

Managing Anxiety in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) A Brief “Primer”

*(For a longer 1.5-hour version of this talk, please see:
<https://www.autism.org/webinars/autism-anxiety/>)*



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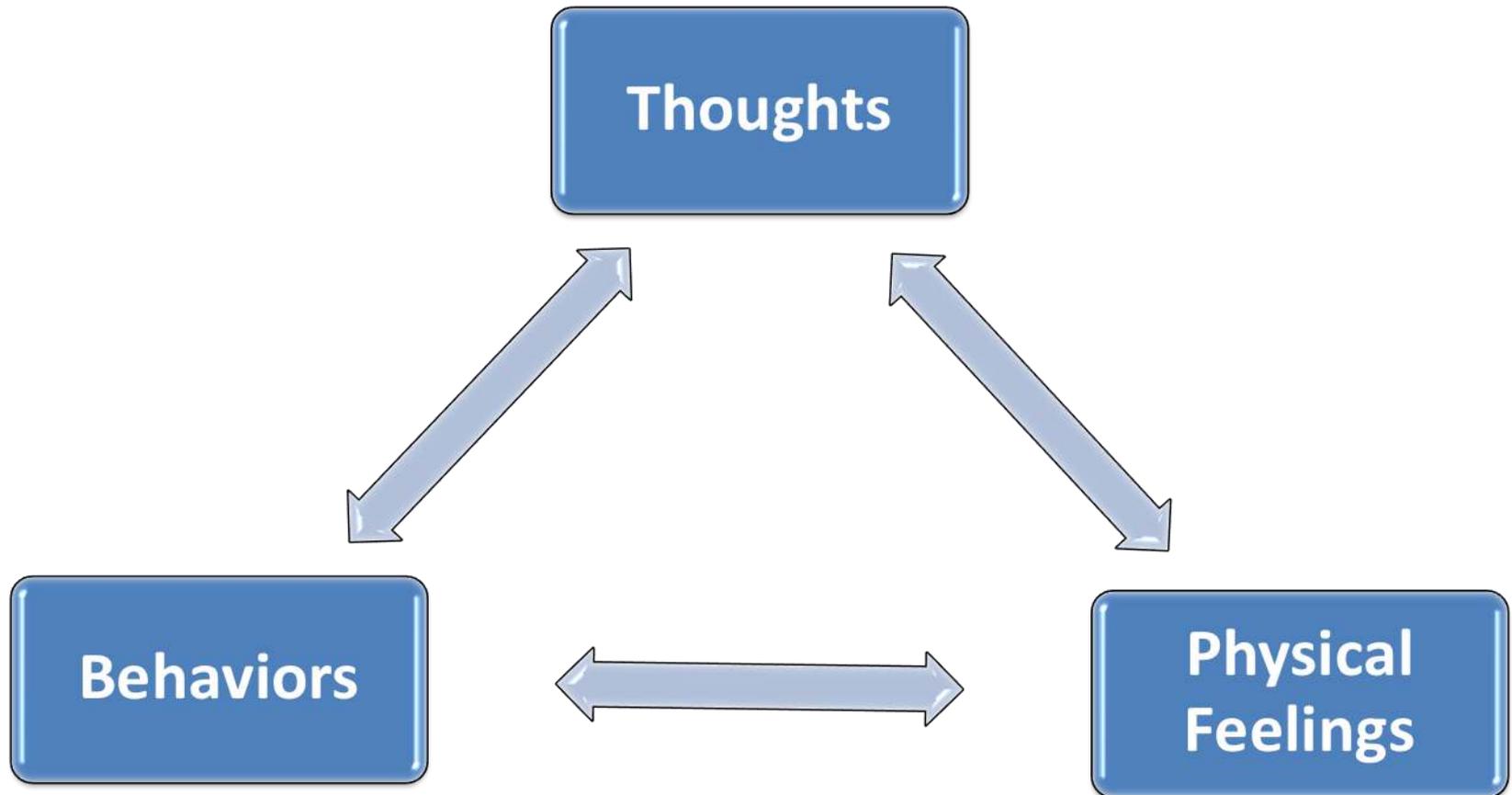
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What is Anxiety?



Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- Addressing **Thoughts**

- Psychoeducation
- Cognitive Restructuring



- Addressing **Behaviors**

- Creating a Fear-and-Avoidance Hierarchy
- **Gradual Exposure***
- Positive Reinforcement



- Addressing **Feelings**

- Relaxation

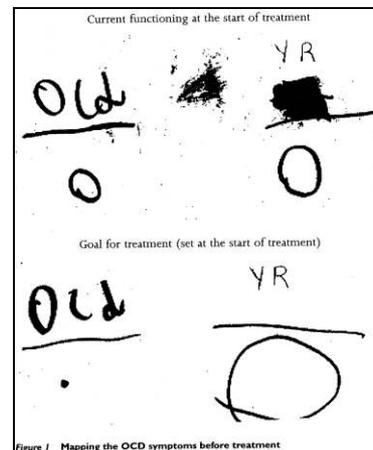


- *CBT is the most effective evidence-based treatment for anxiety disorders in neurotypical individuals & youth with high-functioning autism (HFA) (Ung, Selles, Small, & Storch, 2015; van Steensel & Bogels, 2015; Wood, Kendall, Wood, Kerns, Seltzer, Small, Lewin, & Storch 2020)*

Psychoeducation

- **Information about nature of anxiety**

- Define anxiety
- Normalize anxiety
- Anxiety has a function or purpose
- Externalize anxiety
- Explain 3-component model
- Explain rationale for treatment
 - e.g., habituation



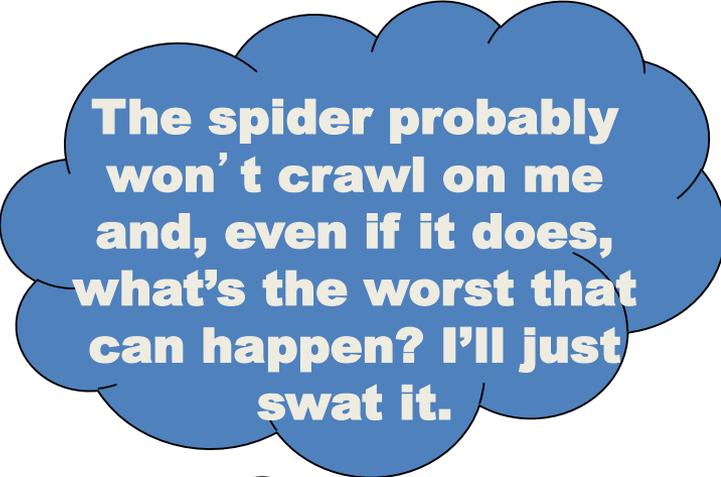
**Sometimes, though,
the fire alarm will go off
even when there is no fire
because the fire alarm is
broken or not working right or
is turned up too much.**



Cognitive Restructuring

- **Challenging anxious thoughts**

- Do I know for certain that _____?
- Do I have a crystal ball?
- What evidence do I have that _____?
- Is there another explanation for _____?
- What is the worst thing that can happen? How bad is that? **How can I cope with that?**



The spider probably won't crawl on me and, even if it does, what's the worst that can happen? I'll just swat it.

- **Coping self-talk/“Boss-back” talk**

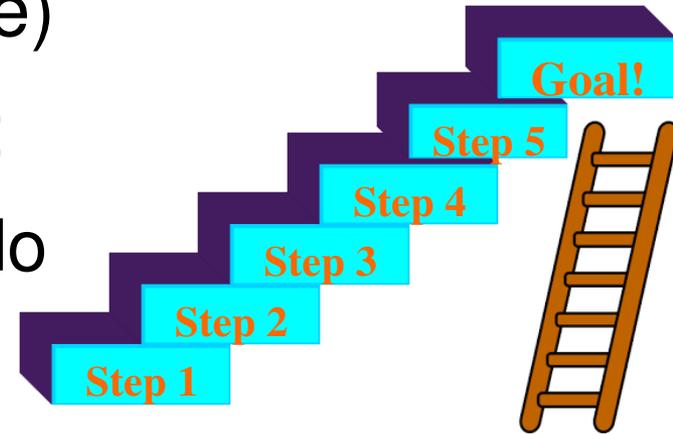
- I've done this before, so I can do it again.
- I can handle this!
- My brain is just stuck right now; I don't have to listen to it!
- My anxiety will pass; I'll get used to it.



