boy in school who teased him the most. This mean bully had taken things from Kurt and other kids. Most of the students in Kurt's class were afraid to tell the teacher about the bully. Kurt realized that this kid had no anxiety. It didn't bother him to make other kids mad or unhappy. Kurt, on the other hand, would never steal from kids or tease them, because he knew that it would make them sad. He didn't want to hurt other children or anyone, for that matter. Kurt realized that sometimes worry was a good thing. His worry made him a better friend than if he had no worry at all. His worry made him honest. Kurt realized that some worry was a part of who he was, and that he liked that part of himself. It was great to feel that he didn't have to change a part of himself at all. He

would be great, just the way he was, now that he could manage his worry.

Anxiety is a false alarm of danger. The alarm itself is normal. The problem for your child is that his brain's alarm goes off when there is no real danger. His mind reacts to the alarm by imagining danger, which then scares him further. That false alarm of danger, repeated over and over again, causes pain, fear, and self-doubt.

This is how the Anxiety Cure works for kids. As therapists, we are lucky to see this story unfold, with endless variations, day after day. It starts out, in classic fairytale fashion, with pain and unhappiness and almost always ends with satisfaction and joy. What happens in this story may seem like magic to you, but it isn't. Though it takes hard work, the rewards are tremendous.

Anxiety and Fear

Before you are introduced to the Dragon, the Wizard, and the Research Notes, we want to explain a few important ideas. Let's start with the word *anxiety*. It needs to be separated from *fear*. Fear is what you feel when you confront a real, immediate danger. For example, when a big bully directly threatens your daughter in the school playground, your child feels fear. When your son is climbing a tree and his feet slip out from under him, he feels fear. When your child is not facing a bully but fears going to school because a bully might be there, that is anxiety. When your child finds even looking at a tree to be scary because he might fall, that is anxiety. Fear occurs when the danger "is." Anxiety occurs when the danger "might be." Fear is generally uncommon—but familiar—in a child's life. Almost every child experiences fear in some situations. Anxiety, in clear contrast, can be a constant companion to your anxious child, in situations that would not provoke anxiety in most of your child's peers.

Anxiety Is Made of Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors

Anxiety is a vaguely defined and commonly used word that also has a strict scientific meaning. In modern mental health research the word *anxiety* describes the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that occur when a person has the perception of serious danger in situations where other people do not perceive danger. Anxiety means worrying that something really, really bad might happen at any minute. For example, a younger child might worry about a monster jumping out from under his bed. An older child might worry that she will be embarrassed in front of her classmates at school. For a child of any age, another serious cause of anxiety might be a major illness or the loss of a parent. Thoughts like these scare anyone. They sure can scare a child. Disturbing as these thoughts are, anxiety is more than just troubling thoughts. Strong feelings, such as tension and emotional pain, also come with anxiety. The pain can be a low-level chronic ache or a severe and acute pain. It can show up in any part of the body. Children commonly feel anxiety as a stomach ache or a headache. A person's whole body participates in the experience of anxiety, with a racing heart, tight muscles, and shallow, fast breathing. Anxiety can make a child feel that he has to urinate, defecate, or vomit.

Anxiety is even more than disturbing thoughts and painful feelings. Anxiety shows up in the anxious child's behavior. Anxiety

Over the course of a lifetime about one in every four people suffers from an anxiety disorder. Females are about twice as likely to suffer from an anxiety disorder as are males. Among children, about one in ten have an anxiety disorder. Far larger percentages of both adults and children have significant anxiety problems that do not reach the level of a "disorder." In children, anxiety problems are most likely to be seen as disruptions in normal developmental patterns. (J. March and A. M. Albano, "Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents," in *Textbook of Anxiety Disorders*, 2002)

causes the sufferer to pay absolute attention to the source of possible danger and to prepare to fight for his life or to immediately flee to safety. In the modern world, fighting is seldom a realistic option when anxiety makes its appearance, but flight is all too commonly the behavior that intense anxiety causes. "Get out of here right now!" "Don't go near that dangerous place!" Anxiety takes up a lot of mental capacity. Anxiety makes it hard to read or study or even to think about anything except the object of the anxiety. Anxiety is exhausting. It leads to intense fatigue and depression—to feeling defeated and helpless. These problems affect not only the child with anxiety but his entire family as well.

