

by Sheila Grant, MS, RN

**I** AM QUALIFIED TO WRITE THIS ARTICLE for one very good reason: As a recovering, card-carrying hypervigilant mom, I have vast experience with the associated behaviors. I was constantly on the lookout for any potential danger and jumped in to ensure that my children were spared from any discomfort. (They weren't spared anyway.) With a longstanding compulsion to protect my children at all costs, I was on guard, on edge, and exhausted.

To be fair, I had good cause to be concerned and protective. When my two young children were diagnosed with ADHD, they were constantly getting into one scrape or another. Arguments with neighborhood kids, upsets at school, difficulty doing the smallest tasks, and verbal impulsivity were frequent occurrences in our household. I cringed every time the phone rang, hoping it wasn't a neighbor or a teacher calling to tell me my child was in some sort of trouble.

All parents want to protect their children, but the urge to protect children can become even more intense when the child is diagnosed with ADHD, because we know that the child will have some unique challenges. Therefore it is appropriate and prudent to offer the type of support and care he or she needs.

Effective and critical strategies to support your child include getting comprehensive evaluations (psycho-educational or psychiatric) and follow-up with appropriate therapies, including medication, academic supports, IEPs, coaches, and therapists. Being available emotionally and physically to guide a child is important for all parents, but it is critical for those parents who have a child with ADHD. These behaviors are indicative of concerned and caring parents who want to support their children and help them to cope with the challenge of having ADHD. Research supports these types of supports to manage ADHD.

So, then, what is hypervigilance and what does it look like?

#### **Characteristics of hypervigilance**

Psychologist Lynn Margolies describes hypervigilance as being hyperalert to danger and hypersensitive to one's environment. There is a constant scanning of the environment to protect or guard against a real or imagined threat. Severe, acute anxiety accompanies hypervigilance and may lead to mental and physical exhaustion. Hypervigilance is frequently associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

# Hypervigilant Parenting May Be Harmful to Your Health



# Five Tips for the Road to Less Anxious, Less Hypervigilant Parenting

## Find a supportive community; create a circle of care.

- I found a CHADD support group in my area where I could talk with other parents about how to help my child and where I could express feelings of sadness and frustration.
- If there is not a CHADD support group in your area, find another parent support group for children with special needs, or try sponsoring a meet-up group of parents who have children with ADHD or special needs.
- Consider joining a church community that is supportive of children with special needs.
- Put your child in supportive environments; not harsh punitive environments. I took my child out of one Boy Scout troop where the leader was punitive and had unrealistic expectations for the scouts, and put him in a troop where parents were easygoing and troop leaders had one hour of vigorous free play before doing scout work.
- Enlist supportive friends or family to help you. My extended family came to our house for dinner frequently to be there for me and my children.

## Get help for yourself.

- If you are anxious and depressed, you may need to talk with a professional. A psychologist, social worker or licensed professional counselor who specializes in helping families who are challenged with ADHD can be extremely helpful.
- If you think you have a clinical depression, consider an evaluation by a psychiatrist. You cannot help your child, if you are in a constant state of distress.

## Get the help you need for your child, ensure appropriate supports are in place.

- Take a break and allow others to help your child, like tutors, homework helpers, therapists, coaches, etc.
- Homework helpers saved my family. You can hire a college student from a nearby college and the cost is less than a tutor.

## Consider a spiritual perspective.

This perspective was very helpful to me, but I didn't get it right away. Instead of thinking "Why me?" think "Why not me." Everyone has something they have to deal with. Every person on this earth must take their own journey, and manage their own life. So too, your child, teen, or young adult must take the journey of figuring out how to live with ADHD.

## Remember this is a marathon, not a sprint. Pace yourself.

- Think about responding rather than reacting.
- In order to respond effectively, pause and take some time to respond. Tell your child you are thinking about the situation before you respond.
- Remember, reacting emotionally generally does not provide the most effective response.
- Breathe, take a walk, or take a yoga class.
- Consider mindfulness meditation as a way to calm yourself.
- Develop a hobby, something that gives you pleasure.

