

The Cloud over My Head and Other Stories: Children's Picture Books on Children's Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

This creative work is in five children's picture book format for the target of age five to nine and the topic focuses on children's anxiety. My stories will be in low fantasy genre, where the anxiety in each story has various forms. The main theme of my stories is to show that what anxiety produces negative thoughts that are not based on reality. To show how children can have anxiety, I use Cognitive Distortions theory, and to show how children can cope with their anxieties, I use Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) theory. Each of my stories will be about how anxiety happens to the main character and how the main character solves the problem. From the research I did, I found that anxiety happens to children and it produces negative thoughts that are later proven to be untrue. With CBT, children can also learn how to cope their anxieties by self-monitoring their own emotions and turn negative thoughts into positive ones.

Keywords: Children, anxiety, cognitive distortions, cognitive behavioural therapy

INTRODUCTION

The form I choose for my creative thesis is children's picture books with the range of age five to nine years old. I particularly choose from age five years old to nine years old because five years old is the age right before the age for primary school children, which they will be facing more challenges in school and adapting to a new environment. Also, primary-age school children (six to nine years old) can monitor and report their emotions (Pereira, Barros, Mendonca, 2012). In addition, picture books are one of the sources of learning for children. Children can learn about numbers, alphabets, animals, and even moral lessons from a picture book (Strouse et al., 2018). Therefore, writing children's stories for age six to nine will be best for me to create children's stories about negative feelings, especially anxiety.

The genre I use is the subgenre of fantasy which is called low fantasy. Low fantasy is a sub-genre opposing high fantasy, which means magical or fantastical elements intrude the real world (Carmody, 2020). Fantasy elements in general matters to children because it helps children to expand their imagination and fantasy can help children to gain motivation in learning (Parker & Lepper, 1992). I use the fantasy element to explain the feeling of anxiety to children. I illustrate the feeling anxiety into a form of magical creature so the children readers will be able to understand anxiety easier and help the children to visualize things better.

Children can feel so many emotions, from happy, sad and especially anxious. In this creative work I choose anxiety as the focus of the topic. The symptoms of anxiety are feeling excessive worry, and avoiding the matter that causes anxiety (Martinelli et al., 2018). Anxiety is a normal feeling that even a children can feel and it is a process of growth (Martin et al., 2007). According to a study about 25 years of research on children's anxiety, it says that there are three variables that affect children to develop anxiety. First, there is a clear chance that anxiety is hereditary. It also says that there is a possibility of 50% that the cause of anxiety is caused by genetics (Eley & Gregory, 2004, as cited in Muris & Broeren, 2009). Second, surroundings or the environment can increase children's vulnerability to develop anxiety. For example the parents' behaviour, and bad events. Third, biased thinking especially the negative ones also stimulates children to develop anxiety (Muris & Broeren, 2009).

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Although there are many studies about children's anxiety, there is a stigma towards children with mental health issues. There is some evidence that people have negative perspective towards children with mental health issues and some reported that children with mental health issues have been excluded from their peers (Heary et al., 2017). A study also mention that parents often have negative perception about their child receiving mental health treatment. They are afraid that their children would not be considered normal anymore if they receive mental health treatment. Thus, they do not search for help to help the children to cope with anxiety (Chavira et al., 2017). From the research, I conclude that the topic of children's anxiety needs to be discussed because it happens commonly among children and there is still negative perception about mental health.

The theories used in this creative work are the theory of Cognitive Distortions and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). First, the theory of Cognitive Distortions by David Burns as a part of Cognitive Therapy Theory by Aaron Beck. Taken from the book *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders*, cognitive therapy studies how thoughts can affect emotional state. To Aaron Beck, anxiety is described with a basic idiom, "the way you think affects the way you feel." (Clark & Beck, 2010, p.31) This idiom means that our minds have the power to influence ourselves to be calm or anxious. Thus, cognitive distortion is why people can think negatively. Cognitive distortions happen when we see the neutral world and process it in our minds. That internal dialogue will affect our mood, not real events. If we have bad thoughts about the events, our emotions will be worse (Burns, 1980).

This creative work uses five types of cognitive distortions: All-Or-Nothing Thinking, Overgeneralization, Jumping to Conclusion, Magnification, Emotional Reasoning. All-Or-Nothing Thinking happens when we have tendency to evaluate ourselves in a very extreme way. This thinking makes us refuse to make any small mistakes and believe that we are failures. Overgeneralization happens when a bad incident happens in our lives, we tend to think that bad events will happen to us again and again. Jumping to conclusion is when we make unreasonable negative conclusions that are not based on the real situation. Magnification happens when we see our failures and exaggerate their significance. Emotional Reasoning is when we take out emotions as the only truth. Cognitive distortions are not based on reality and are very misleading. How the theory will be applied to the story is by showing that each of the cognitive distortions type will be the base of the anxiety of each main character of each story.

