

Mind out of balance, body out of balance

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Many of the 40 million American adults who suffer from anxiety disorders also have problems with balance. As increasing numbers of children are diagnosed with anxiety, Tel Aviv University researchers have discovered that the link between balance and anxiety can be assessed at an early age - and that something can be done about it before it becomes a problem.

Dr. Orit Bart at Tel Aviv University's School of Health Professions, and her colleagues, have found that a simple course of physical treatment for balance problems can also resolve anxiety issues in children. Her work offers new hope for normal social and emotional development for children with both disorders.

Establishing the Connection

Anxiety has a significant impact on children's personal and academic well-being. While not all kids with anxiety have balance problems, all those with balance problems do exhibit symptoms of anxiety, pointing to a link between the two conditions.

"This is a breakthrough in the field of occupational therapy," says Dr. Bart.

Her study -- done in collaboration with TAU researchers Yair Bar-Haim, Einat Weizman, Moran Levin, Avi Sadeh, and Matti Mintz, and to be published in *Research in Developmental Disabilities* -- investigated the anxiety-balance connection in young children for the first time. Dr. Bart tracked children between the ages of five and seven who had been

diagnosed with both problems to see how treatment would affect each disorder.

After a 12-week intervention of sensory-motor intervention, the children in Dr. Bart's study improved their balance skills. The therapy also reduced the children's anxiety to normal levels, she reports. As their balance and anxiety issues improved, the children's self-esteem also increased.

Treating the Mind Through the Body

"You can't treat children with anxiety in a cognitive way because of their immaturity and lack of operational thinking. Working with the body may be the answer," Dr. Bart explains. The treatment therefore focused on letting the children use equipment to experience their environment and move in space. Dr. Bart found that by working with their bodies, children could work through their emotional problems, including anxiety.

Dr. Bart is now working on expanding the initial results through a larger study with more control groups. The goal is to explore the exact nature of the relationship between balance and anxiety in children, and to focus the results on more specific treatment types.

"Young children who have anxiety should first be assessed for balance issues to see if that is the source of the problem," says Dr. Bart. "We can now treat these children because we have a better understanding of the relation between these disorders."

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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