

Justin Coulson's
happy families.

A Grown Up's
Guide to

Worrry Stacking

(and how to help
kids kick it!)



Have you ever seen
a child or teenager
lose it over something
seemingly tiny?

Having to switch off their screen...

Not having the “right” pencil case...

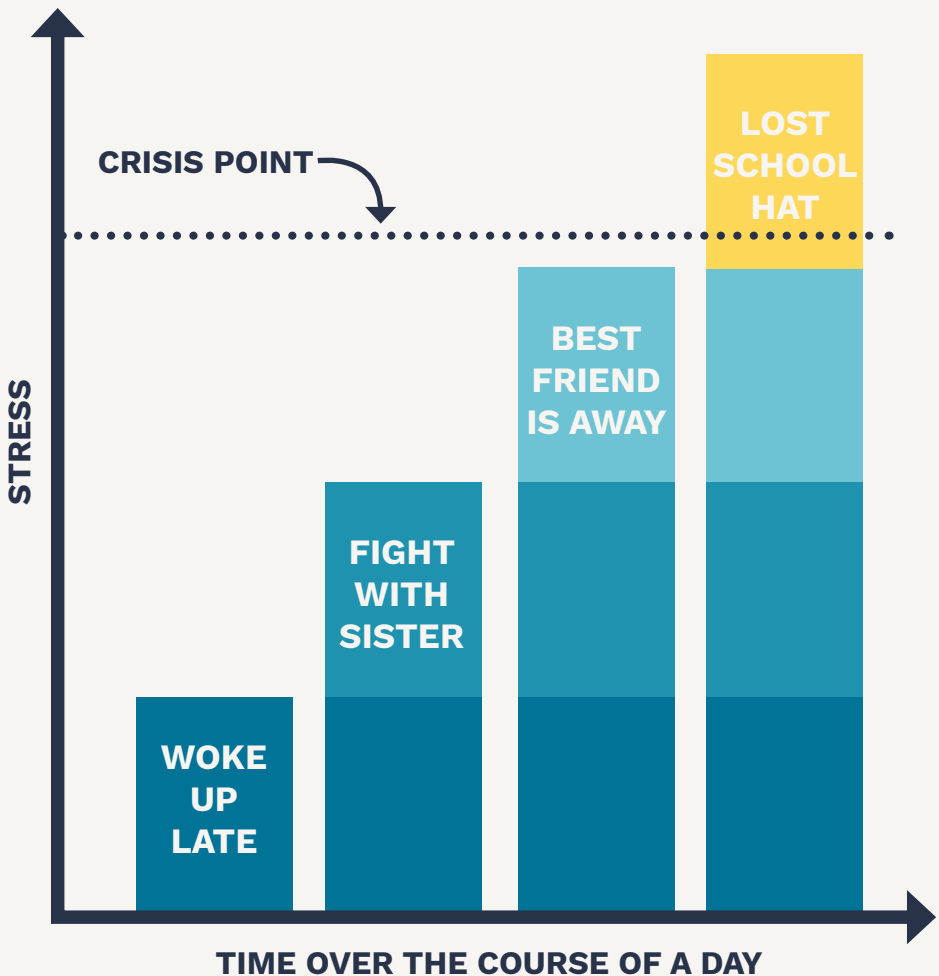
Another child breathing in their direction...

We’ve all been there!

