



McLean
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE



McLean HOSPITAL
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

A Guide to Helping Your Child Approach Difficult Challenges

McLean School Consultation Service



Relationship Mindfulness Exercise
“Connecting with Gratitude”



Agenda

Understanding Emotions

Opposite Action

Behavioral Activation

Facing Fears

Coping

I've heard a lot about this
"COPING"

Do you think I could get it same
day delivery?





All emotions are natural and important



All Emotions Serve a Function

- Emotions serve a purpose
 - Give us information about a situation
 - Communicate to and influence how others respond
- Emotions are like the weather:
 - Inevitable
 - Out of our control
 - Don't last forever
 - We can choose how to deal with them

Emotion: What you feel

Action Urge: What you want to do

Fear/Anxiety

Avoid (Fight, Flight, Freeze)

Sadness

Cry, Stay Away from People

Anger

Yell, Fight, Break Things

Guilt

Stay Away, Argue, Not Tell the Truth

Shame

Hide

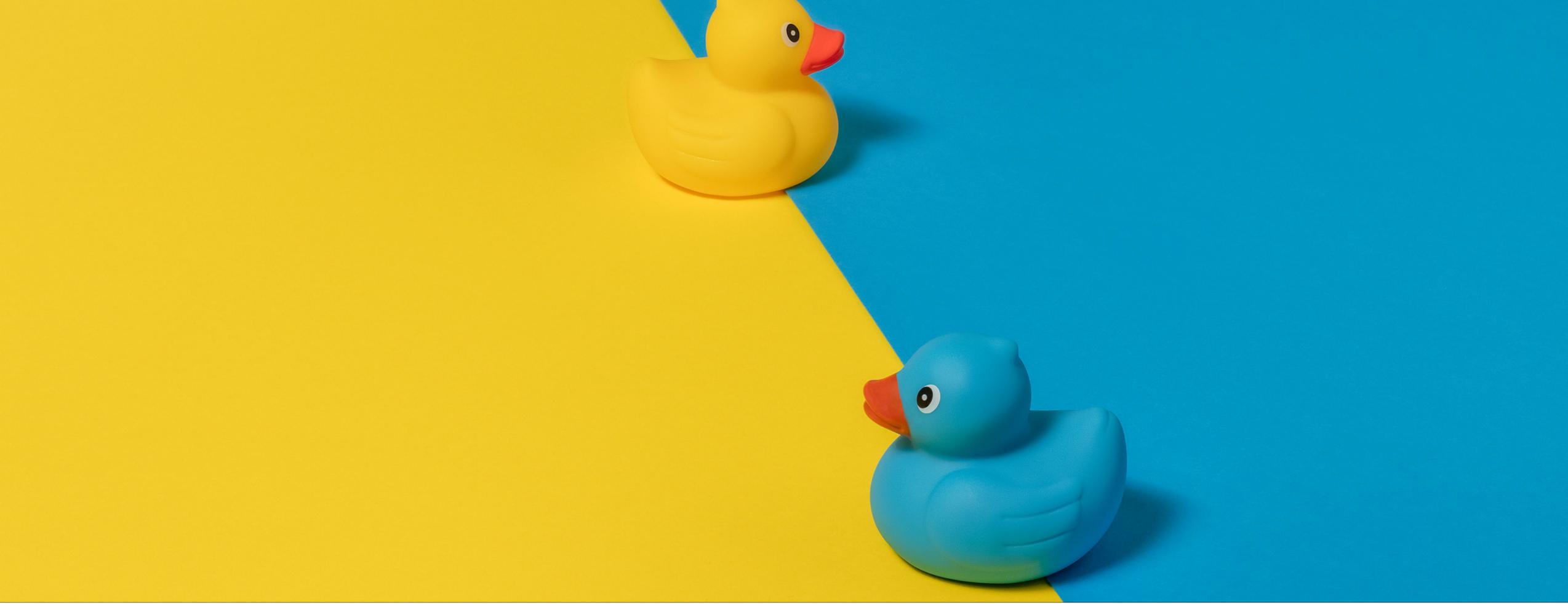
Emotions Come with Action Urges



What's helpful and unhelpful about acting on urges?



But...having an emotion does not mean you have to act
on its urge!



OPPOSITE ACTION



We can choose Opposite Action instead

We can change our emotion by doing the *opposite* of what our emotion tells us to do...in other words, the opposite of our action urge.

BUT! We are not trying to eliminate sadness

Sadness is a natural response to loss or disappointment.

It reminds us what is important or of value to us and helps to communicate to others that we need help.



We all have some degree of anxiety and our stress response system is adaptive for survival



Little to No Anxiety

Acting without thinking

Repeating the same mistakes

Over confidence

Oblivious to others' feelings

Taking inappropriate risks

Adaptive Anxiety

Nervous before new experiences

Appropriate boundaries with strangers

Experiencing discomfort over mistakes

Checking Completed Tasks

Carefully considering decisions or risks

Too Much Anxiety

Avoiding :

All risk

New experiences

Making mistakes

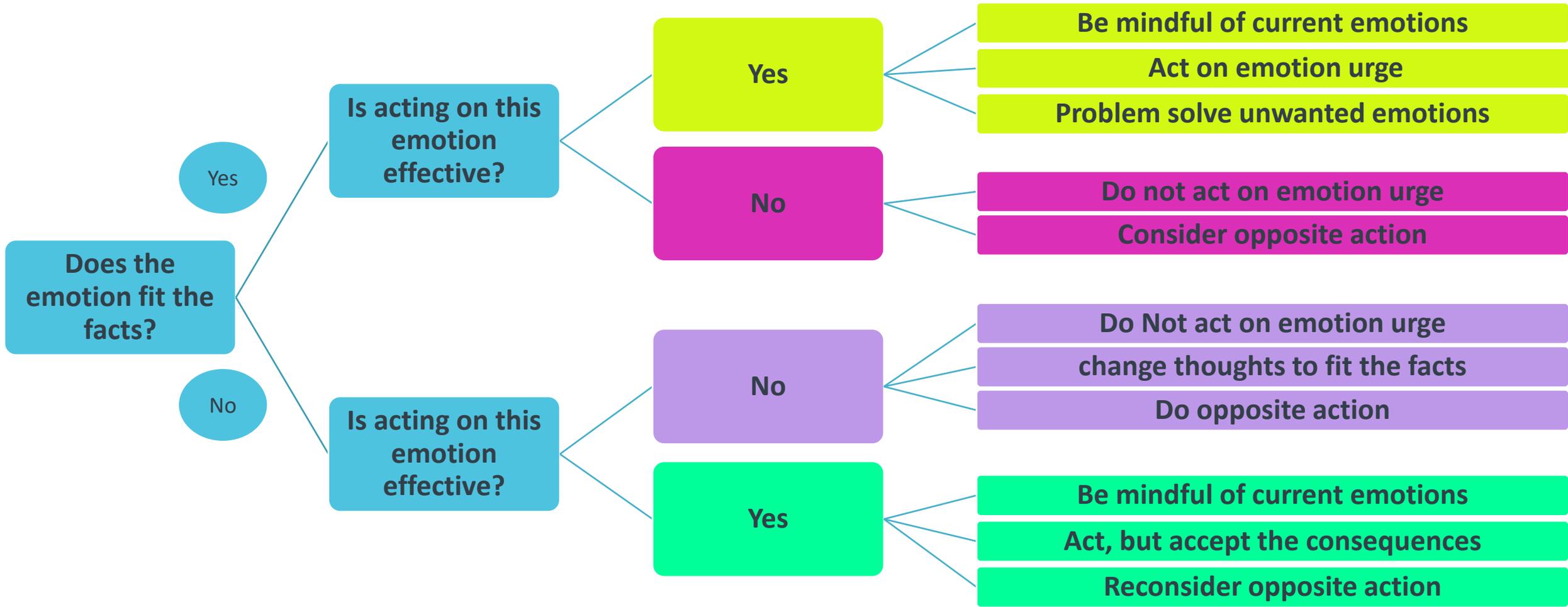
Social engagement

Constant worry

And we are not trying to eradicate anxiety

When to use Opposite Action:

1. The emotion you are experiencing doesn't fit the facts of the situation
2. The emotion may fit the facts but it's not working for you – it's not helpful due to its frequency, intensity, or duration



When to Use Opposite Action

The background consists of three overlapping geometric shapes in shades of blue. A large, dark blue triangle points downwards from the top center. Two lighter blue triangles are positioned on the left and right sides, pointing towards the center. The text is centered within the dark blue triangle.

