Circles of Comfort: A Framework for Addressing Anxiety in Students with Autism

Persike & Nichols, 2016 ©

Research has consistently found higher rates of anxiety among students with ASD when compared to typically developing students.

Prevalence Rates of Anxiety in People with Autism

- 4 times higher in children with autism than in typically developing children.
- 40–45% of people with autism also have anxiety.
- Parents of children with autism also have higher rates of anxiety than other groups of parents.
Anxiety and Autism

- 70% of children with ASD ages 10 to 14 have also been diagnosed with another disorder (2008).
- 42% have been diagnosed with two or more disorders.
- The most common types of diagnoses are those related to anxiety
  - Specific Phobia
  - Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder
  - Social Anxiety Disorder/Agoraphobia
  - Generalized Anxiety Disorder
  - Separation Anxiety Disorder
  - Panic Disorder

Anxiety and Autism

- Adolescents with high functioning autism are more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety.
  - More aware of how others perceive them
  - Children with intellectual impairments may have anxiety but be unable to share how it impacts them thus leading to difficulty in diagnosis
  - Children and teens with ASD exhibit more difficulty reporting anxiety symptoms than the general population.

What is Anxiety?

Cognitive distortions and errors in thinking that include exaggerating the threat/danger and minimizing your ability to cope. May also include an over concern about what others think about you, excessive worry as to whether you will be accepted by others, or intense fear of making a mistake in public.
Three Main Components of Anxiety/Distress

Cognitive or thinking Components: irrational or unjustified beliefs
Physical Component: trembling, muscle tension, nausea, or other bodily symptoms

Behavioral Components: avoiding certain events, fleeing or escaping upsetting situations, crying, temper tantrums, or non compliance

Anxiety Sequence

Symptoms of Anxiety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Symptoms</th>
<th>Behavioral Symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweating or flushing</td>
<td>● Repetitive behaviors that appear to serve no function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomachache</td>
<td>● School refusal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle tension</td>
<td>● Withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty concentrating,</td>
<td>● Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restlessness, and being</td>
<td>● Perfectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easily startled</td>
<td>● Seeking reassurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recurring headache</td>
<td>● Increased aggression, obsessiveness, and rigidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue and sleeping</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficulties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in weight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overlapping Symptoms

Do students with ASD really have anxiety or are we just seeing symptoms of their disability?

Does it matter?

Is The Anxiety Unhelpful?

- Frequency
- Type of objects or situation causing anxiety
- Intensity of reaction
- Degree of avoidance
- Can the anxiety be reasoned away?
- Impact on daily living
Distress Rating Scale

Google form
BUT I’M NOT A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL?

DON’T UNDERESTIMATE YOUR ROLE IN A CHILD’S SUCCESS!

OUR FOUNDATION

SENSORY FUNNEL

Circles of Comfort: A Framework for Addressing Anxiety in Students with Anxiety

Persike & Nichols, 2016 ©
Sensory

- Research suggests that when sensory defensiveness is left unaddressed, adults demonstrate a tendency toward anxiety and depression.
  - Sensory Based Anxiety Disorder
  - Link between sensory intense responsivity and symptoms of anxiety
  - Fear and conditioning
Once a child’s sensory needs are met, the symptoms of anxiety may disappear thus ending the need for further treatment around anxiety.

If a child’s sensory system is out of synch, s/he will not be at an optimal level for learning strategies to address their anxiety.

Sensory
- The Alert Program by TherapyWorks, Inc.
- The Zones of Regulation by Leah Kuypers
- Sensory diet
- Sensory breaks
- MeMoves
- Go Noodle
- Exercise

Environment & Predictability

"Just by introducing predictability and a lot of structure, and eliminating any type of surprise in this type of enriched environment, you can eliminate some of the crucial autistic symptoms." Kamila Markram, Ph.D., Laboratory of Neural Microcircuits
**Temporal**

- organize sequences of time: daily and activity schedules, work completion, calendars, timers, waiting supports

**Procedural**

- clarify relationships—between steps of an activity or objects and people: mini or activity schedules, routines

**Spacial**

- define proximity for people and objects, the organization of the environment: visual boundaries, personal space
Assertion

- help make choices, initiate, and maintain control: visual supports for choices, Augmentative and assistive communication, self-regulation supports *access is key!*

Relationships & Special Interests

“It is the partner without ASD who not only must first accept the obligation to change, but also make the greatest effort toward developing trust” (Prizant and Carley 2009)
Students with autism who had negative self-images were found to feel more positive about themselves when involved in activities related to their special interests. Engaging in pleasurable activities increase endorphins in our brain making us feel happier. Deficit areas were diminished when students participated in their special interests. Emotional memory plays a great role in emotional regulation. Positive memories create positive emotional regulation.

Why Special Interests?

