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:

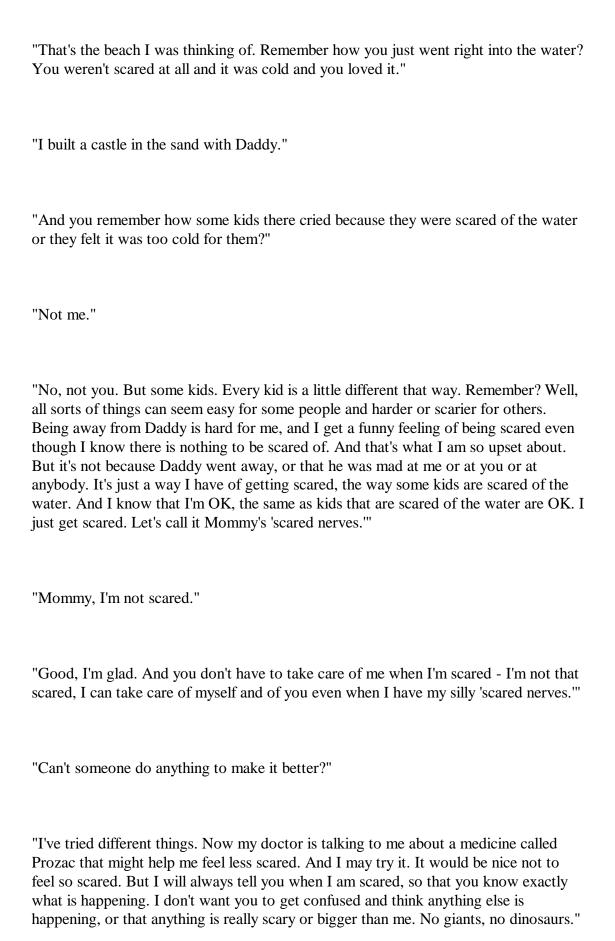
Your question is well-taken. You are asking yourself, I think: "How do I appear to my two- and six-year-olds when I am anxious? What might this mean to each of them?"

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."





"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."