OPPOSITE ACTION: How to do it

Opposite Action

Emotion	Action Urge	Opposite Action
Afraid, Scared, Anxious	Avoid (Fight, Flight, Freeze)	Approach the Fear
Sad	Cry, Stay Away from People	Get active, connect
Angry, Mad, Frustrated	Yell, Fight, Break Things	Gently avoid before skillful approach
Guilty	Stay Away, Argue, Not Tell the Truth	Ask forgiveness, work to repair
Shame, Embarrassed	Hide	Go public, accept consequences, repair

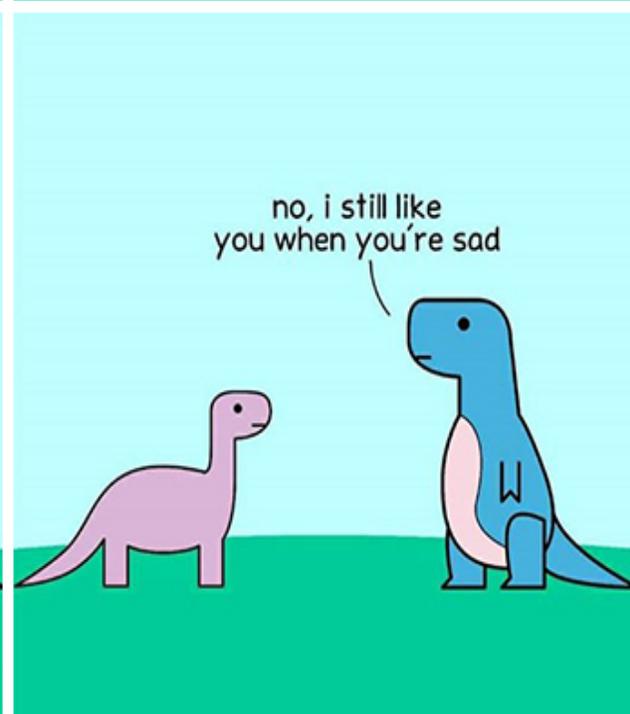
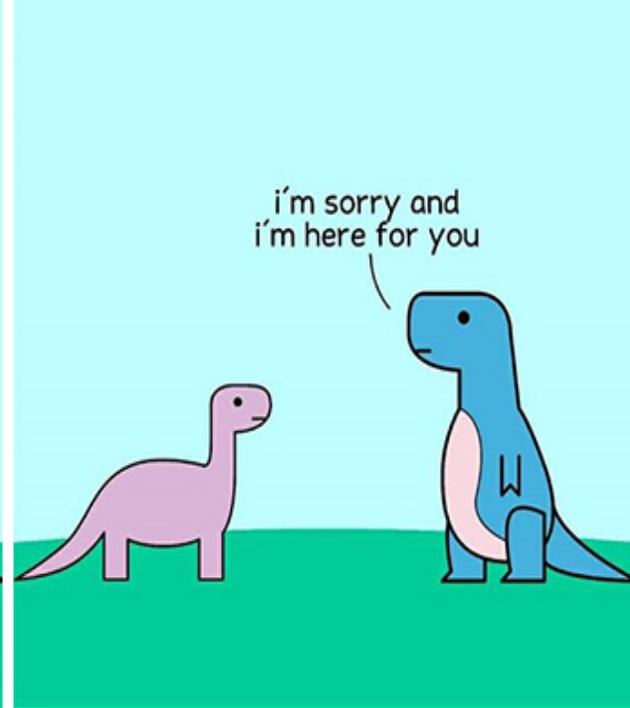
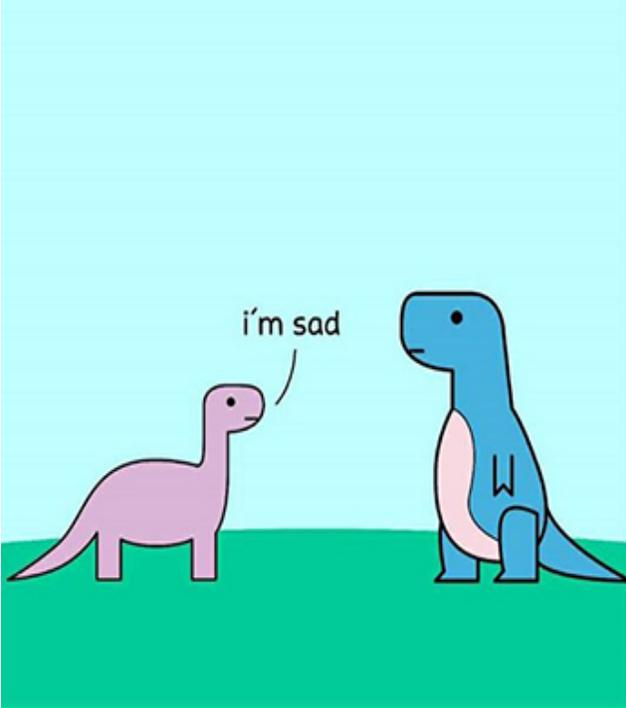
FOUR STEPS TO OPPOSITE ACTION

1. Notice when you're feeling a strong emotion
2. Ask yourself: Does this emotion fit the facts or is it working for you?
3. If the answer is no to either, identify your action urge and do the opposite
4. Do it all the way – engage in the opposite behavior, opposite words and thinking, opposite facial expression, tone and posture. If you don't fully immerse yourself, it won't work.

**this is
not
working
for me...**



But first...we must create an environment for change



...by Validating the Emotion

Validating is:

- Communicating to the other person that what their feelings make sense and are understandable to you.
- A prerequisite to really any other strategy you would use when a child is having a tough time because validation helps to regulate emotions. We are much more able to access skills and to do the work when our emotional intensity has come down from its peak.

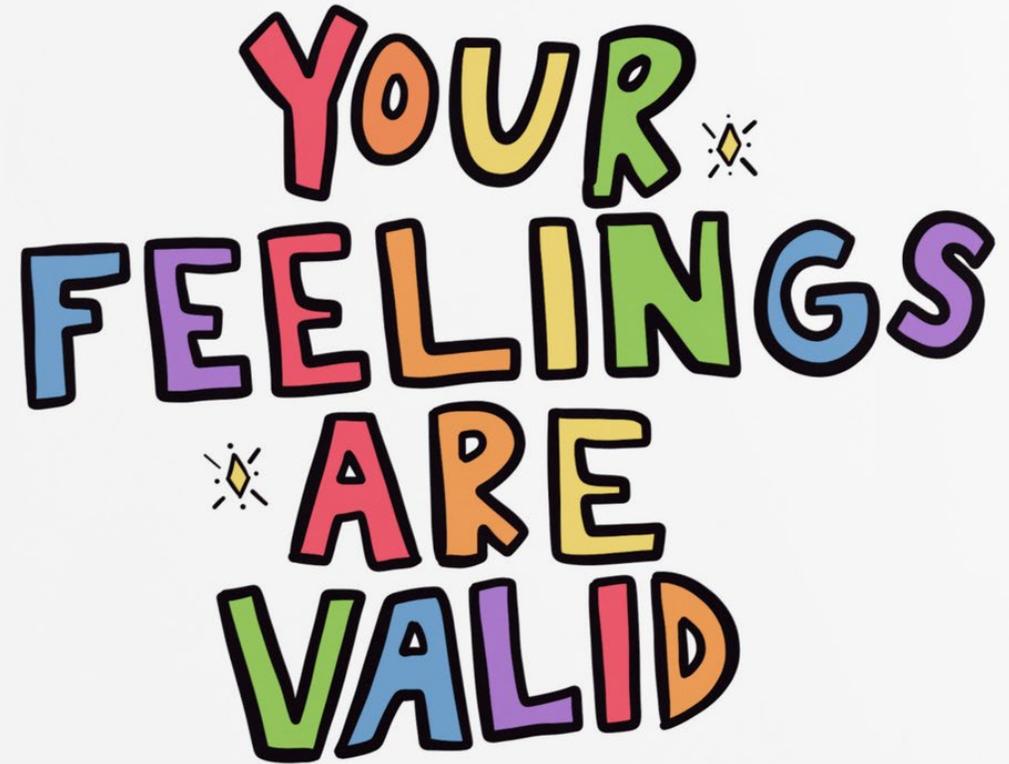
VALIDATION EXAMPLE

But this shouldn't be that hard

vs.