***Give fear/anxiety a name!**

Gradual Exposure

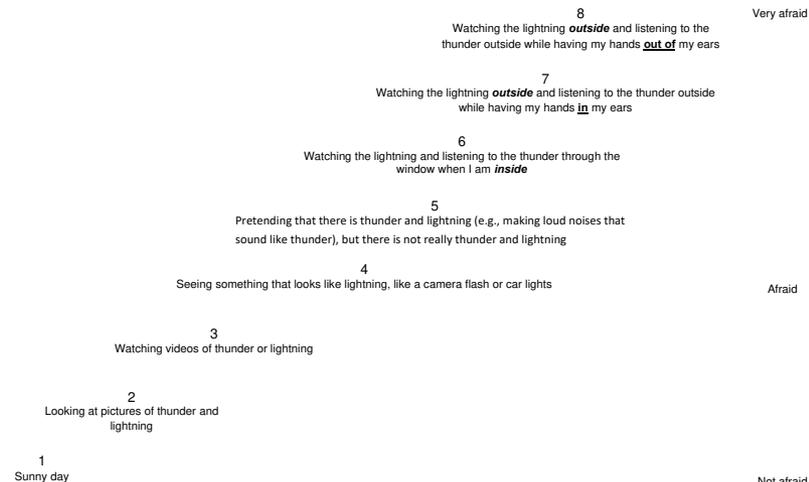
- **Face your fears** (a little at a time)
 - Learn that you will **get used to it**
 - Learn that feared consequences do not come true (*behavioral experiment*)



- **Fear Ladder** (fear-and-avoidance hierarchy)
 - Gradually confront anxiety-provoking situations from easy to hard

Gradual exposure is the **CORE component** in CBT or behavioral intervention for anxiety

Fear Staircase for Thunder and Lightning



Reinforcement

- Reinforce **BRAVE** behavior!
 - Reward your child for doing something that is hard for him/her!



- What is reinforcing for your child?
 - Social rewards (positive attention)
 - Tangible rewards (e.g., toy, treat)
 - Activity rewards/privileges
- Reinforce **partial success or attempts**

Joey's Reward Chart

Even though Mater is afraid...



He still faces his fears and saves his friends.



That's what it means to be brave... facing your fears even though you are afraid.

You will earn stickers for being brave... for talking to people even though it feels scary sometimes. Tell yourself, "I can do it! I can be brave!"

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Ask a question = 1 sticker							
+ eye contact  = 1 sticker							
+ loud voice  = 1 sticker							
Answer a question							
+ eye contact  = 1 sticker							
+ loud voice  = 1 sticker							
Tell a story							
+ eye contact  = 1 sticker							
+ loud voice  = 1 sticker							

Joey's Rewards:

- ✓ Drawing or coloring = __ stickers
- ✓ Reading picture books = __ stickers
- ✓ Choose a DVD or movie to watch = __ stickers
- ✓ Print out pictures of characters = __ stickers

- ✓ Choose a YouTube clip to watch = __ stickers
- ✓ Making a cupcake game on iPhone = __ stickers
- ✓ Scooter = __ stickers
- ✓ McDonalds happy meal = __ stickers

Relaxation



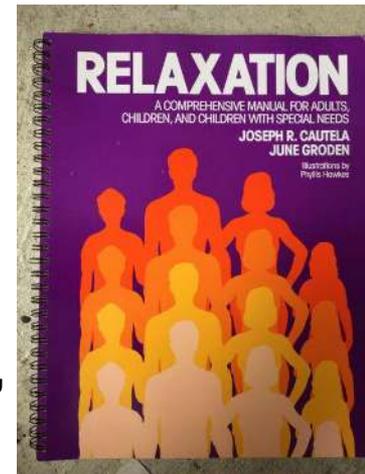
Elmo Belly Breathe video
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZbzDOpyIA>)

- **Belly Breathing**

- Example: Blowing up a Balloon
- **Take slow, deep breath in**, and the balloon fills up with air
(*count to 3 as child inhales*)
- **Let the air slowly out of the balloon...**it gets smaller
(*count to 3 as child exhales*)

- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

- **Tighten** fist to the count of 5
- **Relax** fist to the count of 5
 - focusing on the relaxed warm feeling in your hand,
 - following it into your arm,
 - and continuing to follow it as it works its way through your body
- Continue, focusing on 2-3 muscle groups



Caution: Important that relaxation doesn't become another distraction technique that child uses to avoid anxiety; anxiety is not harmful and can be **tolerated (Farrell, Ollendick, & Muris, 2019)*

Modifications to CBT for Treating Anxiety in Individuals with ASD

- Increase **structure & predictability** in delivering treatment components
 - Use **concrete** and **visual teaching strategies**
- Extra modules for ASD-specific difficulties
- Increase focus on **generalization**
 - Increase **parental involvement**
- Incorporate children's “**special interests**”



Modifications for ASD: Cognitive Restructuring

- **Concrete & visual** teaching strategies
 - Cognitive components de-emphasized or modified to meet developmental level
 - **Psychoeducation & cognitive restructuring conveyed using VISUAL aids** (e.g., Social Stories, illustrations, lists with pictures, reward charts), **modeling**, **video modeling**, & **role-playing**

BRAVE Behavior: Things I CAN do when I'm Anxious	AFRAID Behavior: Things I CANT do when I'm Anxious
	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell myself, "I can do this, my anxiety will pass." • Tell myself, "This is just my anxiety trying to trick me. I will fight it!" • Tell myself, "This is just my anxiety talking. I will not listen to it. This is just a brain trick. I will go do something else." • Do my deep breathing. • Squeeze & relax my muscles. • Play Tech Deck. • Play a board game. • Play a video game. • Watch TV or a movie. • Listen to music. • Read a book. • Go take a walk. • Run outside, or run up & down the hall, or run up & down the stairs. • Ride a bike. • Play catch. • Relax in bubble bath. • Go on the computer. • Play outside with my friends. • Tell Mom or Dad about school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask, "Am I sick?" • Ask, "Am I going to get sick?" • Ask, "Is that person healthy? Am I healthy?" • Ask, "Is the medicine going to work?" • Ask, "Is there something wrong with my brain?" • Ask, "Am I breathing fast?" • Ask, "Am I breathing heavily?" • Ask, "Do I have asthma?" • Ask, "Are you sure I don't have asthma?" • Ask, "Am I going to throw up?" • Ask, "Am I going to catch a virus?" • Ask, "Am I going to have a fever?" • Ask any other question like this.

So, to fight my anxiety, I will try not to ask Mom these questions.



And to help me fight my anxiety, mom will try NOT to answer my questions by saying, "Yes, you're healthy" or "No, you're not going to get sick."



Instead, mom will say, "That's just your anxiety talking. I can't tell you if you're going to get sick."



At first, when Mom says "I don't know" or "I can't tell you," I will feel scared. But, after a while, I will be less scared. Then, after a while longer, I won't be scared anymore.



I will see that my anxiety goes down after a while, even if mom doesn't answer me.



Modifications for ASD: Gradual Exposure

- Incorporate **perseverative** interests (special interests)  =  →
- **Pair** anxiety-provoking stimuli with **highly positive stimuli** (counterconditioning)
- Incorporate **video modeling** or **video priming**
- Incorporate **Functional Communication Training (FCT)** 
- **Increase parental involvement;** most likely need **parents** to implement **positive reinforcement** (e.g., Reward Chart)



 **Sticker Chart for Ed for Brave Behavior**

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
4:00 - 4:30							
4:30 - 5:00							
5:00 - 5:30							
5:30 - 6:00							
6:00 - 6:30							
6:30 - 7:00							
7:00 - 7:30							
7:30 - 8:00							
Total							

You get 1 sticker if you are brave and don't ask any Undertaker questions for 30 minutes.

