

Food allergy anxiety disorder (FAAD) and food allergy related anorexia disorder (FARAD)

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Opinion

Kids who live with food allergies wake up each morning and deal with unique stressors that can potentially cause life-threatening allergic reactions which require constant vigilance to food-related stimuli. Very few studies have revealed the connection between food allergies and what I coined as Food Allergy Anxiety Disorder (FAAD) and Food Allergy Related Anorexia Disorder (FARAD). I believe they have a huge impact on a child's relationship with food.

In my experience, my son's food allergy anxieties were associated with early symptoms of separation anxiety when he began elementary school. He also experienced generalized anxiety disorder and food allergy related anorexia disorder. These are known as co-occurring disorders and can exacerbate symptoms making recovery more difficult. It is imperative that the child is treated for both disorders as soon as symptoms appear. My graduate degree is a Master of Science Addiction Counseling so I noticed these symptoms early from onset and immediately initiated, "Matthew's Cognitive Behavioral Therapy" campaign.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in my opinion is the most widely-used therapy to treat anxiety disorders.

Cognitive therapy: Examines how the negative thoughts contribute to anxiety.

Behavioral therapy: Examines how you react in situations that trigger anxiety.

For instance, my son was unable to concentrate during class because he feared that if a peer had eaten a bagel with peanut butter on it for breakfast and then coughed, or sneezed during class the peanut butter proteins would land on him and he would die. Seriously. This triggered a series of irrational thinking and behaviors that increased his anxiety, prompted his lack of focus and manifested itself in his refusal to eat during school hours. In order to reduce his anxiety, I explored many theorists' views about change and the motivation it takes to elicit change.¹ I concluded that an individual's experience of the core inner self is the most important element for personal change and growth. There is a process of self-actualization that prompts goal-directed behavior for enhancing this self. In this context, motivation is redefined as purposeful, intentional, and positive; directed toward the best interests of the self, or in this case my son. At six years of age my son understood what Carl Rogers was talking about!

In addiction counseling, motivation is the probability that a person will enter, continue and adhere to a specific change strategy. Matthew and I worked together to identify his motivating factors and worked

on each goal every day. Obviously, he was not addicted to anything but many of these theories can be applied to multiple disorders.

I must confess, Matthew's allergies are quite severe and my anxiety was often off the charts. I was projecting my anxiety on to him and I needed to work on similar goals each day as well. I did not want to enable him, yet I did not want to fuel it due to my own extreme anxiety about his food allergies. In addition to working on our goals at home we talked to nurses and doctors each week, read material about food allergies and practiced being near peanut bins in the supermarket. Realizing that his core self wanted to be a "normal" child in regards to food, he realized being near peanuts would not hurt him unless he ingested them. He felt a sense of relief due to his self-motivation and at his young age felt empowered by his sense of self-actualization. He felt "normal." I can say this because I had held him back a grade when we relocated from AZ to VA and he is now far ahead of the other students in his class in: mathematics, science and reading.² He even won a first-grade STEM award last year for his science project about using magnets in levitation in airplane flight, landing and navigation. He is in Student Council and doing very well at sporting events and public places.

This does not mean that we don't experience anxiety, but it has allowed us to empower ourselves and in doing so we wanted to reduce other children's and parent's food allergy anxieties. This was our motivating factor when we conceptualized a backpack that looks like an EpiPen. The EpiPen® BackPack by AllerGear. We are in the process of expanding our program to help schools prepare for food allergy students.

If your child suffers from food allergies pay close attention to their relationship with food. Irrational fears can lead to eating disorder type of behavior. Once they reach adolescence this may have tragic consequences and manifestations in their psychological and physical health.

Homework for you and your food allergy child:

Identifying negative thoughts.

Challenging negative thoughts.

Replace negative thoughts with realistic thoughts.

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References

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2. Abraham H Maslow. Motivation Personality. *Reprinted from the English Edition by Harper & Row, Publishers, USA.* 1954. p.27.