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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What is Anxiety?

Thoughts

Behaviors

Physical Feelings
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
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?

• 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

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

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Fear Staircase for Thunder and Lightning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sunny day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Looking at pictures of thunder and lightning</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Watching videos of thunder or lightning</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Seeing something that looks like lightning, like a camera flash or car lights</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pretending that there is thunder and lightning (e.g., making loud noises that sound like thunder), but there is not really thunder and lightning</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Watching the lightning outside and listening to the thunder outside while having my hands <strong>in</strong> my ears</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Watching the lightning outside and listening to the thunder outside while having my hands <strong>out of</strong> my ears</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Watching the lightning <strong>outside</strong> and listening to the thunder outside while having my hands out of my ears</td>
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Goal!
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
Relaxation

• 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**"

Moree & Davis, 2010; Reaven et al., 2012; Storch et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2020
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

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![Image of Social Stories and illustrations](image_url)

**Moskowitz et al. (2017)**

I am brave & can take good care of myself!
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)

Moskowitz et al. (2017)
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

Cale, Carr, Blakeley-Smith, & Owen-DeSchryver (2009); Shogren, Faggella-Luby, Bae, & Wehmeyer (2004)
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:

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