

## **Glow Sticks and Other Stories: Children's Picture Book Revealing Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) and Ways to Cope With It**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This journal reveals Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) symptoms that may appear during childhood as well as ways children could cope with it in children picture books using realistic fiction as genre and first person point of view. All characters in five stories experience SAD's symptoms such as irrational worries that something bad will happen to them or to their attachment figures, excessive distress, difficulty sleeping alone, school refusal and even physical complaints such as nausea, headaches and stomachaches caused by unfortunate life events such as loss of loved ones, parental separation or divorce and economic hardships. This journal shows possible ways children may be able to face challenges and overcome their symptoms proactively by using self-directed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) such as identifying thought patterns, breaking through negative thoughts, facing fear and putting it all together.

**Keywords:** separation anxiety disorder; childhood; coping; CBT

### **INTRODUCTION**

Mental health illnesses, just like physical illnesses, are inevitable and unpredictable. People from all over the world and ages can suffer from any mental illness, including children. According to an article posted on the Our World in Data webpage, one of the most common mental illnesses that have affected 284 million people in the world is Anxiety disorder (Dattani, 2018). It is also one of the three most common mental illnesses before depression and bipolar disorder, affecting around 6% to 20% of developed countries' children and adolescents (Walkup et al., 2008, p. 2753). Apparently, children are not always stress-free as we thought they are. Even during childhood, children can experience negative emotions such as anxiety and stress. Anxiety that most commonly appears during infancy, childhood, and adolescence is called Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) (APA, 2000).

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition, text revision (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association (APA), SAD is defined as unrealistic and enormous anxiety upon any form of separation of crucial attachment roles, mostly parents (Dabkowska et al., 2011, p. 313). Difficulty sleeping alone, experiencing nightmares about separation, irrational fears or worries about harm to attachment roles and refusal to go to school are the symptoms of SAD. On the other hand, for older children around nine to twelve years old, SAD usually results in disproportionate stress during the separation (Francis et al., 1987, p. 82-89). SAD usually appears in seven years old children (Last et al., 1992, p. 1070-1076), the newest findings find most frequent ages for the occurrence of SAD are in children aged five to eight years old (Dabkowska et al., 2011, p. 316).

Nonetheless, while the causes of SAD remain unsure, they are predominantly the same among children from all ages and should not be taken for granted. Some of the causes are personal and inherent such as genetic influence, gender, and temperament, but external factors like environmental changes, death, divorce, parents' illness, and economical factors can be a

factor risk of SAD (Dabkowska et al., 2011, p. 313-315). Although The causes of SAD may seem like regular live events, SAD should be taken care of as soon as possible or it may affect both the emotional and social development of the children as well as the family as a whole (Johnson, 2018). According to David Rosenberg, a professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience at Wayne State University, SAD might also increase the risk of developing depression, other anxiety disorders, and dependent personality disorder in adulthood (Rosenberg, 2018).

The effects of SAD are the core reasons why I want to raise awareness of SAD by revealing it and ways to cope with it. In addition, the urgency of raising the awareness of SAD and ways to cope with it altogether is also supported by the similarity of the impacts of Covid-19 in Indonesia with the causes of SAD, such as the increasing number of children who lost their parents and people who got laid off, causing economic hardship and eventually lead to the increasing number of divorces as well. The Head of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religion of South Tangerang, Abdul Rojak said that the number of divorces has increased more than 5% since the Pandemic (Sutrisna, 2020) while based on the data released by the religious court in Palembang, the number of divorces has increased 10% in 2021 (Putra, 2021). The number goes on and on, in Blitar, the number of divorces has reached 400 since June 2020 and in Surabaya, it has reached 1,394 divorce cases in June 2020, and 1,982 in July 2020 (Edu, 2021). The increase in divorce number cases is caused by economic hardship as the result of layoffs due to the pandemic (Sutrisna, 2021). According to Kementrian Ketenagakerjaan RI (KemNaker) as reported by Merdeka.com, there are approximately 72,983 people who got laid off from 4,156 companies in Indonesia (Putra, 2021). In addition, It turns out that due to the ongoing Covid-19 (from 2020-to 2021), based on UNICEF Indonesia, the number of children who lost one or both of their parents to Covid-19 in Indonesia has reached 25,430 on September 30, 2021 (UNICEF, 2021). From the data provided, we can all conclude that the pandemic might affect children and cause SAD all around Indonesia. This motivates me to write children's stories revealing SAD as well as ways to cope with it.

