

Anxiety, Nervousness, & Timidity

An Anthroposophic Medical Perspective

Kolisko conferences world wide work at the cutting edge of two disciplines; where medical issues impact upon education. With more children presenting with anxiety issues, Dr Michael Sargent was asked to give one of the keynote addresses on this theme at the 2010 Kolisko Conference, held in Cambridge, New Zealand. The editors thank and acknowledge painting therapist Margaret Snowden for her original notes from Dr Sargent's lecture – which were later expanded by the speaker).

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The Phenomena of Anxiety

Questions of anxiety, nervousness and timidity in children are now common problems that interfere with learning in much more subtle ways than school refusal. Now it is accepted that in children anxiety is a serious problem... upwards of 1 in 5 children over the age of 8 years are expected to have different forms of anxiety behaviours. Currently, counsellors speak of anxiety on the increase among young people. There are huge numbers of students going into tertiary studies suffering from anxiety. They describe feeling “empty”, “hollowed out”, “like a vacuum”. In the United States it is found that 1 in 8 children are clinically anxious or have social phobias. The current diagnoses include:

Generalised Anxiety Disorder — characterised by excessive worry and fear about future or past events. This disorder is usually accompanied by symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, vomiting, and sleep disturbance.

Separation Anxiety Disorder — the fear of separating from primary caregivers, home or other familiar surroundings.

Specific Phobia — a fear associated with a specific object or situation, such as fear of needles, dogs, heights, or the dark.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder — characterised by the presence of severe anxiety reactions or feelings, following a traumatic event, such as witnessing a death or being involved in a near death experience.

Social Phobia — the fear of being humiliated or embarrassed in front of other people... meeting

new people, being at the centre of attention, or in a group social situation.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder — characterised by intrusive, obsessive thoughts that are usually alleviated by compulsive actions (e.g. washing hands 60 times a day), and checking behaviours (e.g. checking bag 20 times before going to school in case they have forgotten something) — extremely rare in children.

Panic Attack — a discrete period in which there is a sudden onset of intense apprehension, fearfulness or terror often associated with feelings of impending doom. These feelings are accompanied by physical symptoms such as palpitation, chest pain or discomfort, difficulty breathing, and choking smothering sensations.

Agoraphobia — essentially anxiety about, or avoidance of, places or situations from which it may be difficult and/or embarrassing to escape, and/or help may not be available if a panic attack should occur. For instance, being outside the home alone, being in a crowd, traveling in bus or being on a bridge.

A list such as this is comprehensive, yet “anxiety” is really a complex of symptoms that provides a label, but no real understanding of the condition itself or its impact on the child or grown up.

Anxiety and Fear?

Anxiety is a common emotion we have probably all experienced at some stage in our life — most of us feel anxious when faced with difficult situations with symptoms such as sweating, pallor, an increased heart rate, shallow breathing, butterflies in the stomach and dry mouth. When we compare ‘anxiety’ to ‘fear’, which is often an associated feeling, it is evident that we experience fear in the presence of real, outer, immediate danger, whereas, anxiety is a

more general inner response that (may be out of proportion to the reality of a threat) tends to be associated with worrying about future or past difficulties, rather than an immediate situation. So when we now look at these phenomena in terms of anthroposophical pictures I hope we can recognise anxiety is an expression of emotional life, that it is to do with the soul-spiritual human being, and in particular with the astral body.

Causes of Anxiety

When we look at the developing human being it is still a question of how we can understand this anxiety, its basis and its origins?

When we look for causes we need to consider the developmental process, how that is affected by the world the child is living in and the constitutional complex that it brings over from its pre-birth time. Steiner talked about an “epidemic of nervousness” which would arise at the end of the 20th Century. The emotional response gestures to Anxiety and Fear tend towards fixity and paralysis. Anxious children have a subtle tendency to become fixed, and obsessive in a certain way.

Movement is a key; movement which starts with the successful transition from one milestone to the next in early childhood. If the developmental milestones of **Walk, Talk, then Think** go awry or do not develop in a healthy way, then problems may arise.

These milestones are normally achieved over the course of the first three years of life... walking by the end of the first year, talking by the end of the second and thinking by the end of the third year, at which time the child comes to an ego consciousness, which is marked in the language the child uses — it now has the word “I” as the reference point for itself; the child sees itself in the *first person*, rather than in the *third person*. How the child accomplishes this development and the factors that surround its processes have a lasting impact on how the child grows from this time on and until it dies.

