



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on June 28, 2024

A Fun Way to Fight Childhood Anxiety

Wouldn't it be great if there was a new, fast, even cheerful way to fight the tide of anxiety engulfing this generation of kids?

It sure would. And darned if the latest *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* doesn't feature one. It's called independence therapy: having kids do new things, on their own, without their parents.

A pilot study conducted by Long Island University psychology prof. Camilo Ortiz and doctoral student Matthew Fastman treated four fourth-eighth graders with a diagnosis of anxiety. In his everyday practice, Ortiz would often use cognitive behavioral therapy. This involves exposing the patient to the very thing they're afraid of, so they realize it's not as scary as they thought. For instance, a person deathly afraid of dogs might be shown a picture of a dog, then stand in the same room as a dog and finally have to pet the dog.



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But in independence therapy, says Ortiz, "We didn't actually have the kids face the things they're afraid of." And afraid they truly were. Ortiz described the patients in his *Journal* article:

- A boy, 13, experienced headaches and a pounding heart, and routinely assumed the "worst-case scenario" — that he was very sick.
- A girl, 9, was so anxious about attending school that she experienced "frequent shaking, stomach issues, nail-biting and crying."
- A girl, 11, experienced "extensive worry and extensive avoidance of everyday activities out of the home." Her fear of being judged or embarrassed led to shaking and abdominal pain.
- A boy, 10, wouldn't go anywhere without his mom.

The independence therapy involved each family separately visiting Ortiz five times in his office or on Zoom. At the first session, only the parents came. Ortiz asked them their biggest concern. One couple said their daughter was too scared to sleep in her own bed. Another said their son wouldn't go up or down stairs in their home without them.

On the next visit, the child accompanied the parents. Without mentioning the big fear, Ortiz talked up independence and asked the kids what they'd like to start doing on their own. Despite their anxiety, they wanted to walk home from school, play chess in the park ... lots of things. OK, said Ortiz: Your assignment is to do one "independence activity" a day for the next four weeks. The parents' assignment? Let them!



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Sometimes, things went wrong. The girl afraid to sleep in her own bed took a city bus — and missed her stop. She was so upset she actually talked to the stranger sitting next to her. That person told her to get off and walk two blocks back. She did it! And then?

“During the last week of treatment,” Ortiz wrote, “unprompted,” the girl “slept in her bed after never having made it through a night previously.” And then she kept doing it.

As it turns out, some bloopers along the way work wonders, because they make the person more resourceful and flexible.

In the end, all the kids’ anxiety went down. In psychological terms, it seems their confidence “generalized” from the new things they were doing to the things they’d been too scared to do. This mirrors a recent a study of people afraid of both heights and spiders. Treated for one, they became less afraid of the other.

If further studies of independence therapy show this kind of success — Ortiz is seeking funding — it could prove a valuable alternative to cognitive behavioral therapy for three reasons:

1. It seems to require fewer sessions, which makes it cheaper.
2. It doesn’t require much training and could be done in schools.
3. It doesn’t require the parents, kids or therapists themselves to deal with the unpleasant, triggering fear.

“This is a pretty big finding — that you don’t have to actually treat directly the thing someone is afraid of to make that thing better,” says Ortiz. Simply put: Independence fights anxiety. “Or, as someone responded to my tweet, ‘Something every Gen X person already knows.’”

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