**High Anxiety**



*Photo by* [*Ryan Ready*](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ryanready/4829673528)

It’s easy to assume that the intellectual advantages of gifted students give them an easier life, but it seems that each advantage also has an unexpected dark side. One of those side-effects is increased anxiety.

[Dr. Dan Peters](http://www.greatpotentialpress.com/authors/daniel-b-peters-ph-d-3) was the guest for last week’s [#gtchat](http://globalgtchatpoweredbytagt.wordpress.com/) chat about anxiety. I’ve seen Dan speak on the topic before, and I own [his book](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1935067230/?tag=byrdseed-20), so I made it a point to be there for the chat.

**A Recipe For Anxiety**

We know that gifted kids’ brains pick up on details that others miss.

*[There is] abundant available evidence that gifted children show enhanced sensory activation and awareness. Gifted brains are essentially “hyper-sensitive”… Eide & Eide,* [*Brains on Fire*](http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/Neurosciences/articles/Brains%20on%20Fire/)

The obvious benefit of this sensitivity is that students learn faster, since they pick up on so much more.

But it can also work against the gifted, turning them into anxious worriers. This sensitivity means that gifted kids experience stressful events more vividly than others. A more vivid experience means the memory of those events will be more vivid. And, of course, gifted kids’ impressive memories mean that they’ll remember the event for longer than we’d expect.

*Not only are the initial impressions especially strong, but also the later recollections are often unusually intense… Eide & Eide,* [*Brains on Fire*](http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/Neurosciences/articles/Brains%20on%20Fire/)

*The anxiety can spread like a virus.*

Now add in gifted kids’ powerful imaginations and their ability to connect the seemingly unconnected, and you have some insight into how gifted students become intense worriers. Their own brains transform a bad experience into something far worse, and then connect it to other situations. The anxiety can spread like a virus.

**Sharing Our Fears**

This is something kids should know about!

I sure wish I knew about it when I was younger. When I was in the classroom, I shared several stories with my students about how my brain likes to work against me and puff problems up beyond their natural size:

* As a kid, I wouldn’t go down the big slides at water parks. I was afraid my skin would get caught in a seam as I slid down.
* My blood pressure readings are always too high, because my anxiety rises as the strap constricts my arm. I’m afraid that I’ll lose circulation to my hand.
* The news once showed a roller coaster that was stuck high up on the track. A cherry-picker came to save the passengers. So my fear of tall rides isn’t that they will crash, but that they will get stuck and I’ll have to climb into a wobbly construction vehicle.

Kids laugh, of course, but they also are quick to recognize similar fears in their own lives. Some are eager to talk about one, and often others will say, “me too!”

There’s something to discussing these over-inflated fears. It turns them from debilitating to simply silly. Of course, not all (or even most) students will feel comfortable talking about these fears, but just hearing that they’re not alone can be valuable.

*Sometimes, we just have to tell our brains who’s boss.*

And remind kids that these fears can take many forms: fear of physical danger, social situations, or even disappointing others. The pattern is that we take an outcome that has a tiny chance of happening, and turn it into a certainty.

But, if we let our brains turn “worst-case” into “very-likely,” we’ll eventually avoid all situations because of *what might happen.*

Sometimes, we just have to tell our brains who’s boss.

**Resources**

* I highly recommend Dan’s book, [*Make Your Worrier A Warrior*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1935067230/?tag=byrdseed-20)
* He also wrote [a kids version](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1935067249/?tag=byrdseed-20).
* Read the whole #gtchat conversation in [this transcript](http://storify.com/gtchatmod/gtchat-special-guest-dr-dan-peters).
* Dan’s [10 steps to tame the worry monster](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-b-peters-phd/10-steps-for-parent-and-kids-to-taming-the-worry-monster_b_4345171.html)
* #gtchat’s links to [other anxiety resources](http://globalgtchatpoweredbytagt.wordpress.com/2014/02/01/special-guest-dr-dan-peters/)