SEPARATION ANXIETY IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

The term “separation anxiety” means feeling really up tight and anxious when you leave your Mom or whoever it is you feel emotionally attached to. To an extent, this is very normal. That is why I miss my wife when I go off to work, even now as a mature adult, and look forward to hanging out with her when I get home from work. But Separation Anxiety Disorder occurs when the symptoms are severe when you are not in the presence of someone significant in your life. I was very close to my own family growing up, and the only real time I experienced separation anxiety was the first time I went away to church camp for a whole week. I was away from the comforts of home, meeting tons of new strangers, not knowing what to expect moment by moment, and I got really anxious. That surprised me because I looked forward to being “a big boy” and going off to camp with a few of my friends. But I got so up tight that I over-reacted to an insult from a kid I had never met and got in a fight with him. Normally I would have ignored a minor insult like that. But because of my separation anxiety, I punched the kid. As a result, my “tribe” (small group of about ten campers) lost the privilege of eating watermelon with the other tribes. When my whole tribe suffered because of a mistake I had made, I felt horrible, embarrassed, and guilt-ridden. I felt so bad I had to vomit, and when I looked for a quick place to vomit, I saw what I thought was a built-in trash area in the floor. It turned out that it was part of the ventilation system for our camp building and things went from bad to worse. After being comforted by my camp counselor and forgiven by my fellow “tribesmen,” I recovered and had the time of my life the rest of the week.

There are all degrees of separation anxiety. When we are born, we think our mothers are an extension of ourselves. As an infant, when our Mom leaves the room, we feel like our arm, leg, head or something else just left the room and left us behind. We cry and quickly crawl or walk, if old enough, to find our missing part. That is all normal. When we are about eighteen months old, we finally realize that our mom is a separate human being and when she leaves the room for a little while it is no longer a big deal. When she drops the mature two-year-old child off at church day-care for a couple hours, he may or may not cry for a minute or two, but will soon forget what he is crying about and have fun with the other two-year-olds. But any child who cries all the time, every time he is away from his mother (or primary caregiver), has Separation Anxiety Disorder and professional help is called for to help resolve the problem. People of all ages can have a Separation Anxiety Disorder—even adults. Even going off to college is exciting and fun for most teens—and the further away from home the better! But some teens have severe anxiety symptoms and sometimes even panic attacks from being away from home for a variety of reasons.
SYMPTOMS, CAUSES AND CURES FOR SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDERS:

COMMON SYMPTOMS are stomachaches, nausea, headaches, refusal to go to school, refusing “sleepover” opportunities with peers, fear of going anywhere alone, demanding to have someone sleep in the same room, sleep disturbances (insomnia, nightmares, etc.), unrealistic fears, or even signs of panic, like heart palpitations, choking sensations, shakiness, fear of dying, fear of going crazy, hot flashes, urinary incontinence, etc.

COMMON CAUSES AND CURES:

1. Hovering Mothers, Fathers or Other Caregivers. Some children grow up to be overly dependent on the mom or other caregiver. Kids need to grow up. Crying is good for them sometimes. Not getting their own way is vital or they may grow up to become sociopaths and narcissists who think the world should revolve around them. Some moms (or dads, or other caregivers) can’t stand to hear an infant or child cry. I am not saying to ignore a crying infant or child; check to see what the problem is, but don’t be manipulated by his tears. Do what is right, and then let him cry himself to sleep in his own room. If you give in every time a child cries, you are rewarding the child for crying and teaching the child to cry in one way or another the rest of his life to get his own way. If an infant cries every night when you have checked on him, put him to bed in his own room and you do not give in but make him stay in his own room, the crying will seldom go on more than a few nights. Then he will learn that crying does not get him his own way and that sleeping by himself does not bring his world to an end. He will grow up and become more mature, as he should. Some parents give in out of loving empathy but are simply harming the child by giving in. Some parents are so selfish that they can not stand the rejection of any other human being, so they give in even if they know it is bad for the child just to prevent feeling personally rejected. Solomon said in the Book of Proverbs that if you don’t discipline your child, you are actually hating your child. Some Moms do not feel close to their husbands or to anyone else for that matter, so they become overly dependent on their own child, making that child their best friend to the extreme. Rather than allowing the child to individuate and develop close friends her own age, and the mother doing the same, the mother and daughter spend hours each day sharing their every thought with each other, even when the daughter goes off to college—talking an hour or two every day on the phone, sometimes calling multiple times daily. This is not healthy for either person and is codependent. The daughter is likely to develop bulimia (forced vomiting of meals and binge eating), anorexia or other psychiatric disorders from this kind of codependency. A mother’s job is the only job in the world that is measured by how little her child needs her after high school! Encourage independence in your children, and do not give in to their demands for too much of your attention.

