Anxiety, Autism, and the 5 Prime Suspects
Webinar Sponsored by the Autism Research Institute

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Psychologist and Author of:
• Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Cool
• Anxiety Management for Kids on the Spectrum: Your Guide to Preventing Meltdowns and Unlocking Potential

“The Principal Emotion Experienced by Autistic People is Fear” – Temple Grandin
“Like many others with autism, it leaves me fearful and anxious whenever I must deal with new people or strange situations. I know this anxiety is shared by countless others on the spectrum. I hide it well, but the fear and anxiety is always with me.”

Prevalence Studies


(109 Children 5-17 Years of Age, modification of the Kiddie Schedule for Affective Disorders and Schizophrenia)

Findings: Most Common DSM-IV diagnosis in the Autism sample was specific phobia 44% of Children with Autism. 2nd was OCD 37% of the sample. 3rd ADHD 31%. Minimum 1 episode of MDD 10%  


31 Studies, at least 1 interview with ASD, some used interviews (41.9%), some used questionnaires (56.1%) to assess

Findings: 39.6% at least one comorbid DSM-IV anxiety disorder

Buck, T.R. et al (2014). Psychiatric Comorbidity and Medication Use in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder. (129 Adults who were identified as ASD in Utah during a 1980’s statewide survey)

Findings: 56.6% Met criteria for current psychiatric disorder, 69% Lifetime criteria; Anxiety Disorder had highest current and lifetime prevalence 39.5 and 52.7% respectively; 58.9% taking 1 or more psychotropic medication
Skills That are Emphasized for Kids on the Spectrum

- Speech/Language
- Motor Skills
- Learning Skills
- Adaptive Living Skills
- Social Skills
The Neglected Skill

• Anxiety Management

Why Address Anxiety?

- Anxiety Creates Distress for the Child
- Anxiety Contributes to Behavioral Challenges
- Anxiety Requires Time and Effort to Manage
- Anxiety Affects other Skill Areas
- Co-morbid Anxiety Disorders are Common
How to Identify Anxiety

• Can they tell you? (fully or partially)
• Physical Signs of Anxiety
• Behavioral Signs of Anxiety
• Increase in Challenging Behavior
• Increase in Sensory Sensation Seeking

Why so much anxiety in autism?

The 5 Prime Suspects
Prime Suspect #1 Cognitive Rigidity

- Difficulty Adjusting to Change
- Difficulty Adjusting to Transition
- Inflexibility
- Fixed Routines
- Restricted Interests

Rigidity: Strategies

- Minimize Abrupt and/or Multiple Changes
- Ease into Transitions
- Prevent Routines from Forming in the First Place
- Encourage to Broaden Interests
- Provide Praise when Change and Transition areHandled Well
Prime Suspect #2 Sensory Sensitivities

- Noise
- Touch
- Sight
- Smell
- Taste
- Others (e.g. Vestibular, Pain, Temperature)
- Overall Narrow ‘Sensory Comfort Zone’

Sensory Sensitivities: Strategies

- Minimize Unpleasant Stimulation
- Use Environmental Strategies
- Come up with a coping plan
- Be aware of and aim to keep in Sensory Comfort Zone
Prime suspect #3 Social Demands

- Language demands in social situations
- Sensory factors in social situations
- Social Skills Development
- Understanding Social Rules and Nuances

Social Demands: Strategies

- Set up social situations that are likely to foster success not failure (small, structured, strength based)
- Work on social skills to build up confidence (with a focus on Generalization)
- Foster a tolerant atmosphere
Prime Suspect #4 Language Demands

• Expressive
• Receptive
• Pragmatic
• Non-Literal

Language Demands: Strategies

• Use Visual Supports
• Clear Communication (Reduced Language when necessary)
• Give Means for Expressing Frustration and Anxiety
Prime Suspect #5 Task Frustration

- Motor Skills
- Executive Function Skills
- Abstract Thinking Skills
- Key Academic Areas

Task Frustration: Strategies

- Give means to express task frustration
- Remediate, accommodate, or celebrate
- Consider the timing of tasks
- Present challenging tasks on a graduated basis
Why Teach Stress/Anxiety Management Skills?

- Cannot eliminate anxiety producing situations.
- Won’t always be a supportive person nearby.
- Help to develop confidence and problem solving skills.

Principles of Teaching

- Be Clear. Don’t be overly abstract
- Use visual supports
- Emphasize generalization
- Provide a rationale (the calmer you are, the smarter you are)
Setting The Stage: Explaining Anxiety

- Sympathetic/Parasympathetic
- Hot Mode/Cool Mode
- Stressful Sam/Peaceful Pat

Relaxation Skills

- Deep Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Imagery
- Meditation
- Yoga/Tai Chi
Foster Healthy Habits

- Eating Healthy
- Physical Activity
- Sleep

Encourage Children to Embrace Their Strengths

- Talents
- Support Network
- Belief System
Strategies for Children with Higher Support Needs

• Means to Express Anxiety
• Music
• Peaceful Place
• Comfort Object
• Active Strategies: e.g. Stress Ball
• Care for the Caregivers

Offering Support During the Current Crisis

• Answer questions openly and honestly but keep information at a level that the child can process.
• Guard against rigid, black/white thinking by encouraging the child to consider ALL of the information (positive in addition to the negative),
• Be mindful of the level of information guarding against too much or too little.
• Establish and maintain as much of a normal routine as possible.
• Use healthy, mind-clearing diversions (walks, dancing, playing music).

www.morethanbehavior.com
Getting Professional Help

Autism and CBT Treatment Studies


[45 Children, 7-11 years old, HFA, Randomly assigned 16 weeks of targeted CBT vs. Treatment as Usual
Findings: CBT group showed substantial improvement relative to TAU on anxiety outcome measures with 75% vs 14% responding to treatment


[8 studies met criteria: primary dx of ASD, compared CBT to control through random assignment, at least 1 standardized measure of anxiety]
Findings: large effect size on parent and clinician rated measures, comparable to CBT in typically developing children, small effect size on child related measures


[6 studies, 2 RCTs, 1 quasiexperimental, one case series, 2 case studies]
Findings: Could not do meta-analysis, narrative analysis suggests CBT moderately effective
Key Takeaways

• High anxiety levels are common in Autism
• This anxiety causes distress and impacts on functioning
• There are things we can do to the environment to prevent and relieve anxiety
• Kids on the spectrum can effectively learn and practice anxiety management strategies
Q and A