I understand you're scared and I understand how hard it is to do things when we are scared...and I know you are really brave and strong and can handle this.

I see your fear and it's big. I also see your courage and it's bigger.

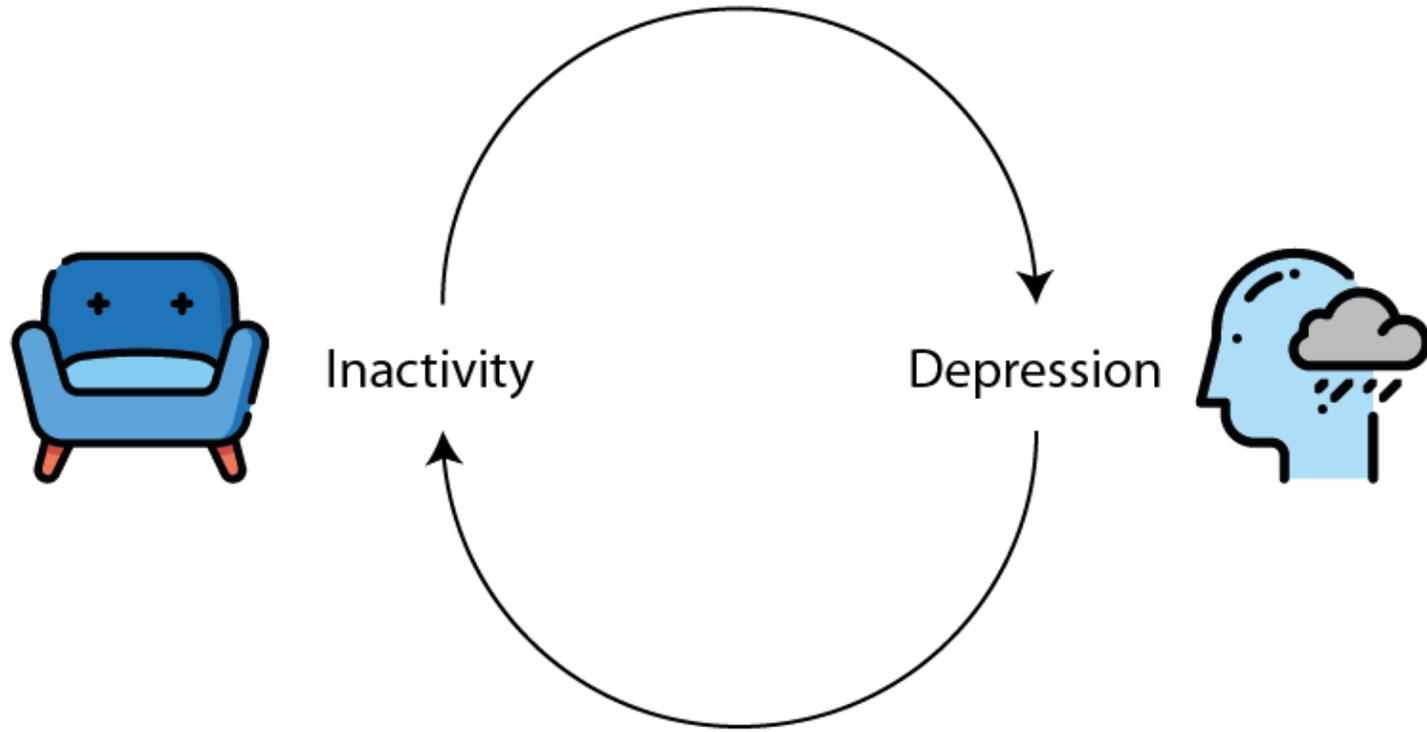


YOUR
FEELINGS
ARE
VALID



Deeper Dive into Opposite Action for Anxiety & Sadness

BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION



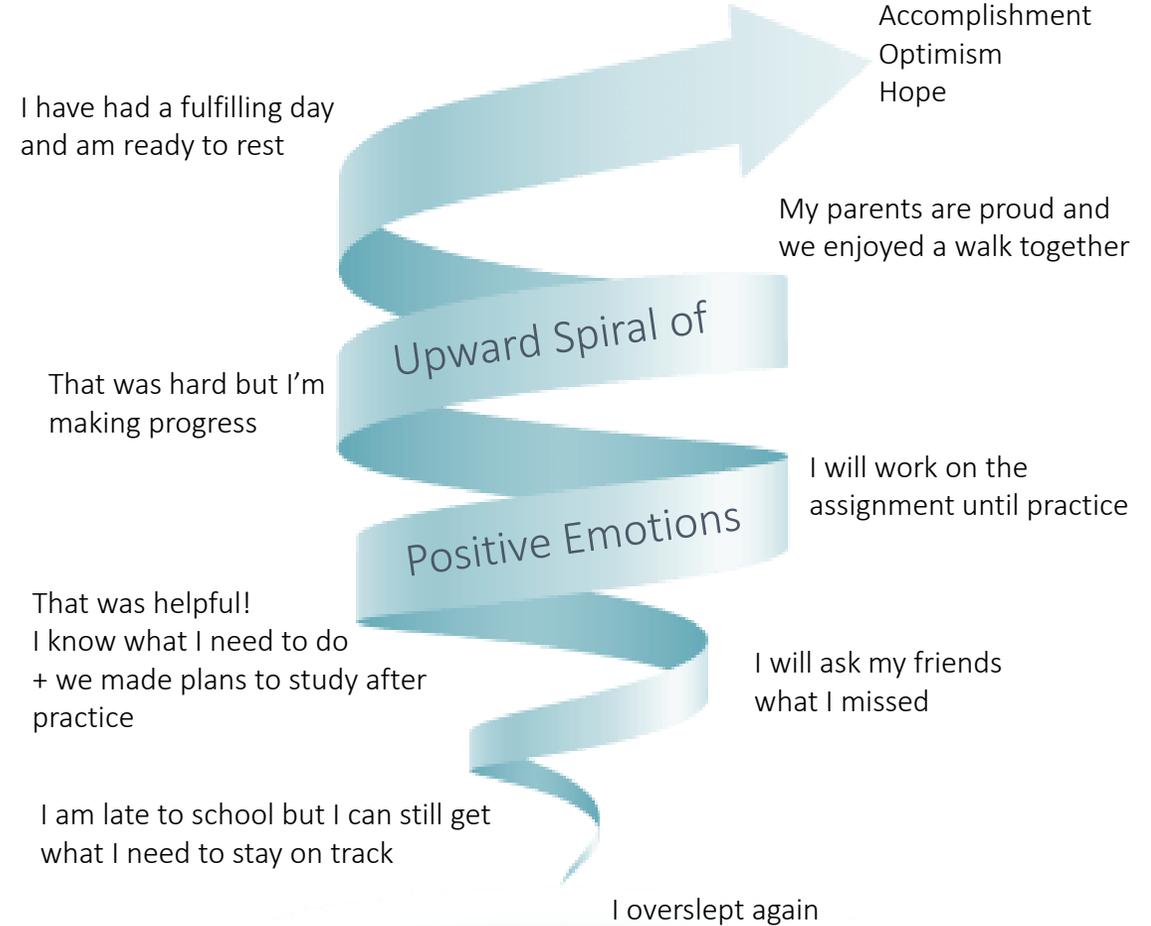
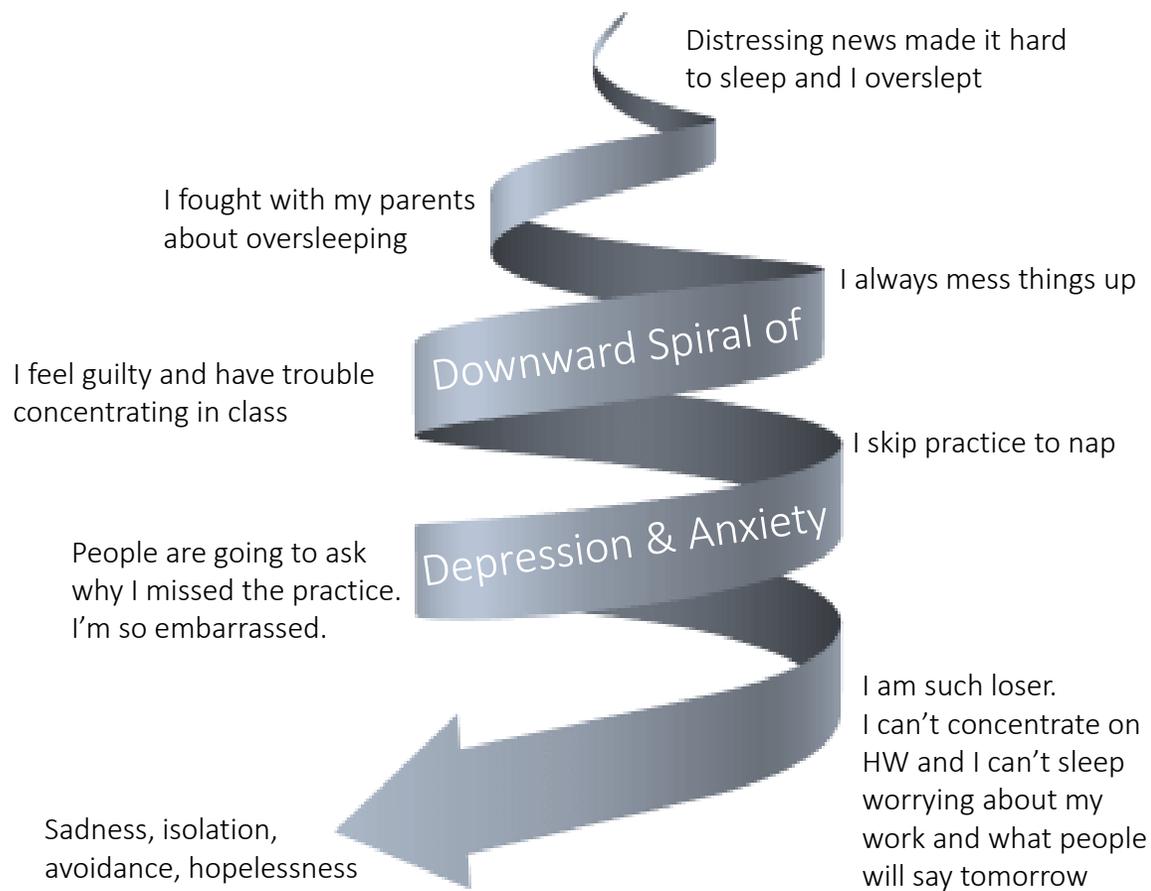
OPPOSITE ACTION FOR SADNESS =
BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION

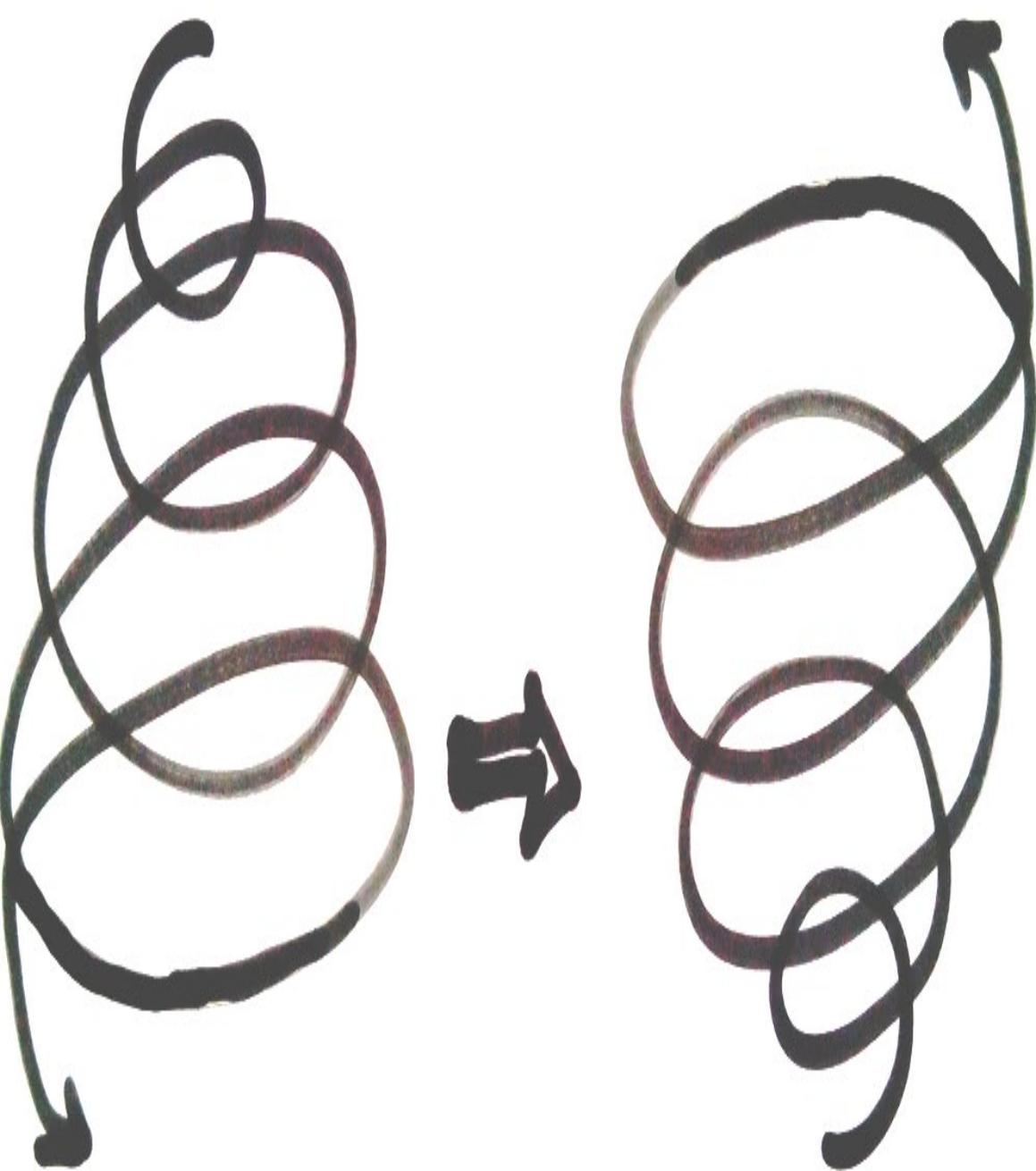
What is Behavioral Activation?

