

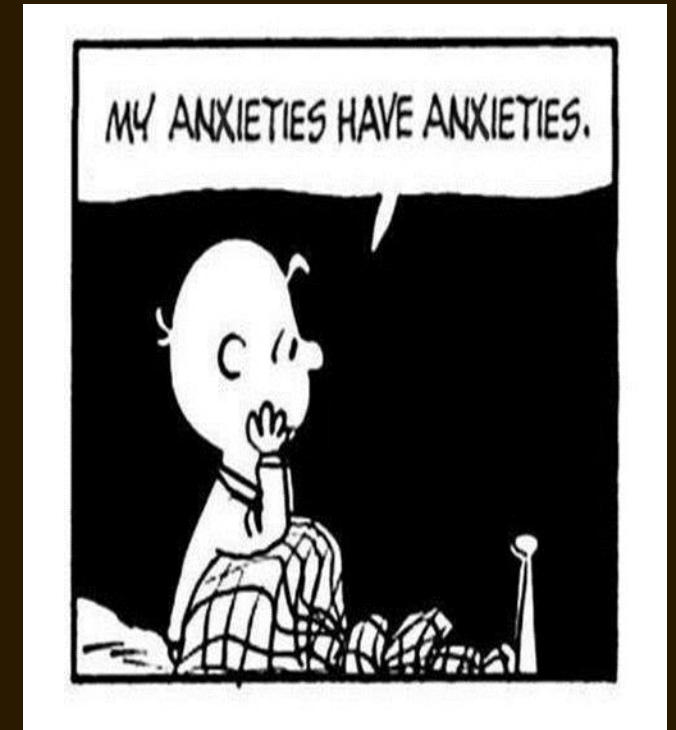
Reducing Anxiety In Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder

PARENT COUNSELING
PRESENTATION
SYOSSET CENTRAL SCHOOL
DISTRICT
PRESENTED BY:
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JANUARY 29TH, 2019

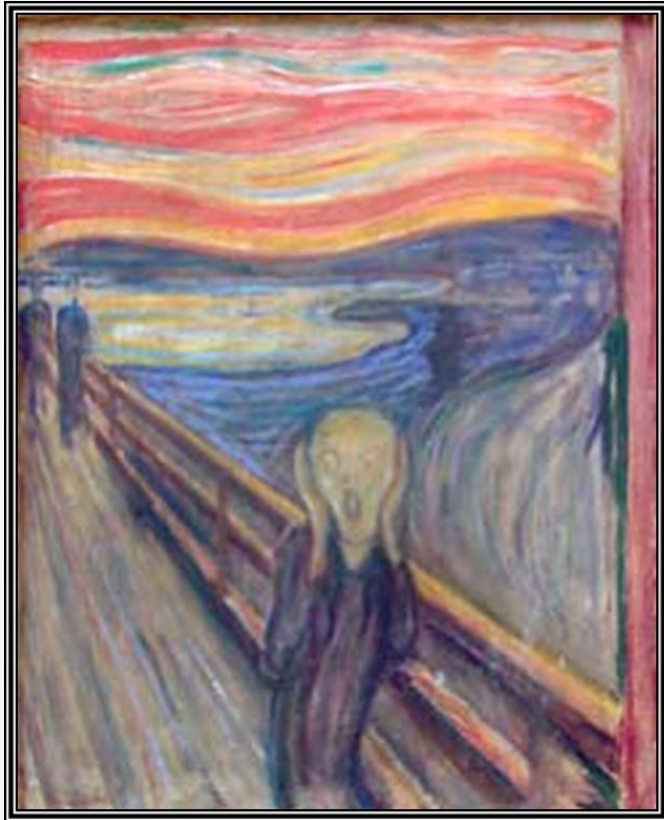


OVERVIEW

- Anxiety
- Anxiety and ASD
- Warning Signs
- Triggers
- Coping Skills and Managing Anxiety
- Questions?



