

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 6

Family Connectedness Helps Manage Worry and Anxiety

Christin D'Ovidio: Welcome to the Power of Prevention podcast. In each podcast, we will go deeper into the topic of prevention in New Hampshire. We'll share our best interviews with you, of people who are working tirelessly for their professions, their families, and their communities to stop something unwanted from happening in this case, substance misuse. This is a podcast for people who are looking for solutions and want to make New Hampshire a better place, where we all have the opportunity to live, learn, and thrive. We are hoping to make your lives a little better with these inspirational stories about substance misuse prevention.

Christin D'Ovidio: The heartbeat of our show is how the emotional wellbeing of young children is directly related to the health and wellness of their caregivers. So when parents and caregivers have support, resources, and coping skills, they can build strong and resilient families. And that's why I'm so excited for today's guest, Lynn Lyons. She is a respected and renowned psychotherapist and public speaker as well as a coach, author, and award-winning podcaster. She's going to share how regulating emotions can help avoid problems with substances as well as how we're handling anxiety all wrong. Let's dive in. Welcome to Lynn, thank you so much. We're so pleased to have you here with us today.

Lynn Lyons: Oh, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Christin D'Ovidio: When we were preparing for this show, you talked a little bit about how anxiety is the top predictor for depression and the need to revise this public discussion around anxiety. I guess the prevailing attitude about anxiety is that we're getting this wrong. And many people are coping with their anxiety with the use of substances, prescriptions or otherwise. So can you tell me a little more about this idea?

Lynn Lyons: Yeah, untreated anxiety disorder in a child is one of the top predictors of developing depression - by the time you hit adolescence or young adulthood, there are a ton of reasons why people get depressed. Anxiety is one of the big ones, and there's also a lot of comorbidity between anxiety and depression. So we know that if you are an anxious person, about 40% of the time, that person will often as an adult carry a diagnosis of depression as well. There are a lot of patterns that anxious people develop to cope with their anxiety that lead to further problems down the road. And just as you said, avoidance is the name of the game with anxiety. So when you're feeling anxious about something, when you're worried about something, wanting to get rid of either the thing that you worry about or get rid of the way that you feel, or the symptoms, the sensations, the feelings, the thoughts about anxiety, of course, everybody wants to get rid of them.

Lynn Lyons: So there are all sorts of ways we go about doing that, substances happens to be one of the ways and unfortunately it's pretty darn effective. If you are socially anxious, alcohol is disinhibiting. Kids, teenagers, adults learn that if I have to go into this situation where I have to deal with people, if I drink, I'm going to feel less anxious about it. We know that kids learn very early on based on the language that they hear, based on the modeling that they hear, that if they're anxious, it's good to try and get rid of the way they feel or to get rid of what makes them anxious and unfortunately that makes the problem worse.

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 6

Family Connectedness Helps Manage Worry and Anxiety

Christin D'Ovidio: So removing the situation makes it that they're not dealing with it at all.

Lynn Lyons: Correct, yeah. And not only are they not dealing with the situation, and of course there are some examples where it's totally fine, like I hate rats. I'm totally fine avoiding rats. I don't feel like I need to do exposure therapy with rats. But if you're afraid of people, if you're afraid of germs, if you're afraid of making a mistake, if you're afraid of feeling uncomfortable, we can't really create a world in which those things don't happen. And so you try and get rid of them, you try and feel better, it makes perfect sense, who wouldn't want to do that. But unfortunately then not only do you miss out on the experience of dealing with whatever it is that makes you anxious. You also miss out on the experience of being able to tolerate those thoughts and feelings as you move through the situation.

Christin D'Ovidio: Lynn says a healthier framework for anxiety as it relates to both children and adults is to just expect that it will show up.