The Holes Dug by Anxiety

Most anxiety-caused behaviors are children's attempts to take certain activities out of their lives. You can detect the presence of anxiety by the absence of other things, the "holes" that occur in the anxious child's life. Anxious children stick close to home and have limited social activities. There is one exception to this general rule. When children have compulsions—repetitive rituals used to ward off anxiety (such as hand-washing, for contamination fears)—then you see something abnormal added to their lives. Yet more typical of anxiety-caused behaviors is children's failure to go to school, to speak up in class, or to spend the night at a friend's house. Travel can be avoided; so can petting a dog or being in the same room with a cat. Those are important activities, the loss of which is common in the lives of anxious children. Literally thousands of abnormal holes in children's behaviors are caused by anxiety, as part of the brain's powerful automatic fight or flight response to the perception of imminent danger.

The physical and mental experience of intense worry, sometimes called a "panic attack" when it is very severe, can come out of the blue at a completely unexpected time; it's the emotional equivalent of a sudden clap of thunder on a cloudless summer day. More often, panic occurs in particular situations that are feared by the anxious child. A child with social anxiety may have panic attacks only in

social settings where embarrassment is the danger, like being in a school play or even being called on to give an answer in class.

Anxiety does not always show up in a child's life as a panic attack. Anxiety can also be the low, steady rumble of a scared-to-death feeling, as if you knew there was a hungry saber-toothed tiger hiding just out of sight but ready to spring on you at any minute. Maybe that tiger is just ahead of you right now. Maybe he isn't where you think he is. You cannot be sure where he is because you don't see the tiger. Anxious children's fears tell them that the saber-toothed tiger could be almost anywhere at almost any time. Imagine trying to live a normal life with that level of fear as a menacing companion, day in and day out.

The Good Side of Anxiety

Anxiety has a valuable biological function. Scary things do happen to children. In many situations it is good to anticipate problems because your child can then prepare for danger. That is why the capacity for anxiety is built into the human brain. Anxiety can work well to get your child's attention and to get him ready for "fight or flight" in response to real dangers. A child who is anxious about failing a test studies for the exam. A child who is anxious about a car crash wears a seat belt.

For the anxious child, this healthy brain mechanism has run amok. In most circumstances, the danger is not the saber-toothed

Anxiety disorders, in addition to being painful for the family, are also tremendously costly to society. As a class, anxiety disorders cost society $65 billion in 1994, which represents 31.8 percent of all mental health disorder costs. Though these costs are primarily caused by lost productivity in adults, the fact that most anxiety disorders originate in childhood shows that society as a whole could benefit tremendously from preventing them. (DuPont, et al., *Textbook of Anxiety Disorders*, 2002)

tiger or the bully in the schoolyard but the "false alarm" itself. Nothing is there for the child to face except his own anxiety, with its associated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This experience of anxiety is unlike that of fear because in the child's life, it is neither rare nor brief. Pathological anxiety is often recurring and may be continuous. The problem of anxiety, however, is deeper than the false alarm because the anxious child soon comes to doubt his own body, feelings, and thoughts. He sees that other people, including children his own age, do not feel this way in this situation. Then comes an inevitable, more disturbing thought, "Something is wrong inside. Something is seriously wrong with me!" When your child has anxiety, he fears not only dangers from outside. Worse still are the terrible dangers from inside. A fearful child does not suffer from deteriorating self-esteem because the dangerous problem is *outside.* The anxious child inevitably does suffer from lowered self-esteem because the deeper, more persistent problem is clearly seen to be *inside.*

The core problem is the false alarm of danger, which produces a predictable and understandable cascade of anxious feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The alarm is in the mid-brain, the most primitive part. It is located there because danger is such a big problem in all of life, not just in human life. The uniquely human part of the brain is the extensive cortex, the gray matter on the outside of the brain. The brain's cortex is where thinking takes place. That big cortex is the part of the brain that most makes us human. When the alarm of danger goes off, the entire cortex of the brain is put on alert. It starts working to understand and to explain the alarm, to solve the dreadful crisis that triggered the alarm in the first place. When the cortex does not immediately find a saber-toothed tiger lurking in the bushes, it uses its immense powers of imagination. That's where the "worry machine" comes into this story. In every anxious child's brain is a built-in worry machine. The worry machine harnesses the highly developed imagination that generally goes with anxiety, to spin a steady stream of stuff to worry about.