ANXIETY



- Anxiety is a **natural part of life** and something that everyone experiences at some stage.
- Anxiety is a “normal adaptive response”. This is the body’s natural alarm system, which enables us to recognize and respond to threats in our environment.
- However, problems occur when we have too much anxiety, or excessive worry. Too much worry can cause maladaptive behaviors.

ANXIETY DISORDERS I

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder:**

- Excessive anxiety and worry about a variety of topics, events, or activities.
- Very challenging to control.
- Anxiety and worry are associated with physical or cognitive symptoms .

- **Separation Anxiety Disorder:**

- Developmentally inappropriate and excessive anxiety concerning separation from home or from those to whom the individual is attached.
- Distress when separated from home or attachment figures.
- Worry about losing or harm befalling on major attachment figures.
- Nightmares about separation and physical symptoms when separation

- **Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia):**

- Fear or anxiety specific to social settings, in which a person feels noticed, observed, or scrutinized.
- Typically the individual will fear that they will display their anxiety and experience social rejection.
- Social interaction will consistently provoke distress leading to avoidance or painfully and reluctantly endured.
- The fear and anxiety will be grossly disproportionate to the actual situation

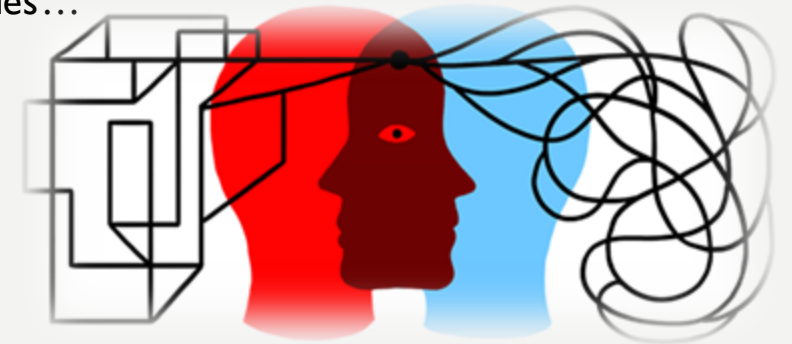
ANXIETY DISORDERS II

- **Panic Disorder:**

- Recurrent unexpected panic attacks.
- Sudden periods of intense fear that may include palpitations, pounding heart, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, choking; and feeling of impending doom.
- Intense worries about when the next attack will happen.
- Fear or avoidance of places where panic attacks have occurred in the past

- **Specific Phobia:**

- Fear or anxiety about a specific object or situation + avoidance.
- Animals, natural environment (heights), situational (claustrophobia), needles...



ANXIETY AND ASD

- **Neurology of the brain:** ASD is considered as a neuro-developmental disorder that changes the structures and functioning of specific components of the brain. For example, we know that those with an ASD are likely to have structural and functional changes to the amygdala, which processes emotions, especially anxiety. Many individuals with Autism have difficulty with self-regulation.
- **Painful environmental experiences:** One of the diagnostic criteria for ASD is hyper-sensitivity to specific sensory experiences. For example, "sharp" noises, such as someone shouting, can be perceived as excruciatingly painful. There can be a phobic reaction to a range of auditory, tactile, visual, and olfactory sensations that will be experienced throughout the day. Anxiety occurs when there is an increased risk of such aversive experiences.
- **Sensitivity to negative emotions:** Often, those with ASD feel highly anxious because of a fear of failure and ridicule, a lack of clarity on what to do in a new or unanticipated situation (often social), or a combination of the two. Individuals with ASD may also have a lower threshold for feeling uncomfortable and have less ability to cope with the anxiety. Some seem to be in an almost constant state of alertness and anxiety, leading to a risk of mental and physical exhaustion.