Is it **NOT** waiting to feel better to function

It **IS** functioning to feel better

Upward & Downward Spirals





Behavioral Activation Breaks the Cycle

Behavioral activation works against cycles of withdrawal by:

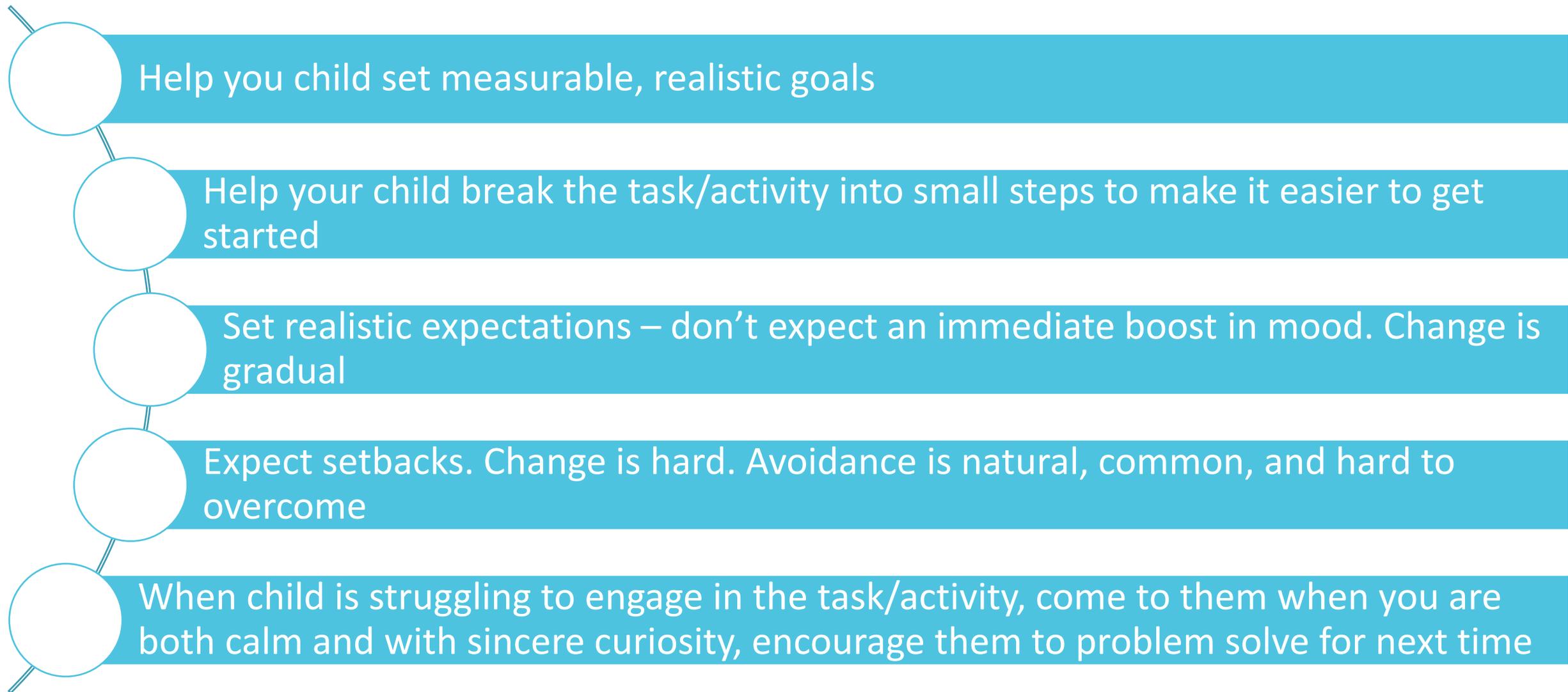
Giving you more exposure to rewarding experiences

Replacing unhelpful avoidance behaviors with more helpful approach behaviors.

Take a moment to think about what's missing and how to bring it back



**PEOPLE
&
ACTIVITIES
IMPORTANT
TO ME**



How can you as a parent support this process?



How do you think you could use these skills with your child(ren)?
What might get in the way?

Facing Fears



OPPOSITE ACTION FOR
ANXIETY

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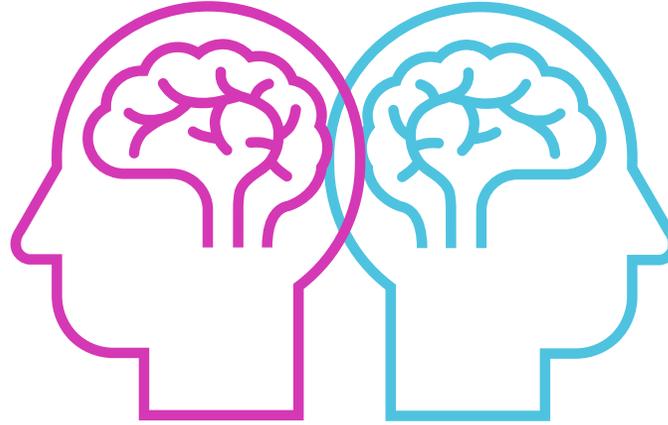
EXPOSURE

Interpersonal Nature of Anxiety

HOLDING TOO TIGHT

"Anxiety will traumatize or damage them."

"It's my job to shield them from the challenges in life"



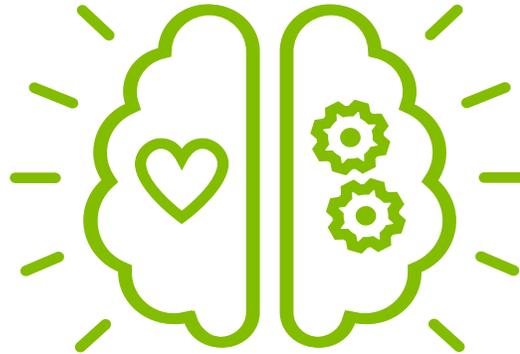
FORCING INDEPENDENCE

"They just want attention"

"They are just being manipulative"

"It's not that scary"

"It's not my job to shield them from everything and they need to suck it up."



