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"Face and Feel" Worries and Fears

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In his book "The Opposite of Worry", Dr. Lawrence Cohen evokes an ancient poem by Rumi entitled "The Guest House". It begins; "This being human is a guest house, every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome them and entertain them all." What a powerful and challenging message for all of us, but perhaps especially for parents. Not only should we welcome and entertain all our own feelings, the highs and the lows, but we must help our children welcome theirs as well. It is hard enough to deal with our own worries and fears, but to watch our children struggle with a range of intense emotions, takes real inner strength and the courage and patience to acknowledge and 'sit with' feelings that span the full spectrum of human experience. Dr. Cohen's insightful theories and approaches stem from years of clinical experience working with children and adults who have especially intense worries or fears, but his essential strategies can benefit all of us as we deal with the challenges of daily life. One central message is that the opposite of worry is connection and play. A relationship filled with lots of playful, emotional, and physical expressions of love is critical for all kids.

With accessible language, real life scenarios, and packed with playful strategies, Dr. Cohen walks readers through what he calls our emotional "Security System"; alert, alarm, assessment, and all clear." He writes; "The alert activates the system at the first hint of danger. The alarm is the anxious state, with all of its thoughts and physical manifestations. The assessment is the thoughtful evaluation of danger and safety. The all clear is the signal to the alarm system to turn off. All is well, I'm safe." Some people get stuck too frequently in a high alarm state, and need extra help to assess real danger, and get to an 'all clear' place. But all kids need help getting to 'all clear', once they are in an alarm state.

For so many of us the urge is to talk our child out of a big worry, or immediately rescue them from their fears. We swoop in to reassure, fix, or cajole. Instead of 'working through' periods of high distress, Dr. Cohen suggests we eventually 'play through' them. Fewer words and more physical and emotional connections are most helpful when children we are really anxious or fearful. Being present, sitting with, hugging, listening, and reflecting back what you see and hear are great places to start. Trying to

explain or work through things with words won't work in the alarm phase because in the midst of intense emotional states, kids can't easily access their "thinking brain". Kids are essentially in survival mode, unable to do any higher order processing of information until they are calm. Deep breathing, counting, drawing, and physical exercise, all can act like 'circuit breakers' when children are stuck in an intense emotional place. One strategy is to have a child rate their level of distress. Dr. Cohen calls this his "Fear-O-Meter" scale. "Assignment of a number on the Fear-O-Meter activates different pathways of a child's brain, and that helps turn down the alarm. It (also) gives children the chance to define the experience for themselves" Additionally, when children are in a calm place, he suggests a myriad of ideas for role-playing, exaggerating worries and fears to the point of laughter, roughhousing, and all kinds of creative games, as ways to 'play through' challenging situations with kids.

Two particularly powerful messages Dr. Cohen imparts is how important it is for adults to be calm and supportive when kids are in 'fright, flight, or freeze mode, and then, over time, to help them 'face and feel' their intense emotions. "I'm, OK, You're OK, we're all OK" is the signal we want to send. Dr. Cohen is clear to distinguish a calm presence from our urge to suppress or deny worries and fears. The balance to work towards is to be patient and accepting, while also gently pushing kids to face and work through what distresses them, one baby step at a time.

Finally, when it seems easier to avoid or give into intense emotional reactions, like when separation is terribly difficult, Dr. Cohen challenges us to ask ourselves; "Would we deny our child the joy of a loving reunion? When the challenge is too hard do we end up doing things for our kids? When the tantrum is too intense do we give in? When the fear is too vivid do we try to eliminate all triggers? When we are tempted to smooth out all the bumps in the road and rescue our child, we can ask ourselves; would we deny our child the affirming experience of triumphing over a challenge? Dr. Cohen suggests that parents and teachers try not to meet a child's every need, proposing that there needs to be a measurable gap, so kids feel just enough frustration to encourage them to grow and learn. We should aim to; "Promote tolerance of uncertainty, risk, and discomfort." In the words of a Garth Brooks song; "The hardest thing to learn was, you can help them find their wings, but you can't fly for (them). Cause if they're not free to fall, then they're not free at all."