ANXIETY AND ASD



- The unique characteristics of ASD may mean that children are more susceptible to higher levels of anxiety than their typically developing peers.
 - These characteristics may include:
 - Social difficulties, including difficulty understanding others' perspectives, difficulty understanding social expectations
 - Difficulties expressing feelings, needs and wants, and difficulties with receptive language
 - Differences in responding to sensory information, including fear of some sounds, smells and light
 - A high need for predictability, along with difficulties coping with change or new situations, or fear of the unknown
 - As one study states, “social skill impairments, difficulty with understanding the perspectives of other people, and increased sensitivity to sensory stimuli may predispose children with ASD to experience daily social interactions as overwhelming, unpredictable, and distressing to a greater degree than it does their typically developing peers, thereby contributing to heightened feelings of anxiety”.

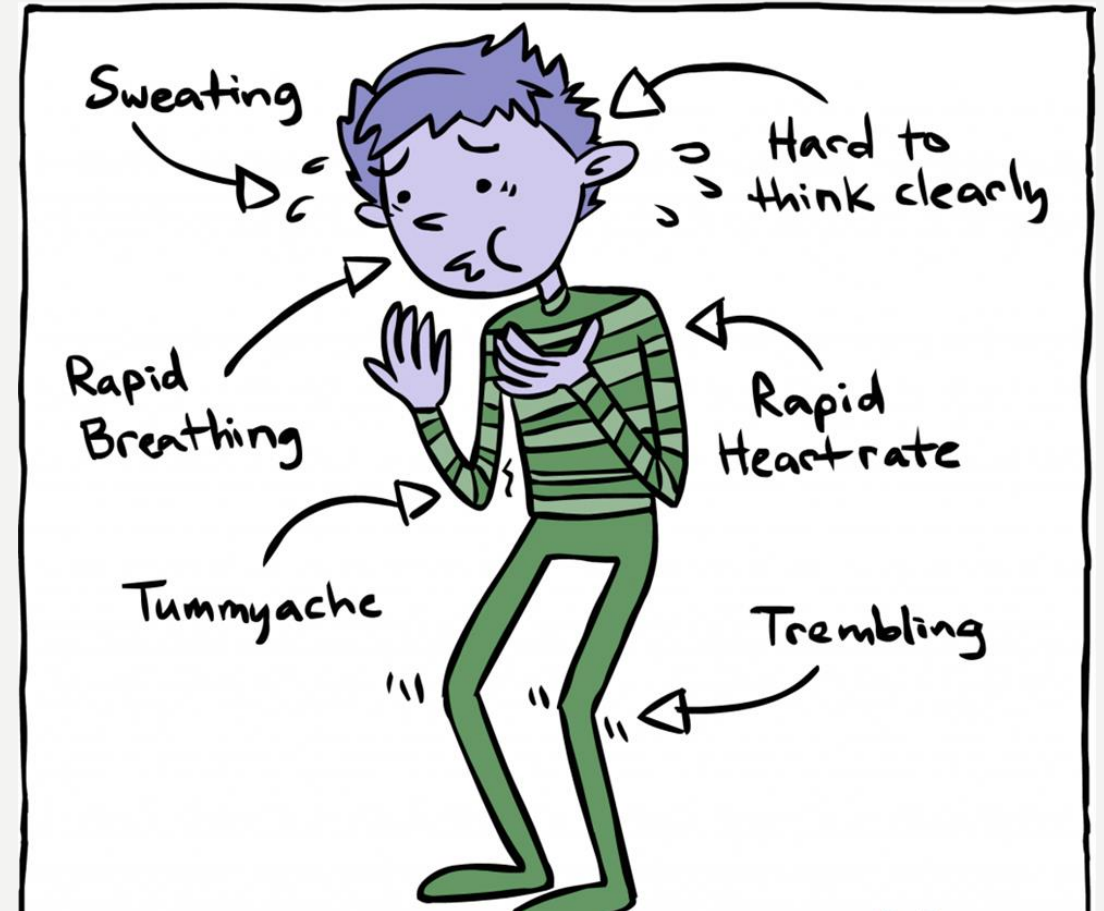
USING THE “LANGUAGE” OF EMOTIONS



- Help your child recognize anxious feelings by using the language with them if possible (visuals may help); feelings, emotions, triggers, warning signs.
- Your child might need to be taught what anxiety is and what it feels like in her body.
 - For example, when she feels anxious her palms get sweaty, her heart beats faster, and her hands flap.
 - You could also try drawing an outline of a person's body. Inside the outline, help your child draw or write what happens in each part of his body when he feels scared or worried.