Lynn Lyons: Anxiety wants certainty and comfort. That's what it's looking for, it wants to know exactly what's going to happen and it wants to feel comfortable. And so what we want to talk to kids about as a parent, what you really want to normalize is the idea that you're going to step into situations that feel uncomfortable and that feel uncertain and that you have to be able to tolerate not knowing. It doesn't mean that we throw kids into situations and say, figure it out on your own. We give them information and we talk, if you're starting at a new school or you're going to go take gymnastics, or you have to go and get a cavity filled for the first time, we give information but we also make room for the fact that we don't know exactly how it's going to go. So even though say you're going off to school and you know who your teacher's going to be and know that this is where your classroom is and you know that you ride the school bus.

Lynn Lyons: So you have that information, there's still a lot that we can't know. There's still a lot that we can't predict. The mistake that people make is that they try and deal with the anxiety by providing more and more and more and more information and reassurance and or they help the child avoid the situation - so they don't have those feelings. What we really want to do, and this is prevention, what we really want to do is we want to talk to kids about the fact that it's okay, it is normal for them to feel uncomfortable. It's normal for us all to have some physical symptoms when we get nervous, because that's what our brain and our body do. It's okay not to know. It's okay to have big feelings about something rather than giving the message of, if my child has these feelings, there must be something wrong and so I have to go in and fix it. We want to do it with love and support and encouragement. But the idea that we're going to get rid of stuff is really one of the ways that we set kids up for substance use.

Christin D'Ovidio: So I want to move on a little bit to where this kind of falls for adults too and caretakers in particular. So there's plenty of things in the world all to feel anxious about certainly, that was before the pandemic, right?

Lynn Lyons: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 6

Family Connectedness Helps Manage Worry and Anxiety

Christin D'Ovidio: Raising a family is stressful with work and financial strains. Some individuals are single parenting or they're taking care of parents while they're parenting. And these are those things that can lead to these feelings of isolation because you're dealing with things all on your own, or depression and anxiety and substance use in adults who maybe we're not dealing with their anxiety and stress that way before. So can you talk about that impact and how that impacts children?

Lynn Lyons: Well, I think that the most important word that you just said is isolation because anxiety and depression are both internalizing disorders. We refer to them as internalizing disorders, which means that you go inside and do it. So we tend to focus on what are the things outside? The job stress, the money, stress, the work stress, the pandemic, what are the things out in the world that make me feel anxious? But the way this thing really gets powerful is that when we go inside and we isolate, we either literally isolate. We don't talk to people. We keep our heads down, we feel ashamed. We keep our secrets. We go inside with our feelings, our experiences, our thoughts, our emotions, and that is where this thing really blossoms, that's where it really blooms. The more that you are disconnected... If we think of anxiety, if we think of depression, if we think of substance use as really an issue between connection and disconnection, then we can begin to see where we can step in and help.

Lynn Lyons: This is why when we're talking about people who are in recovery, we're really looking for connection. We're really looking for a shared experience, we're really trying to get rid of the shame of this by saying, yes, this is exactly what happened to me. Or this is exactly how this thing works and the feelings you're having and the thoughts you're having and the habits that you've developed and the things that you tried to do, those are common to all of us. That is a way of bringing this out of an internalizing disorder and fostering instead external connection.

Christin D'Ovidio: Because of the unprecedented isolation experienced during the pandemic, more people feel overwhelmed and anxious and depressed, but it turns out that family connection, and however you define that, it's really important in combating loneliness. Social media has its place, but it cannot replace these strong relationships.

Lynn Lyons: It's interesting because when we look at the research about loneliness currently in the United States, Gen Z... So that would be 13 to 17 and then up a little bit more Gen Z up into the early 20s, they are reporting levels of loneliness that are 50% higher than the elderly in this country. Elderly being defined as people over the age of 72. One of the things that comes up over and over and over again is that we've got this real contradiction of this over-connected world and then all these people who feel incredibly lonely and disconnected. So one of the things we want to look at is what does connection really mean? Because if, for example, we look at social media use, one of the things that was interesting during the pandemic they were looking at social media helped people stay connected, it helped them feel not alone and we let kids be on screens because we were having birthday parties on Zoom and Thanksgiving on zoom and all that kind of stuff.