Since the occurrence of SAD is usually in children aged five to eight years old (Last et al., 1992), the right form to raise awareness of SAD and ways to cope with it would be the children's picture book form. The children's picture book form is chosen not only because of the target audience but also because of its features that are beneficial in reaching my target audience better. Children's picture books are books with words and pictures dedicated to kids around two through eight (Paul, 2018, p. 19), it has features such as a limited number of concepts and words and excellent illustrations that inspire children and grab their attention. In addition, the combination of words and pictures is likely to provide students with more stimulation and understanding (Morgan, 2019, p. 221). Those benefits make children's picture books an excellent form choice to expose kids to essential matters. A well-written children's picture book can also encourage children to develop multiple perspectives (Morgan, 2019, p. 221).

All stories will be written in the realistic fiction genre. Realistic fiction is a genre that allows writers to write stories that are realistic (Tyson, 1999, p. 156). Some of the characteristics of the realistic fiction genre are: the character acts and speaks just like people do in real life, the tone should be hopeful and the plot should develop naturally (Sibley, Werre, 2003). The reason I am choosing this particular genre is that I want to represent practical realistic events that happen in real life during childhood, in addition, realistic fiction helps children to understand others and develop compassion (Sibley, Werre, 2003). The goal of the story is to raise awareness of SAD and ways to cope with it. Through this particular genre, I will be able to put on the table vividly how SAD's symptoms appear in children during the childhood period.

All five stories will reveal what kind of SAD's symptoms are caused by loss of loved ones, divorce and economic hardship. I will be writing about the story of Angel and Yashica. Angel lost a brother to an accident, and Yashica lost her Grandmother to Covid-19. These two

**Hermawan:** Glow Sticks and Other Stories: Children's Picture Book Revealing Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) and Ways to Cope With It

stories will revolve around how Angela and Yashica cope with the anxiety of losing their loved ones and how they cope with their irrational worries. The third story will revolve around Melinda, who has to deal with parental separation during her childhood that causes symptoms of SAD. The rest of the stories will be presented from Ratna and Ezra's point of view, who are facing economic hardship due to their parents being laid off which causes SAD.

As with every problem, SAD also has a solution. All five main characters will face their fear and irrational thoughts using self-directed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Although CBT is originally done by a psychologist, a recent article written by a licensed psychologist, Seth J. Gillhan, PhD, 'Discovering New Option: Self-Directed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy' says that many studies have found that self-directing CBT can be very effective and has helped to reduce anxiety with gradual progress over time (Gillihan, 2016). In addition, self-directed CBT techniques encourage people to seize things in their daily lives and practice self-directed techniques in the simplest form that may occur during everyday routines or life (Gillihan, 2020). Self-directed CBT works for all ages and is best suited for those with mild symptoms with the indication they are still functioning well and able to get up from bed (Gillihan, 2016). Self-directed CBT techniques include setting your goals and getting started, getting back to life, identifying thoughts patterns, breaking negative thoughts patterns, time and task management, facing your fears and putting it all together. Since self-directed CBT techniques are flexible and adjustable to the goals (Gillihan, 2020, p. 18), it is not necessary for all steps to be used for these picture books. The choices of the steps would be based on the goal and struggle that each main character has.

The application of self-directed CBT in all five stories is a way for my character to cope with SAD according to goals they would like to achieve. In the first story, *The Infinite Eight*, Angel is dealing with the loss of a loved one (losing her brother to a disease). She wants to be able to overcome fear of losing her parents to death and fear of being home without her parents. Therefore, self-directed CBT techniques that may help are identifying thought patterns by recognizing what she feels every time her parents leave her and breaking through negative thoughts by looking at the number eight and realizing what she has been thinking is not true. In the second story, *They Are Stars*, the main character, Yashica, is dealing with the loss of a loved one as well (losing her Granny to Covid) and she wants to overcome her fear of sleeping and being home alone without her parents. Therefore, the self-directed CBT technique that will help her to achieve her goal is facing fear by going to bed and sleeping alone. Furthermore, in the third story, *Glow Stick*, the main character Melinda deals with parental separation. In the story, Melinda wants to be able to overcome the fear of abandonment that makes her not want to go to school. Self-directed CBT that can help Melinda achieve her goal is breaking through negative thoughts by seeing glow sticks and having enlightenment and putting it all together by accepting the fact that her dad is no longer living in the same house but they are still family. In the fourth story, *Permanent Things*, Ratna is dealing with economic hardship and wants to be able to overcome excessive distress when separated from her parents because of her reluctance to be without her parents. Hence, the self-directed CBT technique that supports Ratna's goal is putting it all together (facing things the way they are and accepting them). Lastly, in the story titled *I Am Brave*, Ezra who is also dealing with economic hardship wants to be able to overcome the fear of sleeping alone, and fear that something bad will happen to him. Thus, Ezra uses self-directed CBT technique to face his fear of sleeping alone.

## CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

### Theme

The theme of the story is that children can overcome separation anxiety during childhood. This creative work presents events that can cause SAD in children as well as how children see and cope with them. All five stories show how children, with a little guidance from their surroundings, are able to overcome Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD). This is shown through my five main characters who deals with SAD but manage to pass them.

### Plot

Here are provided the plots of all five stories:

#### **The Infinite Eight**

Ever since her brother Frederick died due to a disease, Angel never wanted to be left alone by her parents. She always thinks that her parents are going to leave her just like Frederick leaves her. Angel cries and begs for her parents to stay every time her parents want to leave. Usually, one of Angel 's parents would stay at home and accompany her doing online classes. One day, on Saturday, both of her parents go for work and leave her alone with her nanny at home. Angel starts to feel worried that something might happen to her parents just like what happened to Frederick. She tries to distract her mind by building legos, arranging puzzles or playing slime but the worry gets worse every hour. Until Angel draws an eight and realizes that her parents are like the number eight! No matter how much they go round and round, her parents are always coming back.

#### **They Are Stars**

Yashica loses her Granny to Covid, Granny is her favorite family member. Yashica has several nightmares about separation from her parents which makes it so hard to let her parents go. One night when her parents are leaving for Kediri for work, she tries to hide her dad's car's key to stop them from going but she does not make it. Her parents leave anyway. She experiences fear of sleeping alone and being home without her parents. Until she sees stars and realizes that her parents are like stars, because they promise to come back. Yashica then faces her fear so she can wake up in the morning and meet her parents.

#### **Glow Stick**

Melinda's dad leaves the house because her parents decide on a divorce. Melinda's dad still takes Melinda to school, but now Melinda does not want to go to school because she's scared that her father will abandon her and she always has stomach aches everytime she sees school. One day, Melinda's father tells her to go to school in a hurry, Melinda gets mad, cry during her way to the class. In the class, during craft time, she figured that glow sticks shine brighter and more flexible when they are cracked into two. She then realizes that although her family seems like cracked up, they are still one.

#### **Permanent Things**

Ratna has been told that her parents are going to sell the house. Ratna feels like she is going to lose everything and she does not want to go anywhere without her parents. One day, Ratna has to be at her aunt's house while her parents are trying to meet people who want to buy their house. Ratna experiences excessive stress when she is at her aunt's house. She cries and feels nauseous during her time at her aunt's house. She tries to make her mom come back for her but it does not work. When Ratna pours out her emotion by scribbling on the table in the living room using a permanent maker, she finds out that some things stay forever no matter how many things we might lose.

### **I Am Brave!**

Ezra is the firstborn of a young couple, his parents are young, around 27. He lives in a middle-class neighborhood and goes to a fancy school. However, ever since the pandemic hits, Ezra's father lost his job and had to sell their house to start a new business. They move to a smaller house and it makes Ezra scared to sleep alone because he has nightmares about a monster eats his mom and dad, and he is scared that someone might kidnap him. One day, his mother does not want to accompany him and ignores all the effort he makes to make his mom come to her room. Ezra decides to open his Discord and sees that his friend, Adit, is online. Ezra finds out that Adit sleeps alone. He feels encouraged to sleep alone as well. Struggling, he faces his fear of sleeping alone and he made it.

### **Characters**

#### **The Infinite Eight**

Angel Tanjaya is 7 years old, a Chinese-Indonesian girl who has fair skin and short dark hair. She has slanted eyes, is thin and is shorter compared to girls her age. She is the last born. She likes to keep her hair short because she is a big fan of Dora the Explorer. She loves to sleep with a fluffy warm blanket even when it is not cold. She is kinesthetic who needs to move her body or do things like arranging puzzles, leggos or even play slime when she is anxious. Angel also likes to play Animal Kaiser with her brother. Her favorite color is pink and purple because Dora the Explorer also loves them. She has this purple backpack that she always brings everywhere. Angel is rather reserved and curious.

#### **They Are Stars**

Yashica is 7 years old, a Javanese little girl who has tan skin and big eyes. She is rather chubby and loves wearing dresses. She is quite shy and spoiled since she is an only child. She loves her grandmother so much. Yashica's grandmother spoiled her as well. Yashica is her grandmother's first granddaughter. She loves navy color and loves to have her hair braided by her mother. Yashica is quiet and shy. She is a visual learner who loves to read and learn things mostly with great visuals. She is loving and caring. Every time she goes to bed, she always goes to her parent's room, asking for her Granny. Her mother then FaceTime her Granny. Yashica never forgets her Granny's and her parent's birthdays. Whenever her parents come home after work, she always welcomes them with cookies and a note. Even with the help of her helper, she is still a very loving and sweet person. She loves fried chicken and ice cream.

