

Understanding Anxiety and Focus Issue for Highly Sensitive Children

Harry Hong Ph.D. L.Ac.

Anxiety is a normal part of childhood, and every child goes through phases. A phase is temporary and usually harmless. But children who suffer from an anxiety disorder experience fear, nervousness, and shyness, and they start to avoid places and activities. Anxiety disorders (AD) affect one in eight children and often co-occur with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), with symptoms like difficulty staying focused and paying attention, difficulty controlling behavior, or hyperactivity. Research shows that untreated children with AD and AD(H)D are at higher risk to perform poorly in school, miss out on important social experiences, and engage in substance abuse. Pharmaceutical drugs such as SSRIs and stimulants can be used to control symptoms of anxiety and focus issue. However, all medications are symptom-based drugs with side effects. To understand the root issues for AD and AD(H)D becomes important in searching for a long term solution for these children and help them live a normal childhood.

Highly Sensitive Children

According to Dr. Elaine Aron, a highly sensitive child (HSC) is one of the 15-20% of children born with a nervous system that is highly aware and quick to react to everything. This makes them quick to grasp subtle changes, prefer to reflect deeply before acting, and generally behave conscientiously. They are also easily overwhelmed by high levels of stimulation, sudden changes, and the emotional distress of others. Your child is probably a HSC if he/she:

- Complains about scratchy clothing, seams in socks, or labels against his/her skin
- Is sensitive to sound, smells and texture
- Learns better from a gentle correction than strong punishment
- Is hard to get to sleep after an exciting day
- Doesn't do well with big changes
- Notices the distress of others
- Is a perfectionist
- Performs best when strangers aren't present
- Feels things deeply

Because of their highly sensitive trait and their easily stressed and overwhelmed nervous system, HSC are vulnerable to develop anxiety and focus problem. As matter of fact most of the children with anxiety and focus issue belong to this group. To understand the highly sensitive trait and the root cause for anxiety and focus issue helps HSC manage their life better and possibly prevents them from development into AD or AD (H)D.

Neurotransmitter Imbalance

Neurotransmitters are messenger chemicals in the brain. There are two types of neurotransmitters, excitatory ones such as dopamine and norepinephrine and inhibitory ones such as serotonin and GABA. Anxiety and focus issue are the direct result of the imbalance of the neurotransmitters. From a holistic point of view, to balance neurotransmitters we should look at the problem beyond neurotransmitters in the brain. Neurotransmitters are synthesized from amino acids, the building blocks of protein, which are absorbed in digestive system. Serotonin production occurs mainly inside our gut. This is so-called brain-gut connection. Supplementation of specific amino acids may help the body produce more corresponding neurotransmitters, but the results may not last. A healthy digestive tract is the basis for balancing neurotransmitters in the brain.

The Brain-gut Connection

Many children with anxiety and focus issue also have digestive problems. Stress and toxin factors from modern life style cause weakened digestive system and comprised immune function. Over growth of Can-

didia yeast, bad bacteria and parasites in digestive tract results in damage to the lymphatic tissue and receptors on the intestinal lining, and further leads to food indigestion and mal-absorption of nutrients such as amino acids. Thus, solving digestive issues such as balancing microbial and repairing intestinal lining becomes number one goal for neurotransmitter related conditions.

The other pathway of the brain-gut connection is through food sensitivity, which is a neurogenic response and different from allergies. You may not have antibodies to particular food but still respond to it neurologically. This type of reactions belongs to neuroinflammatory response that triggers psychological and behavioral changes in children. Common food that causes reactions includes sugar, food coloring and preservatives, gluten (wheat) and casein (dairy). Thus, dietary changes and desensitization of food and nutrients becomes an important step in helping anxiety and focus problem.

Adrenal Stress and Life style Change

Busy schedule, lack of sleep and over-exposure to electronic frequencies stress our adrenal system too much and result in sympathetic dominant status and too much excitatory neurotransmitters in the system. This is the basis for the anxiety and hyperactivity. Long-term stress to the adrenal system results in adrenal fatigue, a deeper issue that greatly affects body's healing ability. Helping adrenal function is crucial to heal any type of illness, especially for anxiety and focus issue because a weakened adrenal function makes hypersensitivity even worse. Hypersensitive nervous system results in more adrenal stress that creates a vicious cycle. A comprehensive adrenal program plus life style changes including sufficient sleep, relaxation, avoiding electronics are necessary in helping anxiety and focus problem.

Neurotoxins and liver detox function

Neurotoxins such heavy metal may also play a role in developing anxiety and focus problem. Mercury is known to have affinity to nervous tissue and cause damage to the receptors, which leads to chaos in signal transduction between neurons and high neuroinflammation. Thus, detoxification therapy is also important. In addition, liver is the main detox organ in the body. It helps not only detox the toxins but also detox excess hormones and neurotransmitters in the system. Stresses always weaken liver detox function and results in a toxin accumulation and the imbalance of hormones and neurotransmitters. Supporting liver function and detoxifying the body are necessary step in balancing neurotransmitters.

In summary, anxiety and focus issues are multi-factor illnesses that require a holistic approach to addressing the root issues. Medications and amino acid therapy to support inhibitory neurotransmitters such as serotonin may help the symptoms temporarily. For a long-term solution, addressing digestive issues, adrenal stress, hypersensitive nervous response, immune response due to food sensitivities, emotional stress and toxin accumulation as well as life style changes are necessary components in a holistic healing program for these conditions. Once the root causes corrected, the highly sensitive children will have their life back without relying on medication and supplementation for the rest of their lives.

Dr. Harry Hong is a licensed acupuncturist specialized in holistic healing for the Highly Sensitive. He teaches highly sensitive people to listen to their body and take charge of their own health. With his own systematic IBMT protocol that includes Chinese medicine, modern homeopathy, energetic testing and allergy desensitization, Dr. Hong helps Highly Sensitive people to gain back their immune strength and get their life back. He has offices in both South Florida and Chicago. Please visit his website at www.highlysensitivebody.com or email to harryghong@hotmail.com.