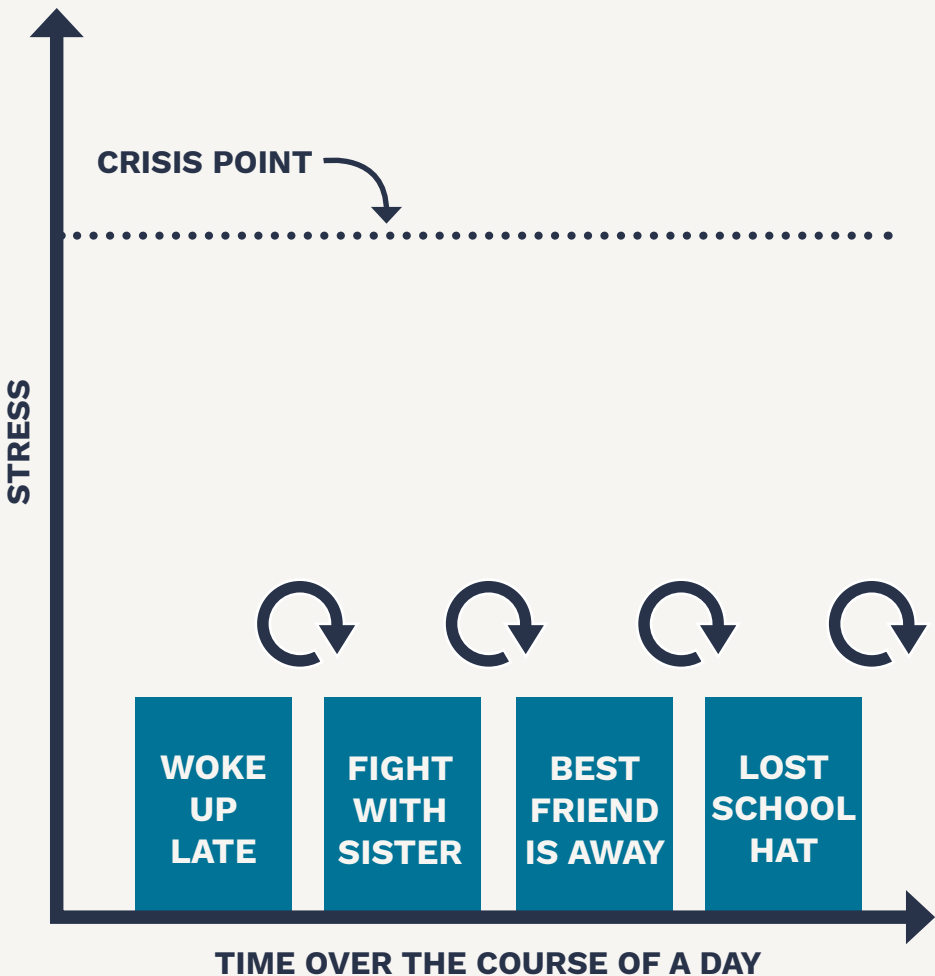
In the moment, their behaviour may have
seemed over the top, but their anxious
response may not be as excessive as you
think. This is due to the very real result of

Wor.y Stacking

Over time, anxiety from minor worries and concerns can accumulate. This compounding effect results in an overwhelming sense of anxiety or stress that is more akin to an emergency. A lost school hat can quite literally *feel* like life or death.



By learning how to effectively manage each worry as it arises, our kids can keep the stack from growing too high and maintain a sense of control over their anxiety. This is essentially like hitting the "reset" button on their nervous system.



