

### **Anxiety - Family Patterns**

When clients come in to figure out why they have anxiety and learn how to work through it, we spend a lot of time talking about their family history. Inevitably, we find that they were repeatedly in situations during childhood wherein they were afraid, either for their health/safety or the health/safety of others (which can include their caregivers). The interesting thing is that the fear in their early environment doesn't have to have been experienced first hand, nor does it have to have been based on reality. That is, they can simply have had primary caregivers who showed frequent fear reactions, even if the things the caregiver feared are neutral to most people. In fact, research has shown that even if subjects only watch a video of a stranger showing a fear response to a neutral stimulus, subjects show the identical physiological fear response (and scanned brain activity) when they are later presented with the same neutral stimulus. This is a powerful lesson for parents (not to mention the folks producing children's media!). We need to remember that our fear reactions, however subtle, are very influential. We need to be sure our reactions fit the situation. For example, fear is appropriate in response to verbal or physical maltreatment (such as sarcasm, ridicule, physical threats, property damage, hitting, or out-of-control behavior related to substance abuse). In contrast, fear reactions are not appropriate to most social situations (including navigating a simple conflict and contact with folks of other religions, races, sexual orientations, or disabilities), common illnesses, bugs, reptiles, accidental spills or breakages in the home, or children participating in age-appropriate physical activity. When we as parents show inappropriate fear reactions in these situations, our young children will internalize them. They will begin to shut down their own natural impulses to explore the world to assuage their fears (or ours!). If you are a parent who grew up with the family patterns that shape anxiety, be sure to seek help before you put your fears on your children!