Second, this creative work use Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) as the solution of the cognitive distortions. CBT has a goal which is cited in the book, "The overall purpose of cognitive behaviour therapy is to increase self-awareness, facilitate better self-understanding, and improve self-control by developing more appropriate cognitive and behavioural skills (Stallard, 2002, p.7)." CBT helps to identify dysfunctional thoughts that are originally negative into functional cycle which is more positive, and functional cognitions. The example of CBT is changing dysfunctional cycle, which is having overly negative thoughts, unpleasant feelings, and avoidance behaviour into functional cycle, which is having more balanced thoughts, pleasant feeling, and confront behaviour. In my stories, each of the characters will learn how to acknowledge their negative thoughts and anxiety and then learn how to change their behaviour from avoiding things into confronting things that they want. Instead of staying passive doing nothing and have negative thoughts, my main characters try to do something about it.

The interest in using CBT for children has grown for the past years. This is shown by numbers of reviews saying CBT is useful and effective for the treatment of children with psychological problems (Kazdin & Weisz, 1998; Roth & Fonagy, 1996; Wallace et al., 1994, as cited in Stallard, 2002; Minde et al. , 2010). For further illustration, a study conducts CBT for 37 anxious children age 3-7 and they want to see if CBT is really effective for younger children.

After doing individual treatment and help from active parents, it is proven that children's psychological state improved significantly (Minde et al., 2010).

I will create five stories to deliver my topic regarding children's anxiety. Each of my characters will go through anxiety because of cognitive distortions. They will be facing situations where they make mistakes, receive refusals, go through new experiences, have arguments, and face changes. I will show that these are the things that trigger children's anxiety. When they face this problem, they will learn to accept their negative feelings first and then they will acknowledge and understand how to manage their negative feelings.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Theme

My stories will focus on the anxiety my characters have. In this project, I want to show that feeling anxious is normal and to show that what anxiety does is producing unrealistic negative thoughts. My five main characters will experience anxiety through various cases. The theme application can be seen from how my main characters feel anxious and have unrealistic negative thoughts. Through the process, they will acknowledge their own anxiety, learn about it, and learn how to cope with it. In the end, the negative thoughts they have are not true. When they do not believe in themselves, the anxiety stops them from doing things they want.

Plot

1. The Perfect Plan

Robin is a perfect planner so she does not make mistakes. She is going on a picnic at the Faraway Park with her dog, Booper and her friends, Fred, and Fiona. On the way to the picnic, she comes across a small, lizard looking creature. The creature can produce big bubbles and through those bubbles, Robin sees herself failing her own picnic plan. She checks everything and everything is fine. Then, Robin and her friends set up the picnic mat and lunch, but suddenly Booper gets loose from his leash and destroy everything. The weather also suddenly turns bad and they cannot do anything about it. Robin blames herself for being such a bad planner, but then she sees that everyone makes mistakes. She understands that everyone can make mistakes and it is fine to do so.

2. The Cloud over My Head

Ken is worried that he cannot make friends in his first day of school. When he is worried, a cloud appears over his head. At first, it is very small and cute. Then at school, he accidentally embarrasses himself in front of the class and everybody laughs. Since then, he believes that no one wants to be friends with him. The cloud over his head gets bigger and bigger. Ken gets really sad and worried. At home, Ken tells her Mother about what happens to him. His mother tells him to give it some time. Then, during the welcoming party, there is running game going on. Ken is good at running so he joins the race. He wins the game and then his classmates starts to want to be friends with him

3. Tangle of Worries

Sean breaks Charlotte's favorite bunny doll. Charlotte feels upset and Sean feels guilty. Sean begins worrying and a single black thread comes out from his chest. At first, he is very confused about what it is and he does not know what to do. He tries to cut it, but it does not work so he ignores it. And then when he meets Charlotte once again, he tries to greet her, but Charlotte does not want to talk to him. Because of this, Sean's thread is getting longer and longer. Sean sends her an apology letter before he gets buried inside the tangle of thread. Charlotte receives his letter and she goes to Sean's house to check on Sean. She helps Sean to get out from the tangle of the thread. Sean apologizes and Charlotte feels sorry for ignoring him.

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She then cut Sean's thread and Sean also cut Charlotte's thread. Then they become best friends again.

4. The First Piano Concert

Anna loves to play piano, but she has a 'worry'. She is worried that her piano performance is going to fail and everybody will hate her. At first, the worry is very small and harmless. Anna makes a lot of mistakes during practice and the concert is only a few days away. The 'worry' grows bigger and bigger and it stops her from playing piano. She thinks that she cannot do this anymore. Anna also has a piano partner named Allen. One day before the concert, Allen notices that Anna has a 'worry'. Then Allen approaches her, then shows that on his palms, there is a small 'worry'. It turns out that Allen is also a bit worried about the concert. Anna feels she is not alone anymore, she can now talk about her worries. The next day, the performance goes well and Anna manages to cope with her anxiety.