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 6

Family Connectedness Helps Manage Worry and Anxiety

Lynn Lyons: Is that one of the things they found, these researchers that were looking at this was that the distinction was, are you passively engaged with social media or are you actively engaged? By actively engaged, are you in a group in which you are providing service to others? Are you connecting? Are you doing something that's meaningful? Are you helping in some way or are you passively sitting back and looking at social media, which ultimately particularly with young people results in you feeling crappier about yourself because you're doing that social comparison thing. So we've got this world of uber connection which people say, "It's great." It's got its downside because it sometimes gets in the way of authentic connection. It gets in the way of... It certainly in real life, I mean that took on a whole new meaning during the pandemic, but what's the difference between a passive connection and an active, meaningful connection? That's what we want to pay attention to.

Christin D'Ovidio: So there's really a paradigm with dealing with anxiety. There seems like there's a paradigm that's happened between over connection, but not quality connection. Can you talk about how do we change this?

Lynn Lyons: How do we change the paradigm? Well, I think that in terms of anxiety, one of the things that I'm always paying attention to, there are a few things that are really important to me. One is that having been in this field for 32 years now, we have a tendency to complicate things in a way that's not helpful. We have a tendency to pathologize things in a way that's not helpful. We have a tendency to medicalize things in a way that's not helpful. From my decades of experience, the more that we remove human beings from connection, from normalizing human experience, from tolerating anxiety, from the simple things of making sure that your kids develop social skills so that when they step into the world, they know how to interact, paying attention to things like paying attention, giving full attention to somebody who's in front of you instead of distracted attention.

Lynn Lyons: But what it really comes down to, if people are listening to this and they're saying, well, how do I step in to my family, to my relationships, to my world, to my job, how do I step in and make a difference? Keep it simple. Think about what it is that allows you to connect with other people in this world that we are living in, where there are so many big problems. There are so many unanswerable questions. We are bombarded with the ability of human beings to be horrific to other human beings on a daily basis. When I am talking to people who are in caretaking roles, when I'm talking to teenagers, if we can just take it back to this idea, that connection, that normalizing human experience, that empathizing, that doing things that are meaningful to other people, all of that is so important.

Lynn Lyons: Believe me, I know a gazillion things about treating anxiety disorders and this and this time technique and that and this and that, what it comes down to is whether or not you feel like you can connect to other people, be yourself, be authentic and then you can build all the other skills of emotional management and tolerating uncertainty and being a problem solver. But it really comes down to how can we get to talking to our kids, to talking to our families, to talking to each other about the value of connection. After the two years that we've been through, it's never been more important than we start talking about that and putting that at the top of our list.

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 6

Family Connectedness Helps Manage Worry and Anxiety

Christin D'Ovidio: When it comes to anxiety prevention, Lynn says it begins with getting rid of the language of elimination. Here she is with some actionable steps to work on in your own lives and with your own families.

Lynn Lyons: We give kids stress balls as if handing them this little toy is going to help them manage their lives better. We teach them breathing exercises, which are fabulous. I'm all for breathing exercises, but we say this will help you feel better. That's not enough. The language you want if you want an actionable step that you can start talking to kids about it's that when this feeling shows up, when this part of you shows up, so I'm a big fan of externalizing the worry, giving it a name. So we're going to call it Joe, we're going to call it Sally and you become an observer of the pattern of when your anxiety shows up, what does it say and what does it demand, and what is the difference between what you listen to and what you say, oh, that's my anxiety, that's what my anxiety says. That's what my worry says. That's what my angry part says. That's what my volcano says.

Lynn Lyons: As soon as we can teach kids that it's not about getting rid of, but it's about becoming an observer of your own thoughts and feelings. Being able to our articulate them, being able to put words to your feelings, so that's emotional literacy. We want to expect these thoughts to show up. Why? Because you are a human being, this is how it works. The second thing is that we want to externalize it, which means that we want to create some distance to become an observer of it. So we become an observer of these patterns. It also allows kids to talk about themselves and it protects their dignity. You've got this part of you that... Because we all have these parts of us. And then the third thing is that we want to teach kids that it is okay to step into situations in which they feel uncertain and feel uncomfortable rather than having them avoid.