Panic happens from time to time. As the anxiety problem matures in a child, the panic typically becomes less common. In its

place is worry, the "What if" syndrome of possible danger. Here is the way this works. Worry requires doubt, uncertainty. Certainty of safety is what the worried mind craves. The slightest sliver of doubt opens the floodgates of worry.

Does the worried boy know for sure that he will not get poison ivy if he goes out in that wooded area? Can he be certain that a rabid dog won't come after him if he goes outside his house? Does the anxious girl know for sure that if she goes to sleep tonight, she will wake up in the morning? Can she be sure, really, absolutely sure, that her parents will be there when she wakes up? Think of the tens of thousands of possible dire scenarios for the worry machine to work on. The worry machine is the Dragon's collaborator in the anxious child's brain. It is how the Dragon does its business, day in and day out.

Anxiety is genetic, in the sense that some people's brain alarms for danger are set at hair trigger and others' almost never go off, even in the scariest situations. At the same time, anxiety is environmental, in that the child's and the parent's experiences and behaviors determine what a child does about the alarm. Your child cannot change the genetic aspects of anxiety, but she can change its environmental aspects by changing her thoughts and behaviors when the alarm goes off in her brain. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*, 1999)

Parents approach the problem of the anxious child's worries by reassuring the child, "Of course you won't get poison ivy, Tom, just go out with your friends and play with them." Or a parent might say, "Sally, you'll be fine tonight and when you wake up in the morning. I'll be right here." Think about it. Just how sure are those parents and how convincing are their reassurances? By now, you are saying, "But when the parent reassures the child and she comes home without poison ivy or wakes up in the morning safe and sound, then she learns to trust the parents' reassurances." Not so

fast. First, many anxious children are so frightened by their worry machines that they don't do the things that they could learn from. For them, many worry scenarios are way too frightening to even try.

Besides, just because the terrible things they dread didn't happen yesterday or last night, how can they be sure these things won't happen tonight or tomorrow? If a thousand airplanes land safely, how do you know the next one will? If ten thousand planes land safely, does that guarantee the next plane will? To make the problem more realistic, think about this. Even if the anxious child does not get poison ivy or die in the night, he was very upset and in a great deal of pain as a result of the false alarm. That pain is the direct result of the magnification and elaboration of possible danger caused by the child's worry machine.

Therefore, the parents' seemingly reasonable reassurances miss the point of the child's own experience, which is terribly painful. Because other people, including the anxious child's parents, don't understand what is going on inside his mind, he feels even more alone and hopeless. The brain's false alarm starts the anxiety ball rolling. The worry machine keeps it going, day after day, month after month.

Two more points about anxiety need to be made. Anxiety is common in human experience, even where there is no saber-toothed tiger or big bully. Anxiety in some situations is even healthy and useful. For example, feeling anxious before tests at school or before acting in a school play is not only common but is usually helpful. This relatively mild anxiety encourages the child to do the homework or prepare for the part in the play. The anxiety gets the child's attention and promotes appropriate behavior. Typically, healthy anxiety is triggered over and over again in these situations and is felt by most, but not all, children. In contrast, when anxiety is associated with what most people consider normal daily activities—for example, when a child feels intense anxiety about entering an elevator because of claustrophobia, and when the anxiety is not mild but is devastatingly severe—then it is neither healthy nor useful. In this case, pathological anxiety disrupts the child's life, producing a hole (refusal to get on an elevator) in his normal behavior.

Trying hard to please others, such as friends, family, and teachers, is usually a positive characteristic that helps a reasonable person live a good life. Most anxious people automatically approach life like this. That's why anxiety is called a disease of quality people. The family team is made up of the anxious child and one or more adults—usually, but not necessarily, a parent—who work with the child daily to solve her anxiety problem. It helps to be both gentle and firm in guiding your child to confront, rather than avoid, her fears.

