Hi, I’m Kerry, I’m a sleep practitioner. I work in Leeds

Hi, I'm Helen. I work as a sleep practitioner in London. And I'm a Mum of 4 children all grown up now, 3 of which are on the artistic spectrum.

This is a Sleep Right podcast and, in this episode, we're talking about bedtime anxiety.

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Hi Kerry

Hi Helen, how are you, okay?

I'm fine. Thank you. I wonder today if we could just talk about what is bedtime anxiety.

Obviously, bedtime anxiety we come across quite a lot, don't we, with all age children. I often find that parents report that their child is very anxious with various diagnosis or additional needs. There is sometimes anxiety there and it can be around they don't want to go into their own bedroom. Or there's some fear there that is stopping the child being able to self-regulate and calm ready to go to sleep. I find sometimes it's anxiety about what's coming the next day, if the child's worried about school and they have a level of school anxiety. Sometimes that causes bedtime anxiety, because obviously they go to sleep, the next thing they do is wake up and it's back to school that rises their anxiety. Other times I find anxiety in different parts. It's actually calm at some points and other times something's happened to cause a trigger to raise the anxiety. And so I guess between us all we give quite a lot of tips and ideas around unpicking that anxiety and trying to work on it. Again, it depends on individual anxiety triggers and the family needs but also, I think it comes to us unpicking it with the parent, what we can do to try and reduce that anxiety at bedtime.

Yes, sometimes it's just being separated, isn't it? You know sometimes they're so used to sleeping with a parent.

I think we see that so much. That may be around, I think, some separation anxiety. And I find that sometimes it's the parent. The child is getting older, and it's the parent saying they can't stay in my bed any longer. We need to work on this. But as the child has maybe always co-slept it's a behaviour that's going to take a while to break. I think maybe it needs to be very gradual steps.

There is no easy fix, is there?

It's about being very sensitive to the individual child.

And I guess unpicking because some levels of anxiety are down to some high level of trauma that a child's experienced, and they're bound to naturally have some anxiety. So, I think we need to be really cautious on unpicking and not just expecting that by doing one simple tactic we’ll support that anxiety.

I think a lot of children when they go to bed, if they are alone, that's when they've got the time to really think about the things that are worrying them.

Yes, definitely.

So, if we were looking at that what might we suggest to parents where they have got an anxious child that just isn't able to settle and keeps on distracting them, you know making up, “Mum, I need this.”

You see we recommend the comfort objects if it's a separation thing, with Mum or Dad introducing a comfort object into a child's bedtime routine or letting them sleep with something of the parent’s that they're attached to. One that we often recommend is an item of parents’ worn clothing on the pillowcase. Recently I heard somebody else saying about their child with autism that they swap pillows every night. So, one night Mum sleeps on it and the night after the child sleeps on the same pillow and then they swap again the next night so the scent can be developed.

It’s amazing how scent is such a strong sense, isn't it?

Yeah. They have a sense of mum being there even though she's not.

I've also found sometimes just to have a picture of what mum is doing when the child is going to sleep. They keep that picture under their pillow so they might have a picture of mum washing up or mum reading a book or whatever.

Or the love heart. The love heart drawn on the hand is another one, isn't it? Mum's got one or dad's got one or the carer has got one and the child's got one too, so when they feel anxious or anything, they can press the love heart and it gives them a hug sensation. I know a few that do that with school anxiety through the day or give them something to hold like a love heart.

And a lot of children that suffer with anxiety can also suffer then with nightmares in the night, can't they?

Yeah, and I guess that's around parking their worries in the golden hour or before the golden hour just so they're trying to clear their mind of any worries or anxieties they've got. Whether it is a worry jar or a worry monster.

For some older children, obviously, they're probably too old for a worry monster, but just even a whiteboard and writing down all those causes.

I've used quite successfully a thought box; they’ve parked the thought in there. It might be they're anxious about “will I remember my money for tomorrow” or whatever it is. It goes into the thought box and then it’s promised that the box will be opened at breakfast. So, they know they've got their PE shoes or whatever.

Yeah. I also say to my parents that are using a worry box or a thought box or something like that, they try and end the set time on a positive. So, to give the child a positive that's happened in the day or try put a positive thought in their mind before falling asleep.

Yeah, I found a gratitude jar really helpful for that.

The child can decorate the jar with little stick-on diamonds and stuff like that. If they want to, that could be a bedtime activity. Then cut strips and they write on the strip. So it gradually builds up and then I find that if there's a night when they are feeling anxious, mum can say “How about, let's look at what we've been thankful for”, and bring back a memory.

I think so often with a child that's anxious, there's often underlying issues of self-identity, you know, esteem. And so, I don't know about you, but I found the “brilliant book” extremely useful. Where they've just made a scrapbook, done a design on the outside. It's the child's “brilliant book” and then photographs go in, and maybe pictures of what they've done, etc. All the things where they have felt brilliant and done things that maybe has been difficult for them to achieve. So that if there is a night when they're anxious and mum or dad can see that they're getting anxious about maybe something they've got to face the next day, they can look through the brilliant book at things that build up self-esteem, it can really help an anxious child.

Yeah, definitely, what about the gradual retreat?

The gradual retreat we use it more often than not, I would say, especially because we don't want if they are anxious, or they're very attached to a parent or carer, we don't want the parent just to walk away, because that would obviously rise anxiety, and the child's not going to go to sleep.

So, we unpick, again, individual needs, and we ask where they are and what's happening at bedtime. Sometimes a parent may be lying in bed with them, so we try to get the parent out of the bed. One thing we find is that sometimes if a child is in their parent’s bed, quite a good one to use is gradual retreat by getting them back into their own room. The parent, being at the side of the bed with them or sat on the bed, and then gradually move maybe next to the bed with holding the hand, but try not to have much verbal contact, and then gradually, whether that's on a chair or the floor, moving the parent away gradually to maybe outside the door. But the steps can be very slow steps because it shouldn't be done as a quick fix.

No, no. I've actually found with some children, it works to have a ribbon, which the child can hold and the mum or dad can hold whoever's putting the child to bed. So, as they're gradually moving further away, the child has still got hold of that ribbon.

Yeah, and the invisible string story that we often recommend. It's around what they feel, they can use an actual string. And say from the parent’s room into the child's room, but the story is around this invisible string. And I guess when we're talking about strings and ribbons, we've got to look at safety. So, we don't want the child getting the string or ribbon around their neck. So, we use an invisible string. Initially they can start to hold actually a string but obviously then reduce it down to the invisible string story. But that's around anxiety just so they feel like they've got that connection still with their parent carers.

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