One way to tell if you are hypervigilant is to look within and recognize how you are feeling. Are you constantly tense and on guard? Are you in a state of panic, is your heart racing, and is your stomach upset? Do you feel an urgency to act? Do you listen in on your child's phone conversations to ensure she is being socially appropriate? Have you followed your child as he drives through the neighborhood to ensure he is going the appropriate speed? Are you lying awake at night obsessively reviewing what you could have done better that day in regards to your child? Do you believe you are the only one who can help your child? Are you consumed by your child's difficulties, to the point that you do not have a moment to enjoy life? Are you feeling anxious and depressed?

These responses indicate the flight-or-fight response that humans experience when there is a life-threatening event. Occasionally this response might be appropriate—if your child is in a life-threatening situation, such as drinking and driving. Fortunately, most situations that are challenging to our children and our families are not life-threatening. If you experience any of the above feelings on a regular basis, you are over-reacting emotionally, rather than responding in a logical, thoughtful way to a child's distress.

The worst part about this hypervigilant syndrome is that being in a constant state of hyperalertness can impact one's physical and mental well-being. "Over time, hypervigilance can lead to chronic health complaints, such as stomach or bowel problems, headaches, and even irregular heartbeats," writes Lisa Fritscher. "You may feel tired and short-tempered, angry or irritable, and unable to relax." Hypervigilance with associated anxiety that is not ameliorated can lead to chronic health conditions such as fibromyalgia, exhaustion, or adrenal fatigue.

## The case against hypervigilance

Hypervigilance doesn't protect you or your children from danger and may even cause you to make mistakes. By keeping you in a constant state of fear, it may impact your ability to focus and concentrate. Therefore, hypervigilance renders you ineffective in solving problems and navigating your way through the challenges of raising a child with ADHD.

Paradoxically, the effort to protect your child at all costs has the opposite effect of what you hoped for. Jumping in to fix all of your children's problems en-

# When Your Spouse is Hypervigilant

Elaine Taylor-Klaus

**T**he hardest part of parenting is letting go and allowing our kids to learn from their experiences and their mistakes. When a kid has ADHD, it is all the more challenging, because the risks seem greater and the stakes seem higher. In my work coaching couples, I often see parents who have very different perspectives on the extent to which they should support and scaffold their child. When one parent is hypervigilant, it adds another layer of difficulty to an already challenging family dynamic.

Here's how it frequently plays out. Dad (typically) wants his son to learn a lesson, so he accuses mom of coddling and provides little to no structural support for the child. Hypervigilant mom (typically) is terrified that her child's failure will land him dead or in jail (this is no exaggeration), so she overcompensates by enabling her child, feeling put-upon and justified because Dad just doesn't understand. The relationship between husband and wife breaks down, and the child is left with either too little or too much support.

This situation can be resolved when parents make the effort to get on the same page, set clear and reasonable expectations and consequences, and then communicate them as a unified front. But as with any change, the first step is always recognizing that there's a problem.

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sure that when they become adults, they will have difficulty solving their own problems. All children need to learn how to solve problems, big and small. They need practice in solving problems. As parents, our job is to help our children, teens, and young adults learn how to solve problems—not to jump in and fix them. Obviously, it is a fine balance and the problem-solving must be age-appropriate.

When you are on hyperalert at all times, you send your children a strong message: “You are not capable of caring for yourself or managing your life, so I will.” You may not be saying this out loud, but your children get the message loud and clear.

Instead of jumping in on every difficult situation, take a coaching approach and see if your child can figure out steps to take to solve the problem. Another approach might be to take a step back and see if you can wait an hour or a day to see if your child can come up with a solution before you do. One thing I have gotten into the habit of saying to my now young adults is “I'm sure you can figure this out, let me know if you need any help.”

If you have a younger child who has some difficulty with a teacher, you might say: “I'm sure you can work this out with your teacher. Let's talk about how you

might approach this problem.” At this age your parenting role can become one of coach. Of course, if things get really difficult, you may need to step in to help.

The dance that we parents of children with ADHD are required to learn is tricky; the steps are complex and there are always missteps on the journey. However, we must balance our role as parents to be concerned and available, without harming ourselves with excessive vigilance and anxiety over the lives of our children who have ADHD. When we manage our own anxiety and become more centered and calm, our children will surely benefit. 🧘

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## ADDITIONAL READING

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