Lynn Lyons: And the language we use for that is to say, of course, those two words, of course couldn't do my job without those two words of course. Of course, you're going to feel nervous as you do this. Of course, you're going to feel anxious. Of course, you're going to feel sad when your heart is broken and then how do we help you problem solve? How do we help you ask for help? How do we help you differentiate between what's a normal part of being a teenager, a middle schooler, a young adult. How do we help you differentiate between the parts of you that you need to put in charge and the parts of you that are really just background noise as you move through all of these changes in your life? Expect these feelings to show up, externalize them, get a little space and then experiment as you step into the world, dealing with these things, not getting rid of them, but handling them. It is okay if you have these feelings and reactions, there is so much emphasis right now on how we get rid of stuff and that's really problematic.

Christin D'Ovidio: Thank you. Well, I have another question.

Lynn Lyons: Okay.

Christin D'Ovidio: So as you know, the name of the show is the Power of Prevention. We like to always ask the guests that we have on a show, how do you describe prevention? What is your definition of prevention? We're usually talking about the relationship to substance use here.

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 6

Family Connectedness Helps Manage Worry and Anxiety

Lynn Lyons: Yeah. Yeah, the way I describe prevention is equipping people as early as possible. I always say the earlier the better, but it's never too late. Equipping them as early as possible with a few really key skills. These are my preventative skills. One is the ability to tolerate uncertainty, that it's okay to not know everything - to, as I say, roll around in the “mights and maybes” of life. So if I've got kids that are like, well, we don't know exactly what's going to happen, but we're going to try it anyway. That's preventative. The other thing is just emotional management and emotional literacy. The ability to put words to your feelings, the ability to talk to people about what's going on inside of you. Then the third prevention thing for me in terms of anxiety is giving kids the opportunity to problem solve and develop autonomy.

Lynn Lyons: So what we know about kids that are raised in environments where there's a lot of anxiety, a lot of worry, is they're not very good, independent problem solvers, and they don't have a strongly developed sense of autonomy. So allowing kids to figure out things on their own, lengthening the leash, not completely and not letting them off the leash before they're ready to be off the leash, but lengthening the leash so that they have the opportunity when they're younger, when there's still adults around to sort of help them through this, they have the opportunity to practice problem solving, to figure things out. If we were thinking in this preventative way, that you had kids that had solid emotional management, that they were able to tolerate uncertainty and that we give them the opportunity to problem solve instead of jumping in so quickly, those three things are enormously preventative.

Lynn Lyons: The way we've got things set up right now is that we're really good fire extinguishers, we're going around trying to put out all these fires. We're not really paying as much to prevention as we really should be. Prevention is a huge thing for me because the things I teach in treatment are the exact same things that I teach for prevention. These skills of emotional management, problem solving, being able to have a sense of autonomy, being to identify what's going on inside of you and express that to the people who you are in relationships with. All of those things are preventative and then connection of course, too.

Christin D'Ovidio: That's great.

Lynn Lyons: It's really, really important that we connect in this way. It's really important that you spend time with your kids. It's really important that they learn how to interact with people without a screen between them, really getting back to basics and thinking about how do we equip kids with the relational and emotional skills they need that are preventative. Because it's absolutely true. Prevention is where it's at, yeah.

Christin D'Ovidio: Well thank you very much, Lynn for joining us today. It's really been a wonderful discussion with so many tools and concepts that I think our listeners are going to be able to take and make action with. Thank you.

Lynn Lyons: You're very welcome

Lynn Lyons: Yeah.

THE POWER OF PREVENTION: EPISODE 6

Family Connectedness Helps Manage Worry and Anxiety

Christin D'Ovidio: Thanks for listening to the Power of Prevention and special thanks to our guest Lynn Lyons. If you liked this episode and want to hear more, please visit us at DrugfreeNH.org and follow us on Facebook or Instagram. You can subscribe to the series at Apple Podcast, Spotify or Stitcher. We'll catch you on the next episode.