**“But *how* do we
push the reset
button!?”**





**Relationship
& Connection**



**Build
Competence**



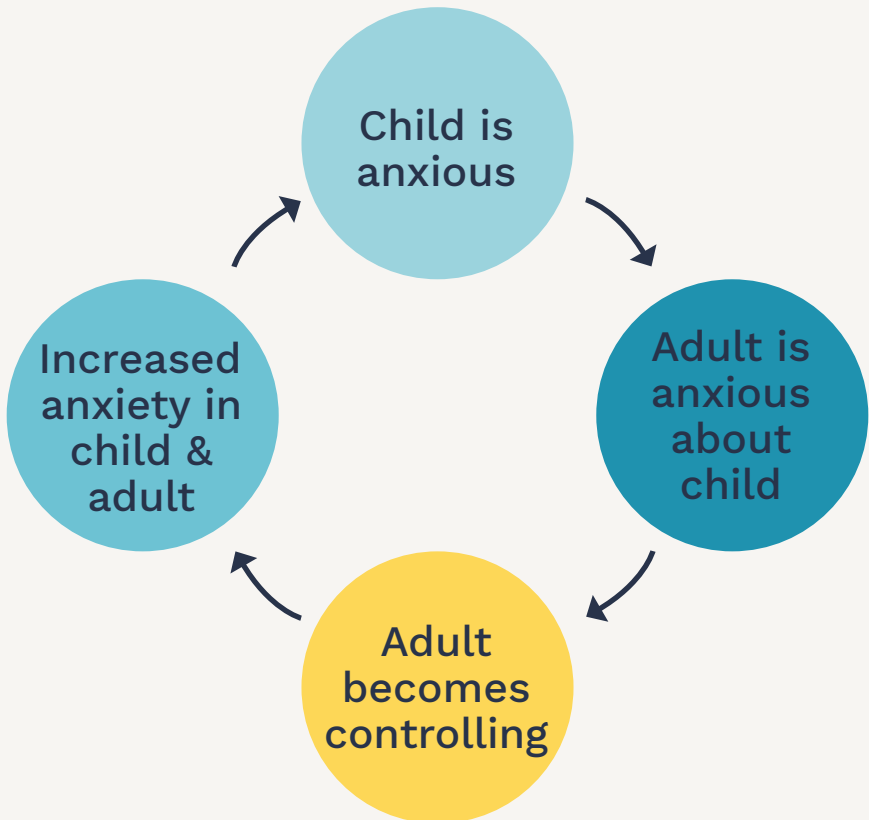
**Support
Autonomy**

Relationship & Connection



Before we talk about how to build relationship and maintain connection with your child while they are distressed, let's talk about what NOT to do.

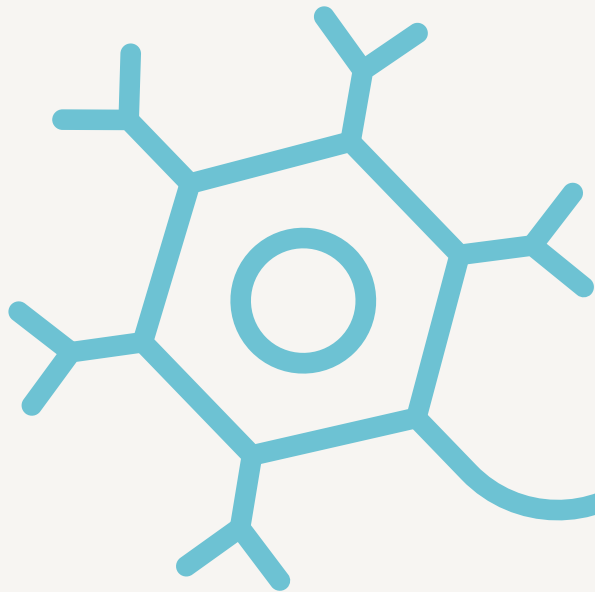
Have you ever found yourself stuck



When children display anxiety, adults often become anxious for their well-being. This discomfort frequently leads adults to adopt a more controlling and critical approach, which in turn heightens anxiety levels for both the child and themselves.

Rather than mirroring your child's anxiety with your own, you can assist them in "catching your calm" through emotional co-regulation.

By maintaining your own composure, you can provide reassurance and help alleviate their distress, reducing the surge of stress hormones in their brain, and restoring control to their prefrontal cortex. Engaging in co-regulation with your child enhances their ability to self-regulate and strengthens important neural circuits in their brain.



Choosing connection over control

Miss Mack, a year 2 teacher, once shared with me a story about a new student that came to her classroom. Gabbie was an extremely anxious child, and often pretended to be a cat as a way to mask her anxiety.

Previous teachers had coaxed, bribed, threatened, punished, and yelled at Gabbie until they ultimately became fed up with the “cat act”. This teacher was determined to take a different approach.

The first morning in her new classroom, Gabbie reluctantly edged into the bustling classroom, put away her belongings and quickly hid under her chair, “licking” her “paws”. Miss Mack crouched down, maintaining a respectful distance, and warmly greeted her, expressing genuine delight that Gabbie had become a part of her class.

As the days turned into weeks, Miss Mack found creative ways to connect with Gabbie. She invited Gabbie to share stories about

her imaginary cat adventures, allowing her to express herself through her feline persona. The other children in the class also embraced Gabbie's uniqueness, sometimes joining her in her imaginative play.

