**IS IT ANXIETY OR EXCITEMENT?**

When we feel excited about something, like riding a roller coaster, or buying a new bike, we get big bodily sensations. Our heart beats faster, palms get sweaty, laser like focus, feel jumpy or restless, speak faster or louder, get butterflies in our stomach, which are all similar bodily sensations with anxiety. Why do the symptoms of anxiety feel so uncomfortable, but when we get these sensations for something fun, the sensations feel thrilling?

In fact, if we didn’t get these thrills in our life, we may complain about feeling bored.

We often create excitements in our life, like watching horror movies, going mountain biking, riding roller coasters, downhill skiing, online shopping, etc. to generate nervous system stimulation and feelings of thrill and excitement.

I noticed that some of my clients with anxiety love watching horror movies before bed. It seemed to me that if you have a hard time sleeping, that maybe watching a scary movie with jump scares wasn’t the best thing for your nervous system. However, it also made me realize that the nervous system craves excitement and stimulation, which is part of living a life with fun and joy.

Roller coasters would be awfully boring if you didn’t get at least a little thrill!

The difference is that you have control over a scary movie, and the subsequent level of stimulation, whereas anxiety can feel out of control.

Our nervous system needs stimulation especially the type of stimulation that creates connection with others through fun and joy, such as a game of tag or going mountain biking together.

When thrill seeking is voluntary and for the purpose of fun our nervous system interprets the feeling as good and not scary, but when our body gets those sensations for a non-fun activity (like giving a presentation) our body may interpret the sensations as bad or “scary.”

The next time you seek thrill and excitement, pay attention to the bodily sensations (fast heart beat, sweaty palms, butterflies, etc), and then apply those to any anxious moments. Telling yourself, these are the same feelings, just a different context. Often anxious feelings come from a context with less fun, less control, and less predictability.

When you (or your child) get an anxious feeling for a safe activity such as going to school, try a redirection towards play and fun. By consciously switching the nervous system to sense the bodily sensations as fun, there are safety signals that are sent instead of danger signals. Try playing a quick game of tag, a thumb war, or a staring contest to switch the anxious, stimulated energy into fun and engaged energy.

Connection, fun, and play combined with predictability, structure, and control can help our nervous system interpret anxious signals as less overwhelming and more tolerable over time.