WARNING SIGNS

- Children who are anxious may show a range of physical and behavioral signs, along with worrying thoughts about a range of situations. It is important to help your child recognize that this may be a sign that they are feeling anxious.
- Some of the physical signs of anxiety can include:
 - ☐ Muscle tension
 - ☐ Difficulty concentrating, restlessness, being easily startled
 - ☐ Sweating/flushing or feeling very hot or cold
 - ☐ Recurring headaches, stomach aches, backaches
 - ☐ Fatigue and sleeping difficulties
 - ☐ Nausea
 - ☐ Increased heart rate



WARNING SIGNS

- Children and teenagers with ASD, especially younger children, **might have trouble telling you that they're feeling anxious**. Instead, you might notice an increase in challenging behavior that may be a warning sign of anxiety.
 - For example, your anxious child might:
 - insist even more on routine and sameness
 - have more trouble sleeping
 - have meltdowns or temper tantrums
 - avoid or withdraw from social situations
 - rely more on obsessions and rituals, like lining up or spinning objects
 - stim by rocking, spinning or flapping hands
 - do things to hurt herself, like head-banging, scratching skin or hand-biting.

EXPRESSIONS OF ANXIETY BASED ON AGE

- **Preschoolers:** Crying, screaming, throwing objects, self-harm, tantrums, withdrawal, hitting, kicking, hyperactivity, attention seeking behaviors, repetitive behaviors, repetitive play
- **Elementary and middle-school age children:** Resistance to take on new tasks, repetitive questioning, tantrums, aggressive behaviors, arguing, withdrawal, school refusal, rearranging schedule, freezing behavior, somatic complaints, selective mutism, inhibition, hyperactivity, attention seeking behavior
- **Adolescents:** Easily overwhelmed by school demands, resistance to school work, somatic complaints, school refusal, increase in social isolation, requiring more re-assurance, emergence or increase in mood dysregulation, aggressive behavior, depressive symptomatology, avoiding
- **Adults:** Difficulties at the day program or at work, challenges with transition to college or independent living, inhibition, flight, fight, freezing

TRIGGERS

- **Find out what makes your child anxious:** Children and teenagers with ASD can have trouble with understanding and communicating emotions, you might need to read your child's signals and work out what makes her feel anxious or stressed. These are called *Triggers*.
- Once you've worked out some of the triggers that make your child feel anxious, it can help to **make a list** of them, so that you can find ways to help your child manage these situations.
- Give your child opportunities to practice dealing with these things and situations in safe environments.
- It helps if other people who look after your child – for example, child care workers, teachers and family members – also know what makes your child feel anxious and what they can do to help him with managing anxiety in these situations.
- Being aware of anxiety triggers for your child is another important step in working to improve and anticipate stress and anxiety.

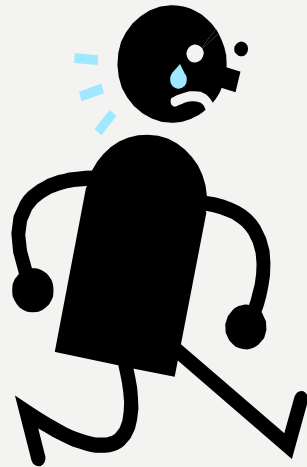
COMMON TRIGGERS FOR CHILDREN WITH AN ASD

- Wish to exert control over their surroundings.
- Sensory Sensitivity
 - Reactions to sensory experiences e.g. school bell, music in the halls, smells, food textures, clothing
- Crowds
- Social Situations
- Unexpected Change
 - Unexpected change to routine
 - Changes in environment – for example, furniture in your home gets moved, there's new play equipment at the local park, or you move house
- Communicating with others
- Academic Situations
 - Understanding what to do and how to do it
- Perceived injustice of self or others
- Meeting deadlines
- Making decisions
- Delays (e.g. transportation)
- Making eye contact
- Finances
- Public speaking
- Talking about their diagnosis