Over time, Gabbie's anxiety lessened, and her cat persona became more of a playtime choice than a constant shield. She started participating in regular class activities without any hesitation and made friends with her classmates, all thanks to the teacher who prioritized relationship over control.

Miss Mack has made a lasting impact on Gabbie's life, and has taught everyone in the classroom the power of empathy and acceptance.



Build Competence



When one of our daughters was in Grade 4 we attended her school swimming carnival. Our expectations were relatively low. Her performance in previous years had been disheartening. So we were amazed when she started winning race after race. This was a change! Her performance was outstanding, and our little girl was crowned 'Age Champion.'

The child beaming in front of us was almost unrecognisable in contrast to the girl she had been a year earlier.

In Grade 3, her schoolwork had been average despite us being told she was an exceptionally deep-thinking student. Her social skills were below expectation, and she was struggling to get through each day. We were experiencing tantrums and challenging behavior. Her confidence was at rock bottom.

Our daughter had no belief in herself, and her belief that she could achieve anything positive was low. So what brought about this transformation?

We unexpectedly changed our daughter's school at the start of her final term in Grade 3, and it was a game changer.

In this nurturing school, our daughter began to develop a stronger sense of competence. This newfound competence triggered a profound surge of confidence – a transformation we had never witnessed before. Not only did her self-belief increase, but her social interactions improved, and her academic performance saw positive changes. She started to feel acknowledged in a positive way, further bolstering her self-esteem.

When it comes to children's well-being, helping them become good at something can make a big difference. When they get better at *any* skill or task, they feel more confident and less anxious. This confidence helps them believe in themselves and handle challenges more positively.

Skill Building

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graph TD; A[Skill Building] --> B[Increased Competence]; B --> C[Increased Confidence]; C --> D[Improved Wellbeing & Mental Health];
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Increased Competence

Increased Confidence

Improved Wellbeing & Mental Health

Achieving small goals along the way boosts their self-esteem and makes them more resilient. Competence also helps them deal with stress by giving them a sense of control. When kids work on improving their skills, it reduces anxiety and improves their mental health.

How to create an environment that builds competence

1. Encourage Exploration

Allow children to try different activities and hobbies to find what they like and are good at. Offer them many experiences to explore.

2. Set Achievable Goals

Help children set realistic goals in their chosen areas of interest. Break down larger goals into smaller, manageable steps, so they can see progress over time.



3. Provide Support and Guidance

Be there to offer guidance, instruction, and encouragement as children develop their skills. Show genuine interest in their pursuits.

4. Foster a Growth Mindset

Teach children that effort and perseverance lead to improvement. Encourage them to

embrace challenges and view failures as opportunities to learn and grow.

5. Celebrate Achievements

Recognise and celebrate children's successes, no matter how small. Positive reinforcement (without the use of rewards) can boost their confidence and motivation.

6. Encourage Self-Reflection

Help children reflect on their progress, strengths, and areas for improvement. Encourage them to set new goals as they grow and develop.

7. Avoid Excessive Pressure

While it's essential to challenge children, avoid putting too much pressure on them to be the best. Let them enjoy the process of learning and growing.

8. Be Patient and Understanding

Understand that competence takes time to develop. Be patient with their mistakes and setbacks, offering support and encouragement along the way.

Support Autonomy



Richard Koestner, a Canadian researcher, teamed up with Richard Ryan to investigate how control and autonomy affect children. The situation? An art class. In their study, first and second graders were divided into groups and told they would be participating in a painting project.

Rules were established for the children to follow while doing their art:

- Being neat and tidy mattered.
- Staying in the lines was important.
- Brushes were to be rinsed when swapping from one paint color to another.

Other rules were put in place so the children knew the purpose of the activity and how it was to be assessed. But it was the way these rules were established that sets up this experiment.

One group of children experienced limits being set in an autonomy-*restrictive* manner. Here, the adults explained the rules to the children, lecture-style. The other group of children established their rules with the adults in a collaborative way. Their set-up was autonomy-*supportive*.

Here's what they found.

Setting limits in a controlling and dictatorial way reduced the children's intrinsic motivation for the painting activity. It also resulted in less creative art being produced by the kids.