First year	standing & walking	will
Second year	speaking	feeling
Third year	understanding	thinking

Learning to walk arises out of imitation, not so much in terms of the movements but in terms of statics and dynamics — the need to imitate other human beings who have developed an orientation to the spatial world by finding the right balance relationship to the forces of gravity. The child develops its own forces that enable it to move from the horizontal to the vertical. This happens through standing first when the lower limbs enable it to overcome gravity and then, through the use of the upper limbs, spatial balance is achieved which allows it to move freely within the field of gravity. This overcoming of the effects of gravity is the work of the ego. By coming into a vertical position in the spatial world, certain moral/ethical forces work out of the child’s ego, back into its physical body – so long as the human being retains a horizontal attitude, then animal tendencies work, which lack the moral element.

Once the capacity to walk is acquired then forces flow upwards into the brain; through the movements of the legs and the arms plastic forces are at work developing the speech area in the brain. The strength and rhythm of the step brings rhythm into speech, and the freeing of the arms from gravity gives feeling to speech. In speech the astral body is at work within the feeling quality that speech has. Finally the forces that have overcome gravity to create walking, freed the arms from gravity and developed the brain for speech are now working into the etheric body to bring about brain development as an instrument for thinking. Each time one skill becomes more or less automatic so that we don’t have to put extra energy into it, then the same etheric energy forces become free for another task.

As long as the imitative processes are able to unfold in the inner life of the child without hindrances, then development should not be problematic. Things can go astray when human nature tries to intervene (albeit in good faith) to hasten or control a developmental stage. In the case of walking it is possible to ‘teach’ the child how to walk — perhaps sometimes because the child is making efforts to walk or stand — one tries to instruct them how to do it, or uses various gadgets to train them. With speech there can be a tendency to use “baby” talk to the child, rather

than use adult language. Then with thinking the use of instructions that are then revoked or changed — showing a thinking that is confused or muddled. In each of these areas there is an element of “untruthfulness” ... and these leave their marks on the child’s physical constitution – marks which are with them for life. In many cases this ‘unfreedom’ is not evident immediately, but only much later in life when problems arise.

“Children’s organs and vessels form according to the way love, truthfulness, and clarity develop in their environment. Metabolic illnesses arise from learning to walk without love; digestive problems may result from untruthfulness while the child is learning to speak; and nervousness comes from confused thinking in a child’s surroundings.” (*A Modern Art of Education, Rudolf Steiner, Ilkley, Lect 6, 10 Aug 1923*).

He went on to say that the “greatest mistakes in the behavior of any generation are a true reflection of the previous generation... When you look at how common nervousness is in the 1920s, you must conclude that teachers were very confused around the beginning of the century. The confused thinking of that time manifests as nervousness today.” (*Ibid.*)

Pre-Earthly Influences

When a child descends into life from the heavenly realms it takes hold of its physical body, and gradually asserts itself on that body. This descent into life is part of a recurring cycle of earthly life, earthly death, spiritual life and rebirth. Before the soul descends into earth life it is at its largest spiritually at the Cosmic Midnight Hour, afterwards gradually contracting as it passes through the cosmic planetary spheres, eventually reaching the spheres of Venus, Mercury and Moon — the cosmic Moon sphere being the region where souls await earthly birth and souls departing earth life gather. In this descent the human soul is in community with various groups of the Spiritual Hierarchies, especially the Archai in Venus, the Archangels in Mercury, and the Angels in Moon. The capacities that a human being has acquired in its preceding life will affect

the relationships a soul can have with, especially, these spiritual beings. These beings have an impact on how the development of the child proceeds in its first three years of life — the Archai bring the capacity to stand upright and walk, the Archangels the capacity for Speaking, and the Angels the capacity for thinking. Important for us as human beings are these three spheres:

Cosmic Venus sphere:

- Archai — Will,
- Standing and Walking — Ego forces

Cosmic Mercury sphere:

- Archangels — Feeling,
- Speaking — Astral forces

Cosmic Moon sphere:

- Angels — Thinking,
- Understanding — Etheric forces

Oversensitivity

In 1924 Rudolf Steiner gave the lectures that became the basis for the Curative Education movement for children with special needs.¹ He gave various pathological pictures. In one case, that of an *hysterical child* he went to great effort to differentiate this from an adult hysteric, which in his time was seen to be typical of women and to be connected with the developing psychoanalytic ideas of Freud – nowadays it is not a term in use for children and tends to be seen as a psychiatric condition in adults.

