

BackChat.....

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Over-anxious?

I am an over-anxious parent. All the doctors and therapists tell me so. Always assuming the worst, swift to react to quite innocuous comments with demands for further explanation, unwilling to accept reassurance.

But consider, for a moment, why I am this way.

The first time I was told I was "over-anxious" was the day I asked for my son to be referred to a paediatrician because, at the age of 15 months, he still hadn't mastered walking without holding on to the furniture. Four months later, when he finally saw a paediatrician, my son was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. From "nothing to worry about" to "moderate cerebral palsy" in the space of a second—a terrible shock.

And how do people react to that kind of a shock? With anxiety, and a loss of trust in the world. Now I have proof that bad things happen out of the blue. When one terrible thing like that has happened, how can I be sure another will not follow? And each time I go back to the place in which that shock was delivered (we are frequent visitors to the hospital), and each time I meet the people who told me my son had a disability (doctors and therapists), I feel echoes of those feelings of anxiety, and wonder what I will find out this time.

My son was referred to a paediatrician because of my "gut feeling", "mother's instinct", call it what you will. That instinct was proven catastrophically right. If I feel instinctively that something is wrong now, will I assume everything is fine? Well, no—I'd rather be called over-anxious again, and be sure.

Consider, also, that as a parent of a child with a disability, I move in circles where I often hear of other children who are ill, or suffering, or experiencing difficulties. You may feel that there is no reason to assume that the same will befall my own child—but I am continually presented with the evidence that it could, since it is happening to my friends' children. Why assume my son is exempt—is it not just as rational to assume he may not be?

It has been eight years since my son's diagnosis, and I am less anxious now than I was in those first terrible weeks and months after diagnosis—in fact, I take my cue from my son, who "takes things as they come" and never worries about his cerebral palsy. However, I relapse easily—like today, for example, when I received a routine appointment card from my GP for my son, with no information on it beyond "please call to make an appointment". My son hasn't seen his GP for several years, as he is healthy and has an army of physios, occupational therapists, and support staff to look after him. Further enquiry at the surgery merely yielded the information "the doctor would like a chat

about the OT's report". The OT hasn't mentioned any concerns to me, nor did she mention that she was referring my son to the GP. The OT is on holiday, the GP has no appointments for a week, so no one can explain this to me.

Anxious? Looks like I'll have to be—for a week. Angry? I will be when I find out why no one mentioned any of this to me in advance.

How could you transform me into a non-anxious parent? My requirements are simple:

- Am I "in the loop" when my son is discussed, or am I the last to know?
- Do I have all the information I need to make an informed choice?
- Do I feel that I have control over what happens to my child?
- Are my emotions and anxieties acknowledged?
- Are you speaking to me in plain English, not jargon?
- Do I know where to go for emotional support and a chance to "talk it over"?

If the answer to these questions is "yes", I will not be anxious. Simple, really, but often forgotten by busy practitioners. Us "over-anxious" parents have good reasons for feeling the way we do!

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"Overanxious" is a value judgement we often make without considering the evidence. After all one needs to know what is reasonable anxiety before deciding someone has gone beyond the normal distribution. This month's contributor tells us what it feels like to be labelled unjustifiably.

Call for papers

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