2. TRAUMATIC EVENTS. Some children seem to be growing up just fine and becoming mature for their ages, but then suddenly develop extreme separation anxiety. When it is sudden like this, and not lifelong, it is often after a traumatic event. The child may have been molested by a caregiver, a sibling, an older cousin, a family friend, or even a stranger. Most kids never tell their parents or anyone else when this happens.
Don’t be afraid to ask your child, male or female, whether anybody touched them in a place that their bathing suit covers, and warn them to be sure to tell you if that ever does happen. The sex abuser nearly always threatens to harm the child or his or her parents if the child tells. It can have lifelong, devastating effects on the child unless professional help is obtained to bring recovery through therapy. I see adults every day of my career as a psychiatrist who are still suffering from childhood sexual or other abuses. They come to our Day Program, often suicidal even in old age, and we dig and probe and get them to clean out their emotional “pus wounds” until they are healed and recover. It takes us about seven hours a day, five days a week, for an average of three weeks to do so. Sometimes the trauma is less severe, like simply moving away from friends to a new neighborhood, suffering from a temporary but debilitating disease, or parental fights or divorce. Again, a shared burden is half a burden, so sharing the feelings and fears with a counselor brings healing if the trauma also is brought to a halt.

3. GENETIC DISORDERS. Some children are born with a genetic social phobia (extreme shyness). There may be four or five children in a family and all of them are extroverts and enjoy life, while one child is extremely shy from birth on. This kind of genetic extreme shyness and social anxiety disorder (and related separation anxiety) can usually be easily treated by a child psychiatrist with medication. Which medicine will work the best varies depending on the combination of symptoms. But I also see adults who have had lifelong social anxiety disorder since birth, in spite of normal childhoods. After one week on a GABA medicine, like Neurontin taken several times a day, the social anxiety disappears totally. But whenever that person quits the meds, even if many years later, the social anxiety disorder comes right back within days because it is genetic. Some children are born with OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) and have to line up their toys a certain way, circle Mommy three times before going through a door, touch objects they pass, or display other obsessions or compulsions. They do this from early infancy on for the rest of their lives. They inherited a low serotonin level and may also suffer from dysthymia or even more severe depressions. They may even become suicidal later on with excessive toxic shame and false guilt. But if a child psychiatrist puts this child on a serotonin reuptake inhibitor (an antidepressant), the OCD goes away within about ten weeks in most cases. It will, however, come back, even at age eighty, if that person ever quits taking the correcting medication. Some people with OCD need a combination of a serotonin reuptake inhibitor with a dopamine medicine (an atypical antipsychotic agent) even if no psychosis is involved. Some children inherit schizophrenia or other psychiatric disorders that can also cause extreme separation anxiety disorder. In most cases, these are also very well controlled these days with modern amazing medications. Medical knowledge doubles every five years in our computer age, so we can take almost any child or adult and help him become much more normal within a few weeks of intensive therapy and/or modern medications. It amazes me what we can do today in comparison to the limitations we faced when I studied psychiatry at Duke University Medical School in the 1970’s with the best education possible but limited medications compared to today.
4. SPIRITUAL CAUSES AND CURES. It is quite “normal” for all of us human beings, in this fallen world, to have a wide variety of fears and worries. I began meditating on scripture daily at age ten and continue to do so more than 55 years later. Nine out of ten things we worry about never come true, and the tenth one that does come true helps us to grow. When I ask adults what was the time in their lives that produced the greatest growth, it is nearly always right after their greatest traumatic events. That is why I wrote a book on this in 2009, Finding Purpose Beyond Our Pain (Tyndale, Publisher), to help people avoid half of the pains in life that are avoidable, and help them learn and grow from the half of the pains in life that are unavoidable, such as rejection, loneliness, disappointments, and even death itself. Even as a child, I learned how to “give God the night shift”—turning my worries over to Him at night in prayer so I could quit worrying about things and go to sleep in peace. In addition to becoming an MD and a psychiatrist, I also got a seminary degree and became an ordained minister. In the process, I did a word study one time on the word “anxiety” and synonyms of it in the Bible. I was surprised to find out that every single book of the Bible, even the very short books of the Bible like Esther or Jude, has at least one verse on anxiety and how to overcome it or learn from it. Seeing a Christian therapist to better understand how lies you learned in childhood are still causing you anxiety today can help tremendously. Resolving grudges and other repressed emotions also makes a huge difference. And obeying the Great Commandment to love God, others and yourself, resolving unhealthy, codependent relationships can bring an end to Separation Anxiety Disorders in people from two to a hundred and two.