The picture he gave was based on an understanding of how a human being takes hold of its body on waking up. He points out how this is far from the simple idea that we might choose to take. In sleep we know that the soul-spiritual elements leave and take a journey of healing and reflection in the spiritual world ... and the remaining elements of the constitution, namely the physical and etheric bodies, which, free from the life-destroying effects of the consciousness brought by the ego organisation and the astral body, undergo rejuvenation in the night so that the human being awakens feeling refreshed. At the time of waking the astral body and ego dive down into the sleeping etheric and physical bodies, bringing them to wakefulness.

¹ Rudolf Steiner. *Curative Education*, Dornach, June 1924).
Rudolf Steiner. *A Modern Art of Education*, Ilkley, Lect 6, 10 Aug 1923.

A simple analogy might be to liken this waking up process to salt dissolving in water — the ego and astral body simply penetrate the etheric and physical bodies and dissolve into them.

But Steiner says that this is not a correct picture. Rather he says that with the Ego organisation the “ego slips into the physical body, lays hold of the physical body — slips in so far that it makes the physical body light. Through the ego’s gliding into it, the physical body loses its weight. And so when I, as an awake human being, stand upright, then for my consciousness — for my ego, for my ego organization which has also its physical expression in the warmth organism — gravity is overcome. There is no question here of the ego entering into *indirect* connection with gravity. The ego, the “I”, enters into direct connection, places itself as ego right into gravity, shutting the physical body completely out of the process. And that is how the matter really stands. When you walk, you place yourself, with your ego organisation, right into the actual gravity of the earth; and you do not do this via the physical body, you yourself enter into direct connection with the earthly.”²

Indeed the ego connects us with the elements — Earth, Fluid, Air and Warmth (Warmth as physical warmth, rather than the more rarefied etheric warmth). The astral body connects us in a similar way with the ethers — Warmth, Light, Sound and Life. Each organ has its own physical body, but also its own etheric body and this in turn is penetrated by the astral body and the ego. So the “skin” of each organ, which is comprised of the organ’s physical and etheric bodies, needs to be a little permeable to the ego and astral body so that they can take hold of the elements and ethers directly. When this skin is impermeable to some extent then there is a congestion of the ego and astral body and this leads to the picture that stands behind epilepsy.

However it can be that the “skin” is too permeable and the soul-spiritual elements ooze into the peripheral world too far outside organs of perception and consciousness. Normally the organ would hold back sufficient for its own needs

but in the oversensitive child, the astral body along with the ego organisation overflow from the organ; what one sees in these organs where the astral body is flowing out is a physical expression of this in secretion — typically in the hands one will find sweating, and sometimes tears in the eyes, and in the region of the bladder there may be loss of urine — enuresis/bed-wetting. It is also to say that the sweating and bodily reactions are not necessarily immediate — the reaction to the soul experience can be one that arises in the process inwardly of “digesting” or processing events of life and only appear several days later in the glandular system. Rudolf Steiner points out that “the child is sore in his soul, and this soreness of soul becomes a dominant idea in him, overriding everything else. If it cannot be made better by means of curative education, then, when the child attains puberty, either the feminine or the masculine form of this soreness will appear. The feminine form will have the character of hysteria, as it was called when there was still a true perception of it. The masculine form will have a different character” which he does not go on to describe but one could perhaps think of narcissistic personality disorder as one possibility.

What do we see in the classroom?

The test of how the child is doing at school is how the child is able to enter into the learning process — in other words its ability to enter into the Curriculum. The Curriculum works on the child in a way that is appropriate for the anthroposophical idea of child development, with stimulation that supports the energies of the developing child in a healthy way. Several objectives for Waldorf education between the loss of teeth and puberty are: firstly to teach the child to breathe and secondly to sleep properly — breathing to help the thinking, and sleep to rejuvenate the body. This is the focus of the middle school years, when the rhythmic system is developing and the feeling life is being cultivated. The educational approach to the child through an artistic medium stimulates the intellect — the normal effect of the intellect is to deposit salty substances, needed for conscious action of the ego, in the tissues

² Ibid Lect 3, 27 June 1924

making them hardened and less enlivened.

Sleep helps to remove these deposits. If the education is abstract and mentally directed this hardening is much more pronounced and much more difficult to remove by sleep; when an artistic medium is used to educate a child of this age, the child will get to a stage in the lesson where it will naturally want to use its intellect but this is kept in balance by the artistic activity, and leads the child from being intellectually active, to being physically active. This physical activity needs to be creative and not of the nature of modern gymnastics or athletics or sport. Creative physical activity causes a fine disseminated “combustion” in the tissues of the body especially in sleep. Physical activity that is structured and constrained only “burns off” the salts in the limbs, leaving the salts in the other tissues, which on waking create irritability in the soul. Sleep that has been prepared by healthy physical activity should disseminate the “combustion process” in a fine way throughout the whole organism, rejuvenating the organism; but when the physical exercise is contrived and mechanical this does not happen, the child awakens restless and fidgety, and unable to sit still to learn.