Comparatively, an autonomy-supportive approach to setting limits (which got the same results in terms of neatness and cleanliness) led to increased motivation and creativity on the part of the children in that group.

The autonomy-supportive approach is about collaborative problem-solving within reasonable limits with parental/adult guidance. Not only that, but it gets better outcomes than controlling approaches.

Autonomy-Restrictive

*Rules established
lecture-style*

Reduced intrinsic
motivation

Less creativity

**Both groups kept the
established rules equally*

Autonomy-Supportive

*Rules established
collaboratively*

Increased intrinsic
motivation

Increased creativity



Autonomy support plays a crucial role in enhancing children's intrinsic motivation and creativity. When children are given a sense of control and choice within age-appropriate boundaries, they experience a boost in their self-determination and confidence. This, in turn, positively impacts their mental health and well-being in several ways:

1. Enhanced Intrinsic Motivation

Autonomy-supportive environments encourage children to engage in activities out of genuine interest and enjoyment rather than external pressure or rewards. This intrinsic motivation fosters a sense of purpose and satisfaction, reducing stress and anxiety associated with forced tasks.

2. Increased Self-Esteem

When children are allowed to make choices and contribute to decision-making, they develop a stronger sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. This increase in self-esteem serves as a protective factor against the development of mental health issues such as depression or low self-esteem.

3. Improved Emotional Regulation

Autonomy-supportive interactions teach children how to manage their emotions and make informed decisions. This skill is invaluable for handling stress, coping with setbacks, and maintaining emotional balance.

4. Resilience and Problem-Solving

Collaborative problem-solving within reasonable limits equips children with problem-solving skills and resilience. They learn to navigate challenges and setbacks, which are essential life skills for maintaining mental well-being.

5. Healthy Relationships

Autonomy-supportive approaches promote positive parent-child or teacher-student relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Healthy relationships contribute to emotional stability and overall well-being.

Autonomy support empowers children to take control of their lives within appropriate boundaries, fostering intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, emotional regulation, resilience, and positive relationships. These factors collectively enhance their mental health and well-being, laying the foundation for happier, more fulfilled lives.

Bonus Tips



1. Balance the body

- Recognise the physical sensations of anxiety. Where does your child feel it? Is it in their chest, shoulders, or stomach? Somewhere else? Identifying these sensations helps manage them effectively.
- Rather than saying, “I am feeling anxious,” which can intensify anxiety, have your child say, “I’m beginning to notice anxiety in my chest.” This simple shift in language helps to create distance from the anxiety, allowing it to be processed more effectively.
- Deep breathing is a powerful tool for regulating emotions. Try box breathing (Inhale, 2, 3, 4. Hold, 2, 3, 4. Exhale, 2, 3, 4. Hold, 2, 3, 4.)

- A splash of cold water, a brief cold plunge, or a cold shower can help with a reset and refocus on the here and now.
- Nature is an anxiety balm. Touch the grass. Breathe fresh air. See the sky. Soak in the sun.



2. Re-calibrate cognitions

- The mind magnifies threats when anxious. Remember, thoughts are thoughts, not facts. Challenge unhelpful, unkind, or unproductive thoughts.
- Question assumptions and beliefs that amplify anxiety.

3. Create capacity

Your child can't control the curriculum, can't trash the timetable, can't end exams, and can't save the planet. But they can—

- hug their parent,
- be present,
- breathe,
- play, run or be active,
- cook dinner with you,
- wrestle with you on the carpet,
- read a book,
- call a friend,
- help someone struggling....

There is so much they *can* do. They just need help seeing it.

Unhealthy anxiety is embedded in our culture. But it doesn't have to be embedded in yours. Or your child's. Let go of control. Recentre, rebalance, rethink, and recreate.

And trust that things will work out. They almost always do.

**DIGITAL
CONFERENCE**



*Live
Event*

RECORDING
INCLUDED

DR JUSTIN COULSON

COMM'R ANNE HOLLONDS

DR JODIE LOWANGER

MATT TYLER

BREAKING POINT

Unpacking the Crisis
in Youth Mental Health

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