- To build relationships with students
- To increase success
- To help expand their social circle
- To help them feel calm
- To promote participation and interest in the curriculum

Special Interests

- Power Cards: Using Special Interests to Motivate Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome and Autism by Elisa Gagnon
- The Power Card Strategy 2.0: Using Special Interests to Motivate Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder by Elisa Gagnon and Brenda Smith Myles
- Just Give Him the Whale!: 20 Ways to Use Fascinations, Areas of Expertise, and Strengths to Support Students with Autism by Paula Kluth and Patrick Schwarz
- Personalized learning
Opportunities to Succeed

- Create a culture of understanding and acceptance
- Develop a plan for collaboration and inclusion
- Provide instruction using multiple modalities in order to maximize access to curriculum
- Allow for multiple modalities of response
- Determine which specific components of work/school are causing anxiety and modify
- Build in small successes
- Explicitly teach behavior expectations
- 80/20 Rule by Jed Baker
Managing Anxiety Involves Learning a New Skill

Skill Building Strategies

Attribution Re-Training

Attribution is our ability to accurately assign a cause to events or motivation to another person’s thoughts, words, or deeds.

Attribution retraining is all about changing the way people assess their circumstances so that there is a sense of hope that they can take control and improve the situation.

Strategies for Attribution Re-training

The Eclipse Model: Essential Cognitive Lessons to Improve Personal Engagement for Young People with Asperger Syndrome, PDD–NOS by Sherry Moyer
Cartooning
Choice Mapping
Choice Mapping

Cognitive Distortions

- Unhelpful thoughts
- Thought poisons
- Mistaken thoughts
- Thought Virus
- Mind traps
- Negative thoughts

Thought Bubbles – Identifying Negative Thoughts
Identifying Poisons Thoughts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autonomic Thought</th>
<th>Poisonous Thought?</th>
<th>Antidote Thought?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive self-talk and scripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giving a presentation to a group of people.</td>
<td>I might make a mistake and appear as if I don’t know my material well enough. They will think I’m incompetent.</td>
<td>anxious</td>
<td>Go over and over the material trying to perfect it or Avoid the presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving a presentation to a group of people.</td>
<td>I've prepared well for the presentation so it is unlikely that I will make a mistake. If I do make a mistake than I can correct it. I’m sure the audience will not be bothered by it.</td>
<td>calm</td>
<td>Deliver the presentation as planned.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Make it Visual and Concrete

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unhelpful thought</th>
<th>Helpful thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will never get it right; I'm a failure.</td>
<td>I did ok. I passed. Next time I will study and do better.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stop Those Thoughts!

Challenge Irrational Thoughts

S—situations that bother me
T—my thoughts in this situation
O—other helpful thoughts I could have
P—praise myself

Regulated Breathing

- Lazy Eight
- Square/Box Breat
- Rising Tummy
Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Tensing and then relaxing the muscles of the body, one group at a time. As students notice the contrast between tensing and relaxing muscles, they are better able to relax.

Mindfulness

Integrates a physical, behavioral and cognitive approach
A state of awareness or presence of mind
A heightened awareness of the senses

Mindfulness is ‘paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)

Susan Kaiser Greenland – Inner Kids

MindUP by Hawn Foundation

Mindful Games by Susan Kaiser Greenland
For three minutes visualize your favorites
- Favorite song
- Favorite person
- Favorite place
- Favorite food
- Favorite animal
- Favorite soothing activity

Yoga
- Center for Healthy Minds at The University of Wisconsin Madison current research – Reducing Stress Through Yoga for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum
- Yoga: Yoga Pretzel Cards
- Angel Bear Yoga
- The Yoga Garden Game

Techniques for Students Who Need More External Supports Around Receptive and Expressive Language
- Calming Pillows
- Lavender Oil/Essential Oils
- Create Positive Associations
- Activate the vagus nerve
- Sensory Buckets
- Calm down Bottles
- Quiet Areas
- Rhythmic Drums

Neurological Pathways
Relaxation

Research
Resources
Teaching through videos!

Questions?

Connie Persike – connie@cpconsulting.us
Jess Nichols – Jessica.Nichols@dpi.wi.gov
References

- National Autism Center at May Institute – http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/resources/
- Anxiety and Depression in the Classroom: A Teacher’s Guide Fostering Self Regulation in Young Students by Nadja Reilly

References

- Teaching Children with Autism: Strategies to Enhance Communication and Socialization, by Kathleen Ann Quill

Resources

- “Thank You, Bob Barker!” Using Passions, Strengths, and Areas of Special Interest to Support Students on the Spectrum by Paula Kluth
- Overcoming Anxiety and Depression on the Autism Spectrum A Self–Help Guide by Lee A. Wilkinson, PhD
- Managing Anxiety in People with Autism A Treatment Guide For Parents, Teachers, and Mental Health Professionals by Anne M. Chalfant, Psy.D.
- Helping School Refusing Children & Their Parents A Guide for School Based Professionals by Christopher A. Kearney
- Counselling People on the Autism Spectrum: A Practical Manual by Paxton, Katherine