1 sticker =
2 stickers =
4 stickers =
6 stickers =
8 stickers =
16 stickers =
24 stickers =

Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Prevention Strategies

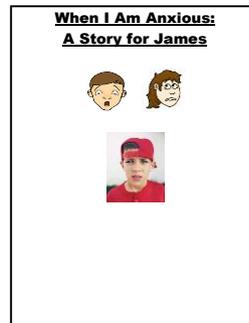
*(to Prevent or Mitigate Problem Behavior
Related to Anxiety in ASD & DD)*

- Increase **PREDICTABILITY**

- Visual Schedules



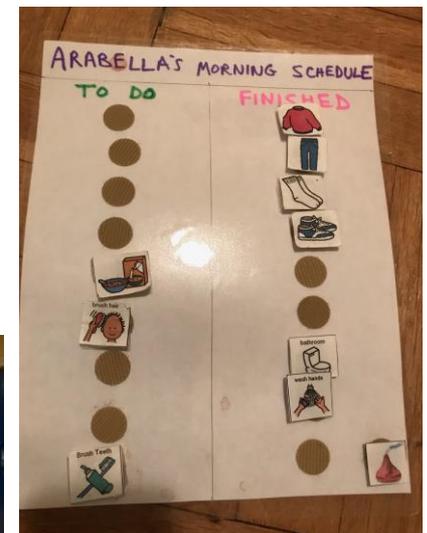
- Social Stories



- Advanced Warnings
(e.g., timers, countdowns)



- Priming (previewing future events)

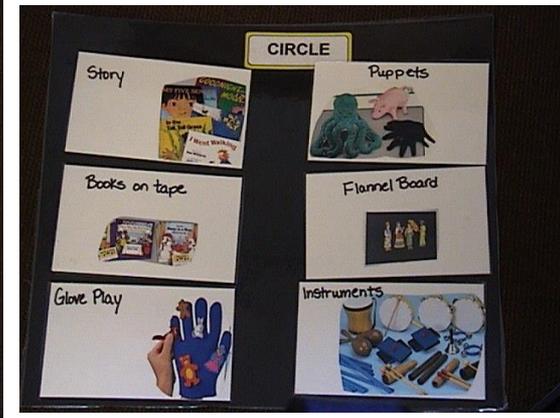
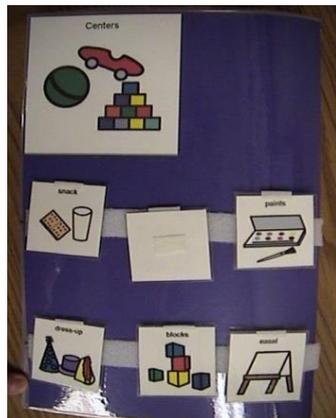
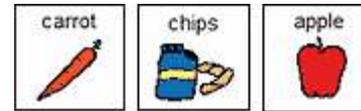


Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Prevention Strategies

*(to Prevent or Mitigate Problem Behavior
Related to Anxiety in ASD & DD)*

■ Provide CHOICES

- Enhances sense of control
- Child learns to become an active participant, rather than a passive, helpless bystander
- Increases motivation to participate & behave well



Resources: Books

Written for Parents of Children without ASD or DD (but should still be useful for youth with ASD or DD):

- ***Freeing Your Child From Anxiety***, by Tamar Chansky, Ph.D.
- ***Freeing Your Child from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder***, by Tamar Chansky, Ph.D.
- ***You and Your Anxious Child***, by Anne Marie Albano, Ph.D.
- ***Helping Your Anxious Child***, by Ronald Rapee, Ph.D., Ann Wignall, Susan Spence, Vanessa Cobham, and Heidi Lyneham

Designed for Children with ASD and their Parents:

- ***Facing Your Fears: Group Therapy for Managing Anxiety in Children With High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorders / Facilitator's Manual / Parent Workbook / Child Workbook***, by: Judy Reaven Ph.D., Audrey Blakely-Smith Ph.D., Shana Nichols Ph.D., Susan Hepburn Ph.D.

Resources: Websites

- Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders Clinic at Temple University www.childanxiety.org
- Children's and Adult Center for OCD and Anxiety: www.worrywisekids.org
- The Child Anxiety Network: www.childanxiety.net
- Association for Behavioral & Cognitive Therapies: www.abct.org
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America: www.adaa.org
- Parent Training Resources: <http://www.copingcatparents.com/>

"I Can Relax" CD
by Dr. Donna Pincus
http://www.childanxiety.net/I_Can_Relax!_CD_for_Children.htm