MALADAPTIVE BEHAVIORS

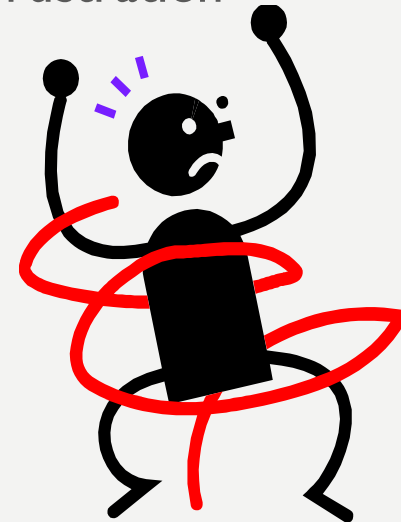
Inwards

- Self-criticism
- Self-blame



Outwards

- Criticism of others
- Expressions of anger
- Expressions of frustration
- Blaming others
- Avoidance





The diagram is an iceberg floating in a blue wavy line representing water. The top of the iceberg, which is above the water, is labeled 'Refusing to go to Art'. The bottom part of the iceberg, which is submerged, contains four text boxes: 'Uncertain about where to sit / which group to join / how to join in socially..', 'Poor motor skills: feels he cannot achieve well', 'Difficulties in organizing materials in own space', and 'More noise and movement around the room making the environment less controlled'. To the right of the iceberg, there are two labels with arrows pointing to the water level: '← Presenting Maladaptive Behavior' at the top and '← Underlying Anxiety' further down.