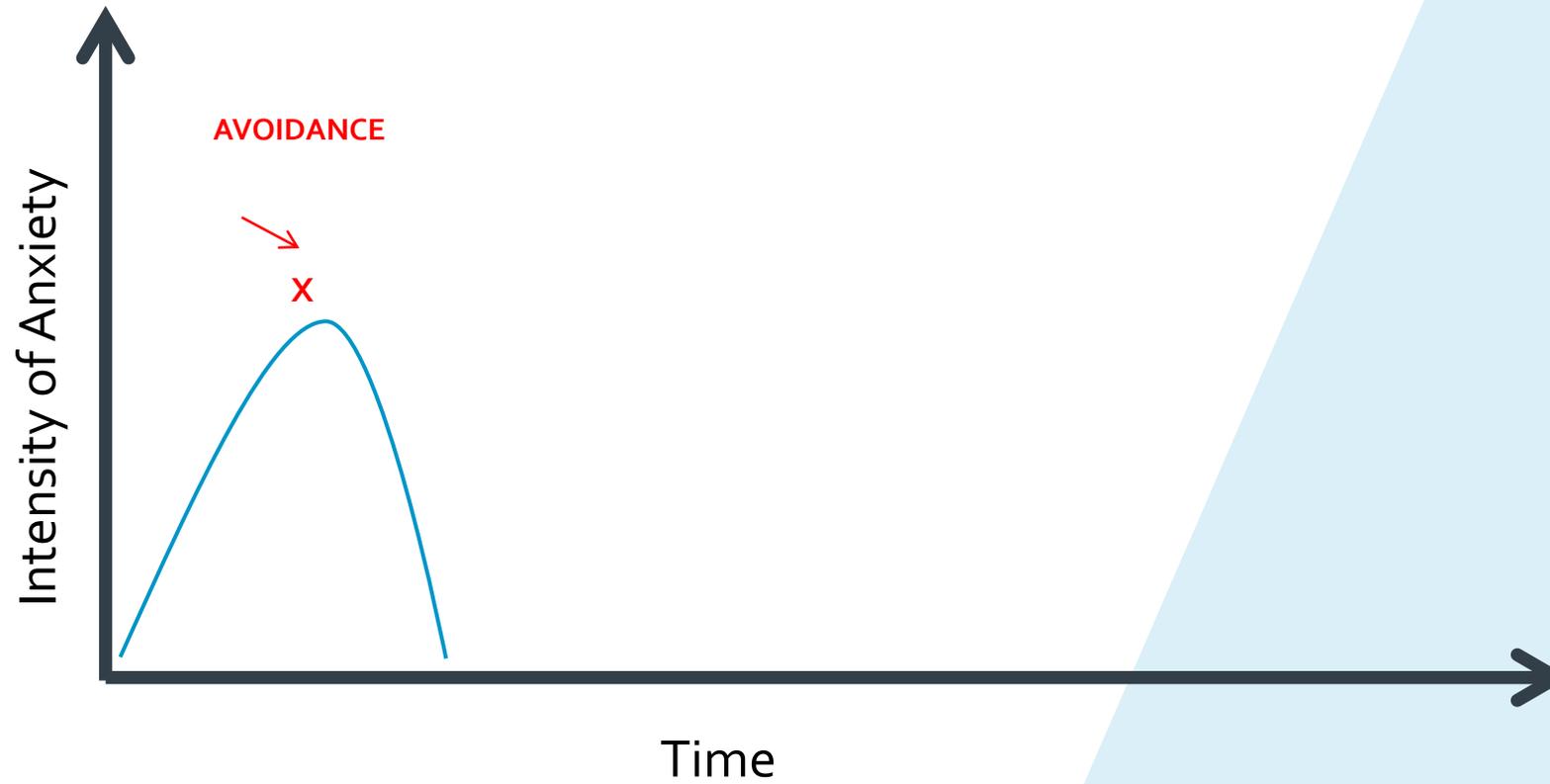
SUPPORT

"This is hard for you and you are great at hard things."

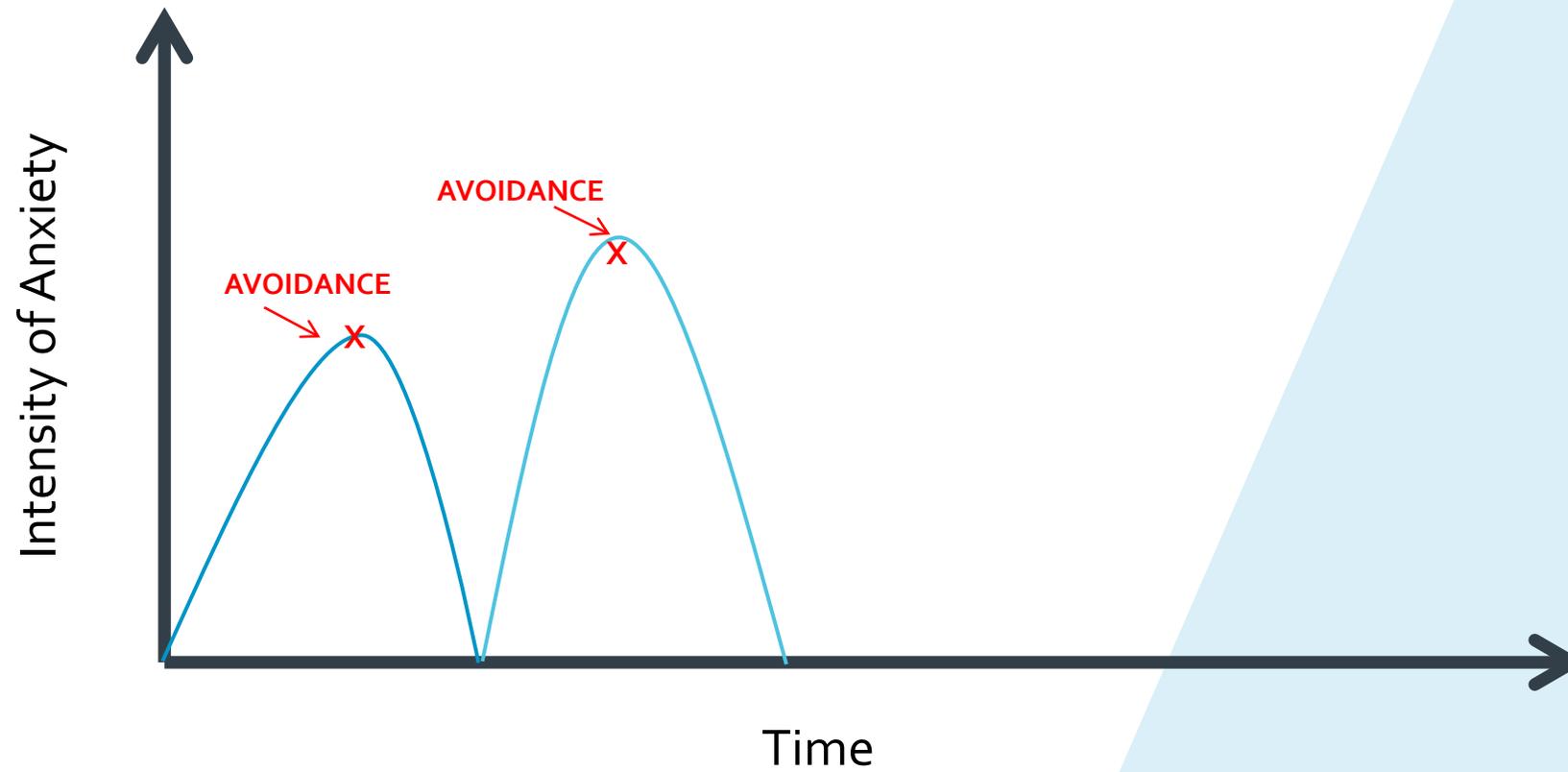
"It's my job to prepare them for dealing with the challenges in life"

"I need to prepare my child for the road, not prepare the road for my child"