#### **Glow Stick**

Melinda Wan is a 8 years old Chinese-Indonesian girl. She has medium eyes, light-yellowish skin tone, and long dark hair. She is of average eight years old height and weight. She loves craft and playing instruments. Compared to kids her age, Melinda learns faster than the other kids. She is outgoing and emotional. She is a kinesthetic learner which is why she loves craft. She is pretty tall compared to kids her age. She is a Chinese-Indonesian with a light-yellowish skin tone, dark hair, and medium eyes. She hates playing with gadgets because it is too boring for her. She has always wanted a pet, but her parents never let her because they do not have room for a pet in their house.

#### **Permanent Thing**

Ratna is a 7 years old Javanese girl who has a round face and medium hair. She has light skin and medium eyes. She is pretty fat compared to kids her age. She loves to use her favorite hair clip with purple glitter on it. She likes watching cooking videos on Youtube, and she also gladly helps her mother with cooking, especially when it comes to dessert making. Ratna is a little dramatic and she loves animals, especially her pet, Moli. Ratna is a fun little girl who loves to joke around. When she helps her mother cook, she loves to make silly faces with

the ingredients like putting carrots as a mustache. However, she is not a tough little girl, she gets scared easily.

### **I Am Brave**

Ezra is a 8 years old Chinese-Indonesian boy who has pale skin and red lips. He is short since boys are always late bloomers. He loves to play basketball so much that he sometimes plays too much. He also loves to play minecraft with his friend Adit. He is a visual learner who is so imaginative and creative. Ezra is a friendly little boy though he can be shy talking to adults too. He has basketballs in his room as well. Ezra is close to her mom.

### **Conflict**

I will use internal conflict to write all five stories. The internal conflict or also called man vs self conflict is a moment where characters have conflict inside their own mind (Thompson, 2018). As in this creative work, the implementation of the man vs self conflict will be in all five stories since this journal discusses traumas. In the first two stories, Infinite Eight and They Are Stars, two of the main characters from both stories, Angel, will be dealing with fear of losing their parents. They will experience irrational thoughts that make them anxious and worry. In the third story, Glow Stick, the internal conflicts that Melinda will experience is excessive stress everytime she is separated from her dad, she thinks that her dad is going to abandon her and that she is not wanted. Moreover, in the last two stories, Permanent Things and I Am Brave, although both of the main characters encounter economic hardship, they will experience different symptoms. Ratna thinks that she is going to lose everything just because she loses her house. This fear of losing her parents will make her worry whenever she sees her parents leaving. While Ezra is going to think that he is not safe. He thinks that a monster or someone is going to hurt him and that he is going to be separated from his parents.

### **CONCLUSION**

All five stories are written to reveal Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD)'s symptoms that may appear in childhood which the causes of them are similar with the effects of Covid-19. In all five stories, all main characters show SAD's symptoms that include three criterias and happen for at least 4 weeks. In the first story, Infinite Eight, the main character Angel experiences SAD's symptoms after losing her brother to death. Excessive distress when separated from parents, irrational worry that she is going to be abandoned, and enormous fear of losing her parents to death. In the second story, Glow Stick, Meilinda who is dealing with her parents divorce, experiences fear of being abandoned, refusal to go to school and stomach ache every time her dad drops her to school. In the third story, They Are Stars, Yashica as the main character will experience nightmares about separation from her parents, refusal to sleep or being home alone after losing her Granny to Covid-19. In the last two stories, both Ratna and Ezra deal with economic hardship and experience SAD's symptoms. Ratna experiences nausea, stress when separated from her parents and away from home as well as her fear something bad will happen to her parents. She loses everything due to economic hardship and always thinks that she is going to lose her parents too. As in Ezra, he experiences fear of sleeping alone and something bad will happen to him and his parents. Ezra moves to a new house and feels insecure with the house since it is not as big as the house he used to live in. He experiences stress in adapting to the new house as well.

Secondly, I discussed self-directed CBT techniques as ways to cope with SAD's symptoms. Angel uses an identifying thought pattern, by realizing that every time she thinks about her brother Frederick, it brings anxiety and breaking through negative thoughts that her parents are gonna leave her by looking at the number eight and having enlightenment as well as taking action proving that her thoughts are biased through phone call with her mom. Meilinda,

on the other hand, manages to overcome SAD's symptoms by breaking through negative thoughts by seeing glow sticks and having enlightenment and putting it all together by accepting the facts that her family cracked and can still be beautiful. Yashica overcomes her SAD's symptoms by facing fear, by encouraging herself to sleep alone at night so that she can see her parents in the morning. Ratna manages to overcome her SAD's symptoms by putting it all together (self-directed CBT) by accepting the truth that while she may lose things due to economic hardships, she will not lose her parents. Lastly, Ezra manages to overcome his fear with self-directed CBT facing fear by encouraging himself to sleep alone since he is also motivated hearing his friend Adit sleeps alone too.

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