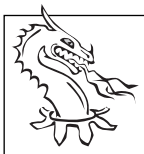
Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety exists in a continuum, from mild to severe, in everyone's life. Anxiety is, however, a lot more common and intense in some people's lives than in others', even when they face similar situations. Certain situations generate more anxiety in some people than do other situations. A child who usually does well on tests is less likely to feel anxious before an exam than is a child who wants to get a good grade but has done poorly in the subject being tested. Nevertheless, most variations among children are the result of different anxiety settings in each child's brain. You probably know someone who always complains before a test that she's afraid she'll get a bad grade, yet she always gets As. After a time, her complaints become a joke. But it may not be funny if she is truly distressed, inappropriately, every time she takes a test. Some children are more prone to severe and enduring anxiety than others are. When anxiety is so severe that it leads to significant limitations in a child's life—

When panic occurs without warning, it is called "spontaneous panic." When it occurs in predictable situations (like getting on an elevator or staying overnight at a friend's house), it is called "situational panic." *(Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, IV-R)*

for example, avoidance of going to school—then it is an anxiety disorder. To reach this level of a discrete mental disorder, the pathological anxiety must cause significant distress, disability, or both in the child's everyday activities.

This book was written for children whose anxiety interferes with their normal daily actions and enjoyment of life. Yet we are primarily addressing children's parents, who are their best allies in dealing with anxiety problems. We want to help, even if the child's anxiety stays below the threshold of a full-blown anxiety disorder. Because this type of anxiety is more widespread and more easily treated without professional mental health intervention or medicine, it is the primary focus of this book.



The Dragon's Own Story

Dragons, like Wizards, do a lot of different things. Unlike other Dragons, I specialize in scaring people. You probably think I do this because I am mean. I can see why you would think that, but it is not true, or maybe I should say that it is not the whole story. I only pick on people who have false alarms of danger that ring in their heads. I don't cause that to happen; it happens all on its own. What I do is add scary thoughts to those painful feelings. I do that by magnifying and multiplying the "What if's" in the fearful person's own anxious imagination.

How do I justify myself? It's not easy, I admit, because I do cause a lot of suffering. But there is one way that I can make a claim to having a useful life. When anxious people do the work necessary to tame me, they get a huge boost in their self-esteem. They learn a wonderful technique to help them solve many of the problems they will face in their lives. So, in a way, you could call me a teacher. A harsh and an unfair teacher, that's true, but a teacher nonetheless.

I know that it's better for me and maybe it will be better for you, too, if you think of me as a teacher. At least, it gives our troublesome encounter a positive spin.

Two Characters and One Useful Tool

You have already encountered the Dragon, the Wizard, and the Research Notes. Although you will learn more about them as you read, here are some important facts you need to know at the start. Let's start with the Dragon. It is the embodiment of anxiety and panic. When your child is anxious, he is suffering from a "Dragon attack." The Dragon is a tough beast, cruel and heartless. Like a lot of tough guys, however, it also has a tender side. If you understand it, you can tame it. The Dragon's goal is to put its victims into prison. It does this by blackmail. The Dragon comes at its victims with a dazzling show of force. It makes its victims fear the worst. It wants its victims to believe that it can make them go crazy, pass out, and lose consciousness. It wants them to believe that it can even kill them, if it chooses to. Sometimes the Dragon says it will harm or kill other people, like family members, if its victim doesn't do as it demands. This Dragon is a nasty tyrant.

There are many important things the Dragon doesn't want you and your child to know about it. For example, the only food it can eat is the fear of its victims. If they don't fear it, they don't feed it. The Dragon then withers away and withdraws from the victim's life as a result of this neglect. Its only power, really, is the power to make its victims terribly uncomfortable. It cannot do any of the awful things that it wants its victims to believe that it can do. It cannot cause physical illnesses, passing out, or loss of control. It surely cannot harm its victims, let alone kill them. The Dragon is all show and no substance, other than the pain it can inflict on its victims. That pain, however, is real. Anxiety and panic cause severe pain, as brutal as the pain of a broken leg or a heart attack. Nevertheless, knowing that the Dragon's only power is pain helps to make its attacks more endurable.