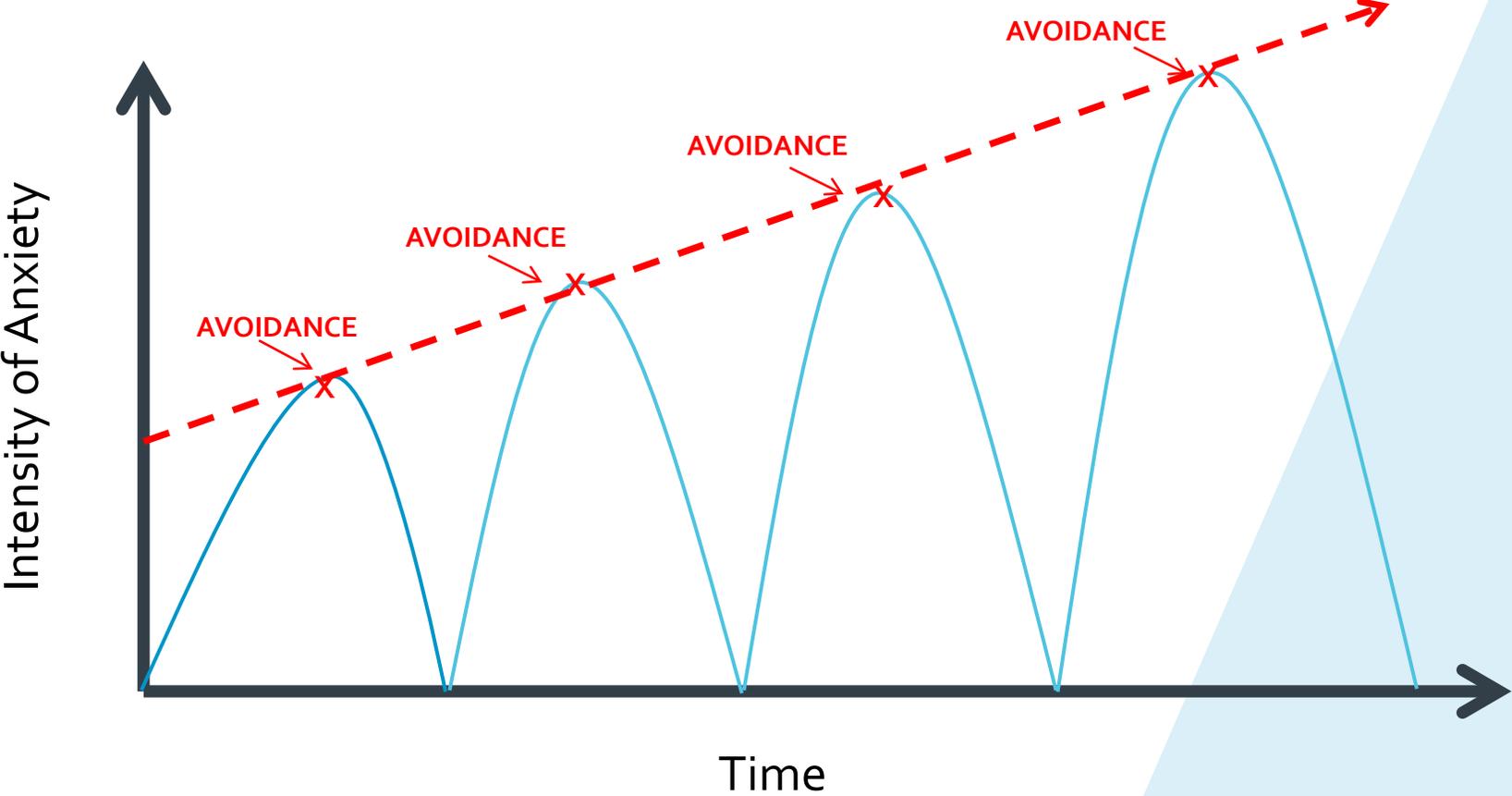
The Role of Avoidance



The Role of Avoidance



The Role of Avoidance



What do we learn from avoidance?

I can't handle
strong emotions

I shouldn't have to
do things I can't
handle

I need to keep
avoiding anxiety
provoking situations

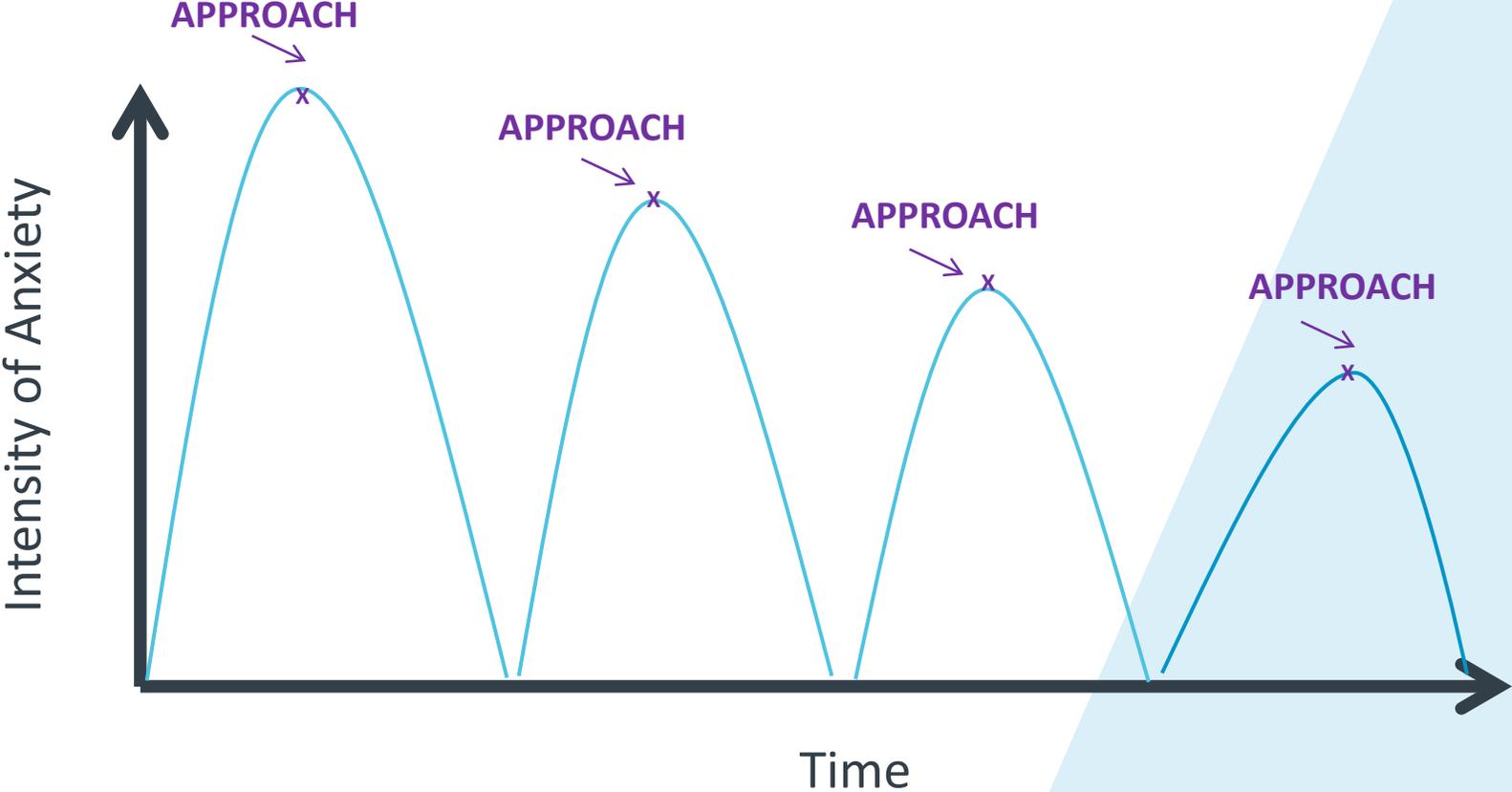
I am weak



What should we do instead?

Face fears instead of avoiding them!

How Approach Works



What is Exposure?

Exposure: a planned therapeutic exercise in which a person faces a feared stimulus (e.g., going to a birthday party without their parents)

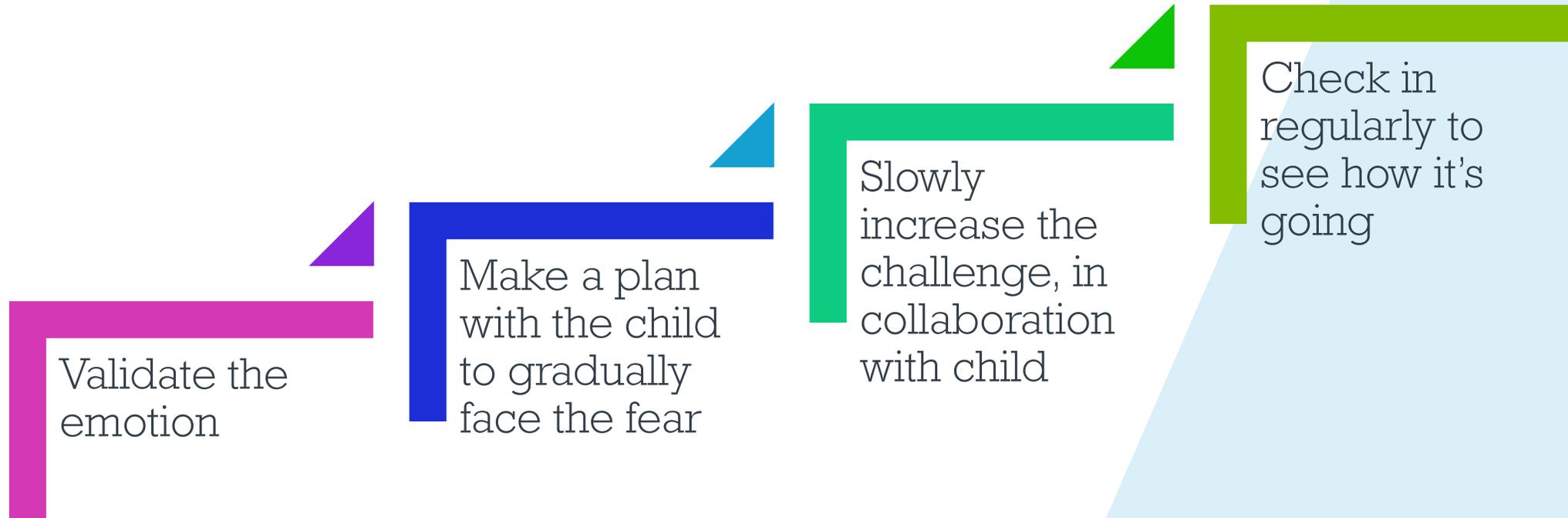
Response Prevention: While facing feared stimulus, the person does not retreat until goals are completed