Refusing to go to Art

← Presenting Maladaptive Behavior

**Uncertain about
where to sit
/ which group to
join / how to join
in socially..**

**Poor motor skills:
feels he cannot
achieve well**

← Underlying Anxiety

**Difficulties in
organizing
materials in
own space**

**More noise and
movement around the
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controlled**

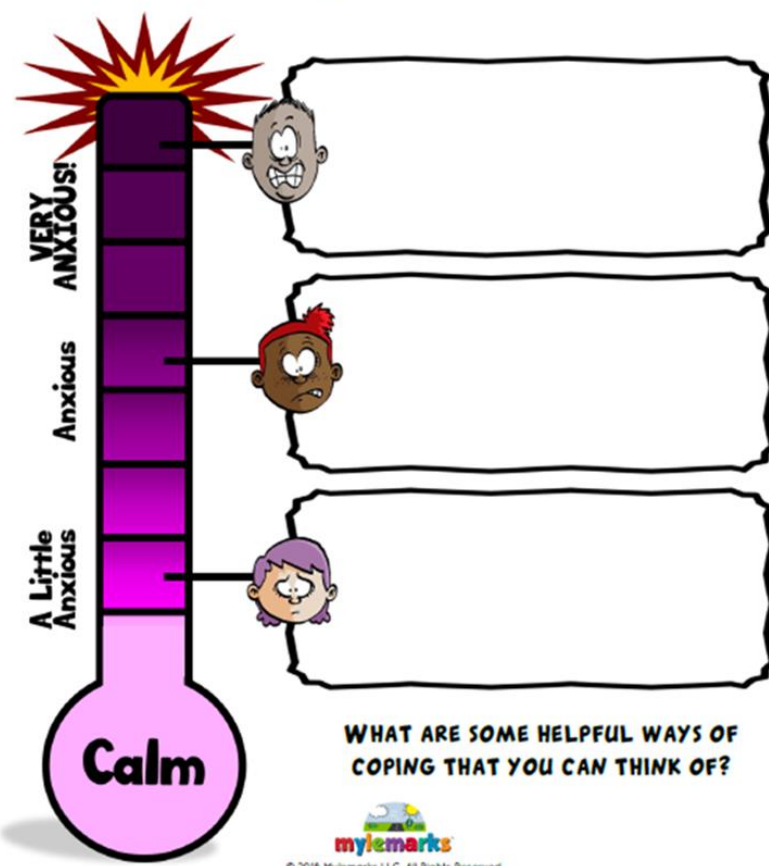
YOUR ROLE IN MANAGING ANXIETY

- Parents have an integral role in helping to manage anxiety in children with ASD. As the parent, you know more about your child than just about anyone else.
 - ☐ Encourage and reward your child for his or her effort and engagement in overcoming anxiety
 - ☐ Distinguish between realistic and unrealistic fears so that an appropriate treatment direction can be established
 - ☐ Convey confidence in the child's ability to handle his or her worry and anxiety
 - ☐ Model positive coping skills to manage anxiety
 - ☐ Discuss how to share coping skills and find out which skills work in different settings for your child

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ANXIETY FOR A CHILD WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

ANXIETY THERMOMETER

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS OR SITUATIONS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL A LITTLE ANXIOUS, ANXIOUS, AND VERY ANXIOUS?



VERY ANXIOUS!

Anxious

A Little Anxious

Calm

WHAT ARE SOME HELPFUL WAYS OF COPING THAT YOU CAN THINK OF?

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STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ANXIETY FOR A CHILD WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

- **Physical Activity**

- Physical activities and regular exercise are a ways of releasing emotional energy and clarifying thinking. People who have an ASD can sometimes be poorly coordinated and clumsy in sporting activities during the school years. However, we know that physical activity can be effective in alleviating anxiety. It may help to consult an OT or a personal trainer who can assess body type and personality to determine which physical activities would be most effective. This does not have to be team sports, and can include solitary practice sports such as cycling, swimming, horseback riding, or going to the gym.