Imagine that anxiety is like a Dragon. To your child, this Dragon is huge and terrifying. It makes your child feel bad physical feelings and makes him scared. It pops up from nowhere when least expected or forces a child to perform rituals or avoid things in order to keep the Dragon away. This Dragon, of course, is all in

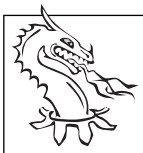
your child's head. His own brain makes up things to be fearful of, and his mind creates panic attacks that just seem to pop up out of nowhere. Yet having the image of the Dragon is tremendously useful for both children and adults. It gives a sense of otherness to the feelings, so that they are not part of one's personality but are alien, belonging to this fierce being.

Every anxious child or adult we've ever met has instantly recognized the idea of the Dragon as appropriate for the feelings they experience. Some people call this feeling the shadow, the octopus, the beast, or the monster. We like the image of the Dragon. If your child chooses to call his anxiety a different name, just translate all of our references to the Dragon into your child's language. But first give the Dragon a try when you explain anxiety to your child. We bet that you, too, will see a light of understanding in your child's eyes.

The first step to getting well is the most important. Your child must face the problem and accept that it is her problem to solve. She does not have to do it alone, but she has to do it. No one can do it for her, not even you, as a loving and concerned parent. The hardest thing for a parent to face is a suffering child. You want to fix your child's anxiety problem, but you cannot. Yet you can help your child fix it. Guiding you along the way is our main goal in this book.

Once the anxious child stops running away and turns to face the Dragon, the Dragon dramatically changes its behavior. It comes less often and with less intensity. But, because its attacks vary over time, it still comes back, occasionally with great force, even during your child's process of getting well. Once the child has gained control of his life, the Dragon typically goes away for short or long periods of time, sometimes for years or even decades. Sooner or later, though, the Dragon usually reappears, often with full force. At that point, the victim needs to remember the techniques for dealing with the Dragon and not flee in terror.

There is much more to know about the Dragon. It is a master of disguise. It comes at an anxious child first in one costume, then in another. That makes the Dragon hard to recognize. There is just one constant in its life: its only power is the ability to create anxiety in its victims. The Dragon's disguises are one way that it rules its victims. Sometimes it pretends to be a terrible physical illness. Sometimes it hides behind things in the environment, as if, for example, one's parents would be hurt if a child opened a door the wrong way.



My only power is the ability to produce bad feelings. In that way I make your child afraid of what I can do to him. If your child does my bidding, I'll go a little easier on him. But I can't promise not to bother him, even if he agrees to stay in my prison. Children need constant attention. I show my attention by scaring your child.

The Dragon's goal is to put anxiety sufferers into its prison. The anxious child's goal is to be free of the Dragon. Since the child cannot directly stop the Dragon's attacks, the only way to succeed is to accept the bad feelings caused by the Dragon and to put these into a healthy perspective. That means going through life "impersonating a normal person," despite the bad feelings. When the anxious child does that, the Dragon is no longer being fed, so it soon loses interest in this particular victim. The Dragon tends to come back, but each time it returns, you can use the same techniques to limit the damage it causes.

The Research Notes of Anxiety contain the newest discoveries in the field of neuroscience, which have been pouring out of research centers around the world over the last decade. It is reassuring to know that scientists are developing better ways to understand and overcome the problems of anxiety. The Research Notes have lots of interesting, important, and practical knowledge for you and your child, and you will hear more about them in Chapter 2.

The Wizard is your guide to getting well. The Wizard is a helpful, wise, and compassionate person who understands the Dragon and who sympathizes with you and your anxious child. The Wizard offers useful ways to regain control of your anxious child's, as well as your family's, life. The Wizard knows the Dragon and all of its devious tricks and understands the information in the Research Notes. The Wizard is determined to help your anxious child stay out of the Dragon's prison. The Wizard is a guide, a pathfinder, in a world made scary by unpredictable but repeated Dragon attacks. You will read about the Wizard in Chapter 3.

The Wizard, the Dragon, and the Research Notes will provide you and your child with a shared vocabulary for thinking about anxiety and for solving this problem. Working with thousands of people—many of them children—we have found that these three tools bring the anxiety problem to life and make the solutions more understandable and practical.

Action Steps

- Notice the presence of the Dragon in your child's life.
- Recognize that reassuring your child does not work.
- Empathize with the suffering your child is experiencing.