5. Karen and the Shadow

Karen promises her parents to sleep by herself, but on her first day of trying, she sees the Shadow in her room and she feels so scared. Because of the fear, she believes that she is in danger, that the Shadow might eat her. She also tries to turn on the lights, but she cannot sleep. Days go by and it gets worse. Karen tells this to her friend, Maya and Karen gets an idea to sleepover at Maya's house. Karen then goes to Maya's house. At night, they can see beautiful stars through the window in Maya's room. Then, Karen tells her parents about the stars and they buy her star stickers to help Karen sleep. After that, her room is not that dark anymore. Karen finally has the courage to talk to the Shadow. After talking to the Shadow, she realizes that the Shadow is not that scary. Karen then learns to live with the Shadow.

Main Characters

- Robin
Age : 8 years old
She has long brown hair. She wears colorful clothes. She is very diligent and a delicate child. She likes to work hard and try to organize everything. Being a hard worker is the only thing she can do so when she makes a mistake, she immediately feels like a failure.
- Ken
Age : 6 years old
A first year elementary student. A rather shy and plain looking boy. He really likes superheroes and get inspired from them. Deep down inside, he wants to overcome his troubles just like the superheroes he likes.
- Sean
Age : 9 years old
Sean has short black hair. He has big energy to do things all day and sometimes he is a little bit selfish. Sean does not like losing, but once he thinks that Charlotte might hate him, he does his best to be friends with Charlotte again.
- Anna
Age : 9 years old
Anna has brown hair and her hairstyle is bun. Anna is a shy kid. Anna has been learning piano since 5 years old. She loves to play piano and she wants to make her mother proud, but she is afraid she will fail. She has many worries.
- Karen :
Age : 8-year-old child.
All the time she has been sleeping together with her parents. Since she is old enough to sleep by herself, her parents want her to sleep by herself. Karen is determined to sleep by herself so she can be independent. But because this is her first time, she is scared of it.

Anxiety Form

- 1st story: A small-white-lizard-looking creature.
This creature looks very cute and harmless. It can produce big bubbles and in the bubbles, the main character, Robin can see herself doing mistakes.
- 2nd story: Cloud
At first, the cloud is very small and white, but as my main character, Ken gets very anxious, the cloud will get bigger and bigger. It will get darker and also grumpier. Eventually, when Ken's emotion bursts out into sadness, the grumpy cloud will produce rain.
- 3rd story: Thread
When the characters in this story, Sean and Charlotte, get anxious or worried, a single black thread will come out from their chest. As the thoughts get busy and full of worry, the thread will get longer and longer. At first, Sean needs to hide the thread inside his small pocket, but eventually, it will grow longer until Sean gets buried inside the tangle of thread.
- 4th story: Blob looking creature
The characters named Anna and Allen have a 'worry' in form of a blob. At first, it is very small like in the size of the palm, but then when Anna gets very afraid that she is going to fail her piano performance, the blob gets bigger and bigger. When it gets bigger and overwhelming, the blob can do action. In Anna's case, the blob stops her from playing piano.
- 5th story: The Shadow
The Shadow shows up when the main character, Karen is afraid to sleep on her own in her room. This creature has a big, overwhelming figure with big eyes staring at Karen every night. It can talk and actually the Shadow is there with no harmful intention. The Shadow just want to say that the dark can be dangerous because we cannot see anything in the dark. In the end, the Shadow will be just there to say its concern to Karen.

Conflict

In this creative work, there will be internal conflict and minor external conflict. Internal conflict happens when the characters having struggle within themselves. The internal conflict focuses on psychological struggles and caused by their own emotions, and conflicted desires (MasterClass, 2020). Internal conflict is an important element to make the character comes into life and more sympathetic (McNulty, 2019). The internal conflicts will happen to each of the stories as my main characters dealing with their own anxiety.

Meanwhile external conflict is a type of conflict that make the character have odds with things outside themselves. The type of external conflict that I will use is character vs. character. It happens when two characters are at odds with each other (MasterClass, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of my creative work is to show the causes of why children can have anxiety especially and how the children can cope their anxiety. Each of my character has anxiety. All the story shows that anxiety can lie and makes humans and even children to think unrealistic negative thoughts. This creative work shows that the negative thought the main characters have, end up not true and anxiety can stop them from doing the thing they want. This creative work also shows that the characters feel better after they acknowledge and learn about their own anxiety.

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In the first story, Robin feels like a failure after making a single mistake, but then she understands that everybody makes mistakes. In the second story, Ken believes that no one wants to be friends with him, but then after showing his talent, he finds out that his classmates want to be friends with him. In the third story, Sean is worried that Charlotte does not want to be friends with him anymore, but he then finds out that Charlotte still wants to be friends with him. In my fourth story, Anna is afraid that she will fail the piano concert, but in the end, she gives the best piano performance ever. In the fifth story, Karen is afraid of the Shadow. She thinks that the Shadow might eat her, but turns out the Shadow is not scary and harmful at all. In these stories I show that the main characters acknowledging their own anxiety. After that, they learn that their negative thoughts are not true so they can cope with it. Until then they have better thoughts and feel better.

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