If the education can meet the middle school child with lessons that are artistic, filled with a musical quality, then the physical activities arising out of the inner nature of the child should err towards what is healthy. It is not a question of preventing a school child from taking part in physical games and sports, but rather not as a competitive super-trained athlete. Activities for a school child that support creative – not the intellectual and physical – fill the soul with wonder, support development towards balance in the emotional life, encourage good rhythms in breathing and thinking, and healthy patterns of sleeping.

Another thing that we have considered is the oversensitive child. This child can present in many ways other than being timid, or shy. The oversensitive child has difficulty in meeting the outer world and suffers from this painfully in a real sense. The normal child will grasp the outer

world through the ego insofar as the elements of warmth, air, fluid and matter go, and through the astral body through the warmth, light, chemistry and cosmic life. The oversensitive child takes hold of these too strongly and is drawn out too far into the outer world, and then experiences the world as a “soreness of soul” in a way similar to what we might get when we have grazed our hands and then try to grasp something; as the child comes up against the outer world as it is sucked into it with its astral body and ego consciousness, these soul spiritual elements of consciousness are pressed back, compressed and experienced as pain — pain can be thought of as heightened awareness, or compressed consciousness. So these children can exhibit all sorts of defensive behaviours around their cognitive activities – they can be touch defensive, smell defensive, taste defensive and so on. The normal response to pain is to remove the cause of it — to reduce the compressed consciousness by moving to a safe place, and then to avoid it if possible. In learning situations, then, oversensitive responses may be expressed as withdrawal and isolation from participation which, when it spills over into the realm of ideas, presents as a learning problem.

The sequence of behaviour responses in these oversensitive children is often seen as:

I Will ~ the intention to do something arises in the child who is immediately drawn in to the outer world as the intention unfolds and experiences this as pain. This leads to withdrawal...

I Can't ~ at this point the child refuses and withdraws... the ego is no longer able to carry through its will intention as the pain in the astral body builds. The necessary step to follow is...

I Must ~ this engages the will once more and completes the deed. In this there is the need for the ego to once more regain the upper hand and draw the astral body back from the outer world.

It is possible to see that this can happen not only in the case of the outer world but also for the inner world of ideas — this inner realm also has a will aspect when one realises that ideas need to be given direction and order, in order to enter

into a learning process. The sphere of thought can also become a victim of the oversensitivity and new ideas are no longer possible because the realisation of a new concept is associated with fear. This experience of fear has an impact in the realm of feeling and this in turn stimulates anxiety which evokes a depressive mood in the soul. Steiner says, "Every such idea which, at the moment when it should come to consciousness, evokes fear — every such idea simultaneously causes the life of feeling to develop below it; feelings surge up, and *depression* invariably sets in. Feelings which are not comprehended, not taken hold of by ideas, give rise to depression; only those feelings are not of a depressing nature, which, as soon as they arise, are immediately apprehended by the life of thought and ideation."³

How then can we deal with the oversensitive child?

This centres on the need for those who deal with these children to develop the right qualities within themselves. These children are anxious and jumpy... easily flipped into states of hysteric tears and meltdowns. They bear in themselves a level of anxiety all the time, which is on the threshold of becoming painful, and creating panic. So the people caring for these children need to overcome their inner anxieties and fears in such a way that they are in control of themselves and those in their care. In a way this is the picture of the need for the ego of these folk to be present and in control. The environment around the child with such oversensitivity needs to be calm and have a sense of it being controlled and safe. This is necessary so that child can then be brought into a state of anxiety briefly through small shocks — the sound of keys or a change in the tempo of the lesson. These shocks need to be brought with full consciousness and not arise in an unconscious or habitual way — a deliberate conscious method is needed. For example: when working in a lesson with which the child is comfortable and has no threshold issues starting at a certain speed, then increasing the tempo and being there in front of the child creates consciously further anxiety. Now the build up of this anxiety is clearly able to be

3 Ibid

sourced and so the build up in the astral body and ego is not turned back as soul soreness but now works to incarnate the child's astral body and ego which is supported by the ego of the teacher being present in this process. Through repetition over time the ego and astral body of the child will become consolidated in the organs more strongly.

