

PARENTING: Anxious parents can calm children

By RUTH MASON

(March 5) I get incredibly anxious when my husband is late coming home from work or from anywhere for that matter - especially if he is driving. I get really swept up in this emotion and all I can do is pace the floor.

I had several years of psychotherapy, but this reaction remains.

I have two children aged six and two, and my question concerns them. How do I deal with them when I am in this state? And what should I tell them, if anything?

Alan J. Flashman, M.D., child and adult psychiatrist and pediatrician, answers:

Your question is well-taken. You are asking yourself, I think: "How do I appear to my two- and six-year-olds when I am anxious? What might this mean to each of them?"

For the two-year-old, the main point would be to explain what you are not: You are not anxious regarding him, and you are no less dependable as his mother while you are anxious. A two-year-old tends to assume that his mother's emotional state is entirely determined by his own behavior and wishes, but can understand that something else is bothering you. A statement about your feeling saying that you can still do anything for him should be sufficient.

A six-year-old is another matter. He is capable of thinking and feeling deeply about your inner state and about your relationship with his father. How you talk to him will have everything to do with how you talk to yourself about it.

Here is an imaginary conversation that may help you. "I bet you noticed something different about how I seem when Daddy is away."

"Sort of."

"It could get you thinking and having lots of questions."

"Well..."

"Well, I wanted to tell you what I think about it. Would that be OK?"

"Yes."

"First of all, I want to say that when I get this way, it is not ever because of anything you may have said or thought about me or about Daddy. It has only to do with me and a problem that I have. And it is a problem that I can live with and that I hope to be able to make better in time. It's a problem that is smaller than I am, and cannot do me any real harm. I am safe even when I feel bad, and so are you."

"OK, I got all that, like in some books or on TV. And I heard you telling my brother something like that. But how come you get that way?"

"Now you're asking what I ask myself. And I don't know for sure, but I want to tell you how I think about it."

"Remember when we went to the beach last summer?"

"And you bought me the ice-cream bar with chocolate inside?"

"That's the beach I was thinking of. Remember how you just went right into the water? You weren't scared at all and it was cold and you loved it."

"I built a castle in the sand with Daddy."

"And you remember how some kids there cried because they were scared of the water or they felt it was too cold for them?"

"Not me."

"No, not you. But some kids. Every kid is a little different that way. Remember? Well, all sorts of things can seem easy for some people and harder or scarier for others. Being away from Daddy is hard for me, and I get a funny feeling of being scared even though I know there is nothing to be scared of. And that's what I am so upset about. But it's not because Daddy went away, or that he was mad at me or at you or at anybody. It's just a way I have of getting scared, the way some kids are scared of the water. And I know that I'm OK, the same as kids that are scared of the water are OK. I just get scared. Let's call it Mommy's 'scared nerves.'"

"Mommy, I'm not scared."

"Good, I'm glad. And you don't have to take care of me when I'm scared - I'm not that scared, I can take care of myself and of you even when I have my silly 'scared nerves.'"

"Can't someone do anything to make it better?"

"I've tried different things. Now my doctor is talking to me about a medicine called Prozac that might help me feel less scared. And I may try it. It would be nice not to feel so scared. But I will always tell you when I am scared, so that you know exactly what is happening. I don't want you to get confused and think anything else is happening, or that anything is really scary or bigger than me. No giants, no dinosaurs."

"I had a dream that there was going to be a bomb on a bus we were on."

"No, I'm not scared because of bombs. No bombs. It's just me and my silly 'scared nerves' and I'm OK. Want some hot chocolate?"

"I'm not scared of hot either. Not cold and not hot."

"Great. And me, I get 'scared nerves' and I'll be fine."