Goals of Exposure:

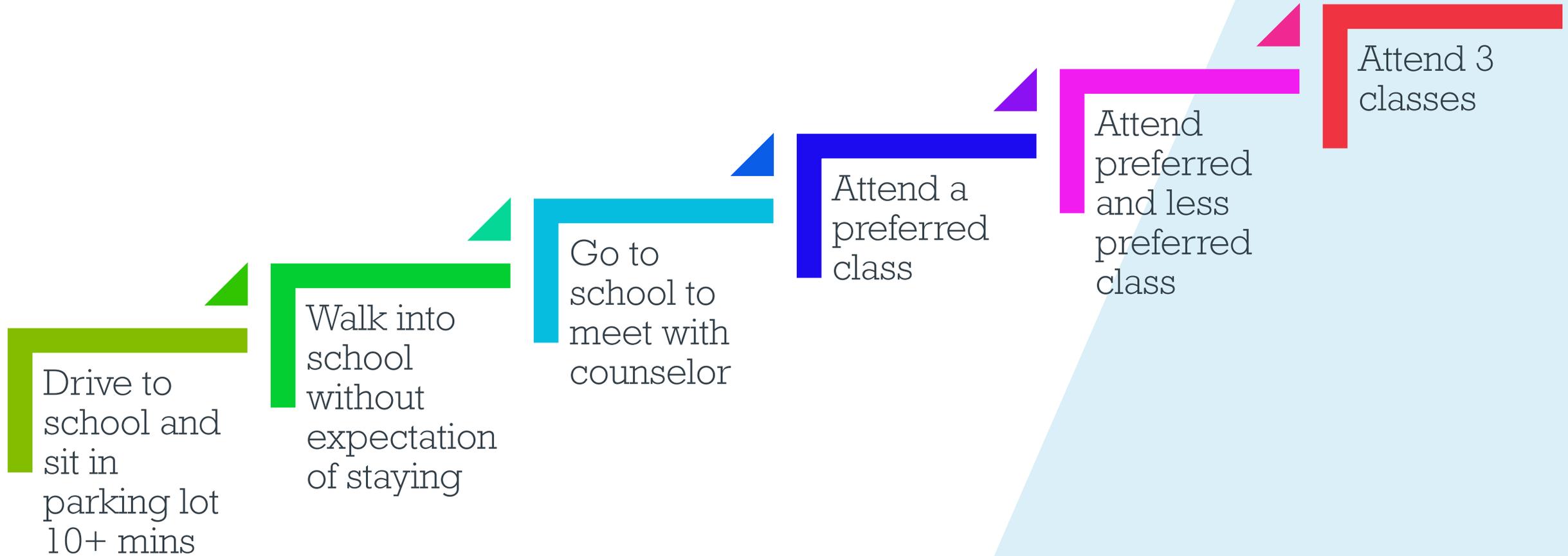
- Learn you can tolerate anxiety
- Learn that the feared outcome is less likely to occur than anxiety predicts
- Bonus: learn that if you stay in an anxiety provoking situation for long enough, anxiety will eventually decrease



How to Help Our Children Approach Feared Situations

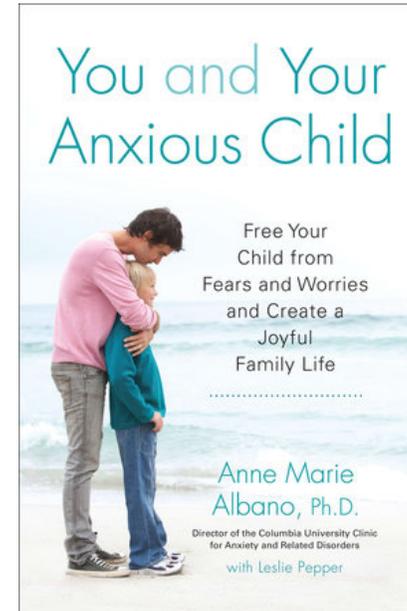


Exposure Example: Getting back to school

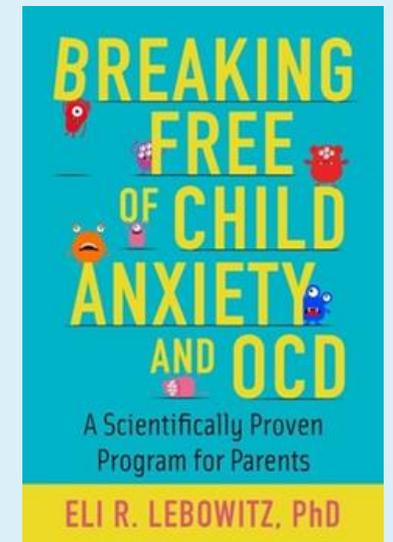


How can parents support this process?

- Don't worry, you don't have to be your child's therapist
- But you can provide support by:
 - validating the emotion
 - keeping an eye out for avoidance
 - talking to your child about the short-term vs long term-consequences of avoidance
 - modeling approach vs avoidance in your own life
- It's hard to see our kids do things that feel hard to them – be aware of your own feelings, your own desire to rescue, and remind yourself how powerful it will be when your child learns they can do hard things
- Identify a mantra!



Can try with additional guidance from clinicians or parent guides such as these



Partnering with Schools

- Communicate with teachers, counselors, and other key personnel
- Identify a willing point person to streamline communication
- Communicate collaboratively and respectfully
- Offer to support reward programs
- Ask about exposures that may be helpful to support at home
- Ask about opportunities to encourage or reward independence at home
- Keep an eye out for avoidance behaviors





But remember:
It all starts & ends with environment



What to say to encourage brave, effective behavior

- This is really hard... AND ... I know you can do it.
- I am so proud of you for taking that step.
- What is one way you want to push back on your worry? I believe in you.
- It sounds like anxiety is really trying to push you around right now. I know you can boss it back.

Reward Brave Choices

- Rewards can help build new habits and break unhelpful responses to anxiety
- Identify rewards that are personally reinforcing
 - Does not have to be huge!
 - Interpersonal rewards
- Always pair rewards with praise
- Slowly phase out rewards when child is consistently successful at using skills/facing their fear



How do you think you could use these skills with your child(ren)?
What might get in the way?

So, what do I need to remember?

- All emotions are necessary and serve a function
- What we DO changes how we FEEL
- Emotions come with specific action urges that push us to act in certain ways. Sometimes, these urges can cause us to act in ways that may feel good in short term but aren't helpful in long term.
 - Scared – avoid
 - Sad – withdraw from people and things you value
- But we don't have to act on these urges if the emotion doesn't fit the facts of the situation or if the emotion is not working for you.
- We can change our emotion by doing the *opposite* of what it is telling us to do
 - Scared – do it anyway
 - Sad – engage in things you value, get active, spend time with people
- Validate, Validate, Validate!
- Reward brave behavior and attempts at effective coping



One last thing!

Before you sign off, please complete this 3-minute survey. We greatly appreciate your feedback!

<https://is.gd/mcleanparent>



THANK YOU