However it can be that the child has developed more movement in the pattern of this oversensitivity and one sees that there is alternation in mood from a depressive melancholia to one that is manic and overly cheerful. Here the pattern of "I will, I can't, I must" is more evident. An idea rises up in the child and as they try to fulfill it as a deed they meet the soul soreness and withdraw... eventually they may overcome the fear and act but then only to find that the outcome was far short of the original expectation. Again a sense of failure... however if at the point of the idea arising one can intervene and provide not the emotional sympathy, but the strength of companionship, to accompany the child through to the conclusion... this may be achieved by gently touching the hand of the child who is trying to do handwork and is about to become stuck or the carrying within oneself the action the child is trying to do and perhaps gently accompanying the child in movement over or alongside.

What Else Helps?

First, above all, anxious children need a parent or teacher who is comfortable in their own being, secure, calm and able to accompany them with an attitude of steadfast, radiating *warmth*.

Second, place around them strong clear *rhythms* and boundaries. Rhythm means a good balance of expansive and contractive activities. They know in advance what is going to happen, so they don't have to wonder, in fear. Strong, sensible rhythms of mealtimes, sleeping and waking, playtime and work, quiet times and noisy times, breathing in and breathing out as it were, all support the etheric body's life energy, which is low and compromised.

Dr Kolisko pointed out that the main healing balm is a good school curriculum which links the

human being to the world of knowledge, through imaginative activity, story, and human feeling.

Besides this there is also the use of therapies directly to strengthen the organs and create stronger peripheral boundaries to hold the astral body and ego more firmly. The use of Nursing Therapies, Rhythmical Massage, Eurythmy Therapy, Music Therapy, Speech Therapy, as well as medicines is all possible, helpful and may be needed in various combinations. It may be that the “treatments” need to be pursued over a considerable period although perhaps with intervals between courses.

We can assist children in particular through medicines applied *externally*, i.e. to the skin. The skin is our largest sense organ, so it is especially important for these nerve/sense children. **We need to give the child “a skin”.**

Copper ointment (Weleda) over the kidneys at night time, for the anxious child. Parent can rub on lower back. Brings immediate warmth for the night and settles the soul (astral body), which is so active physiologically in the kidneys (the seat of anxiety) by day.

Yarrow compress over liver if anxiety is tending towards depression.

Eucalytus compress cloth over bladder at night can help with too frequent need to get up to go to the toilet at night.

Footbath. An easy and gentle settling remedy that releases child from being too awake in the head. Parent or teacher can do this. Find a quiet corner, curtains pulled a bit, dim lighting; this enables child to take in surroundings quietly. Sit on chair, put feet into warm foot bath, with appropriate essential oil, e.g. lavender - a lovely smell for the sensitive senses. Warm towel over knees for comfort and security. Squeeze some lemon juice also into the footbath. Colder hands and feet can lead to bladder weakness, going to the toilet all the time, the remedy is to bring them down into their feet - to help ground them in their body and to centre them. You can put marbles into the footbath so they can play with them with their toes and feel their feet.

Simple massage or body-oiling. A footbath may be the precursor to a simple massage. These children are losing their sense of warmth all the time and being pushed out of their bodies by an over-awake soul life. The rhythmic touch of massage really helps to bring them to a sense of self. Work with rhythm; spiralling, circling, streaming movements all of which restore warmth. The masseur may apply special ointments on organs - cover with a cloth for maximum benefit where the child is in shock, trauma or state of nervousness. For example: a rose/aurum/lavender-soaked cloth.

Work with morning or evening rhythms. Work over liver, kidney and spleen in mornings for incarnation. Afternoon time is more conducive for “digesting” the day’s experiences.

Preparation for sleep important. Lavender is soothing and warming - anxious children love to be wrapped up in warmth and containment. (Warmer children not so keen on all that cosiness!)

Nutrition baths. Adding egg, honey and oil to a bath very good for the nervous system, for adults as well as children

Kali Phos or Fragador homeopathic remedies are very helpful.

Also Three Flower Massage Oil, recently developed by Weleda, is a very effective remedy.

- ◆ **Rose** Supports the rhythmic/feeling system with its harmonising, mediating balance and connection to the heart.
- ◆ **Hypericum (St John’s Wort)** Supports the nervous/thinking system with its delicate warmth.
- ◆ **Chamomile** Calms, soothes and promotes digestion and the will system.

Simple monitoring of the reduction of anxiety is possible by simply checking how much sweating the child is displaying — are the hands sweaty when shaken? ◆

Dr Michael Sargent, a graduate of the Otago School of Medicine, has worked in medical practice in New Zealand and for the last 25 years also been involved in Waldorf education. At present he is involved with school medicine, being the visiting school doctor in several Waldorf Schools in New Zealand.