- **Special Interests**

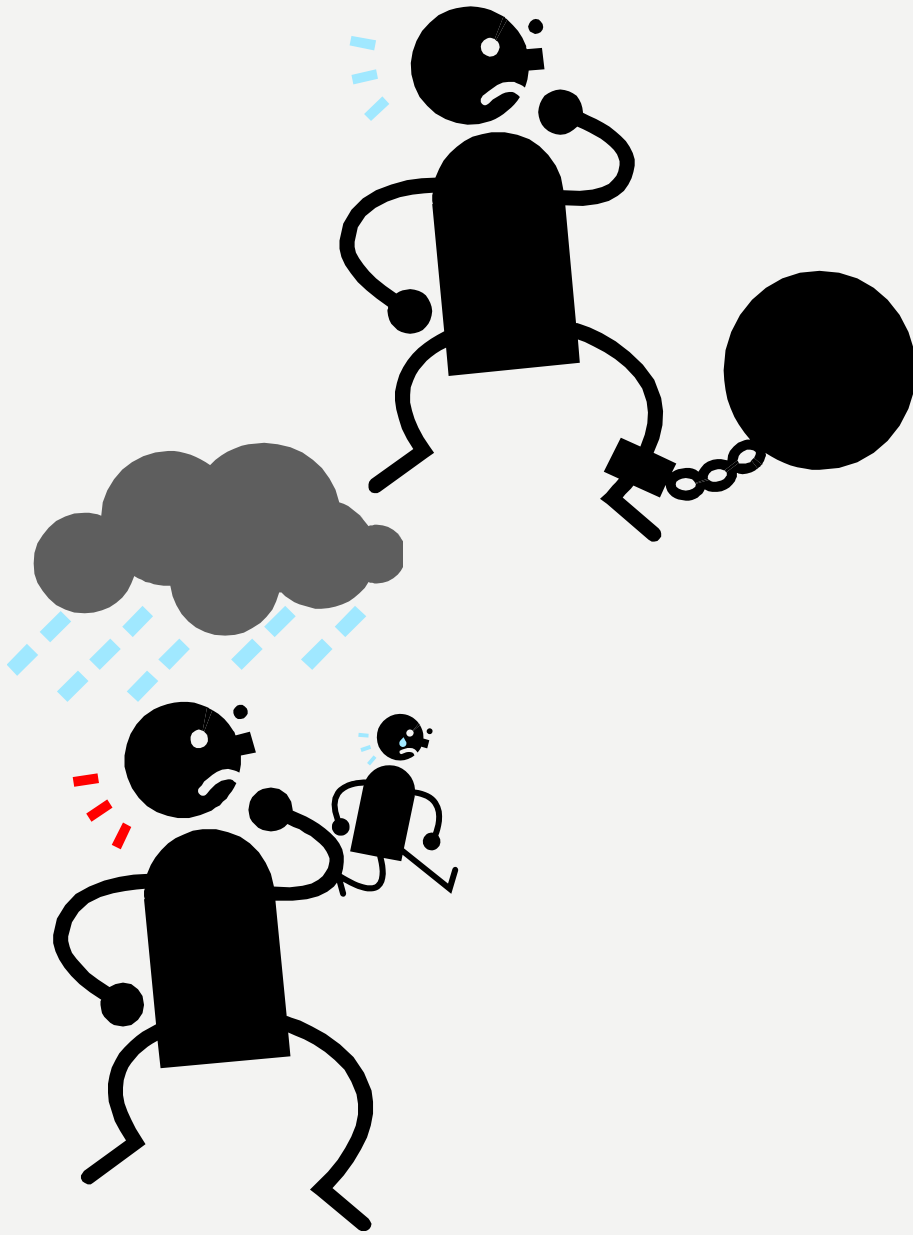
- There are many reasons why someone with an ASD has a special interest (one of the diagnostic criteria), but one of the reasons is that time engaged in the interest may act as a 'thought blocker' to anxious thoughts. Being so engrossed and hyper-focused on an activity creates a barrier to anxiety and provides time devoid of anxiety. Being engaged in the special interest can actually be a time of intense enjoyment and achievement. However, there needs to be an awareness that the engagement in and enjoyment of the interest can be almost addictive.
- Sometimes the origin of a special interest is to overcome fear by acquiring knowledge; for example, fear of the sound of thunder may lead to a special interest in weather systems.. This is a useful strategy, but needs to be one of many, so that the activity does not become irresistible and compulsive.

- **Being With Animals or a Favorite Person**

- There are social strategies that can reduce anxiety. For example, spending time with adoring pets that make a person feel safe or being with someone who seems like a 'sponge' that can soak up a person's worries can be helpful. It's a great idea to have pictures of pets or significant calming and accepting people on a mobile phone or nearby. An audio recording of a supportive friend saying positive and reassuring comments can also help during anxious moments.

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ANXIETY FOR A CHILD WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

- **Sleep**
 - Sleep has many functions, one of which is to refresh mind and body. People who have an ASD may have both a poor sleep pattern and/or inadequate sleep. The sleep cycle associated with ASD can be unusual, for example, taking some time to actually fall asleep, (especially if worried about events during the day or anticipated tomorrow), and a tendency for there to be a disturbance of the depth and quality of sleep subsequently.
- **Diet and Nutrition**
 - Junk food may be tasty and even provide some comfort in the short term, however the problems outweigh the benefits. Not only does excessive consumption of fats and refined sugars lead to weight gain, it also has a role to play in increasing anxiety. Studies have also shown that diets rich in whole foods, fruit, vegetables, nuts, complex carbohydrates, and lean protein can have a beneficial effect on both sleep and mood. Healthy food contributes to a healthy mind.
- **Incorporating deep touch pressure into your child's day**
 - Whether it be through weighted wearables, compression garments, weighted blankets, or weighted lap pads in the classroom.
- **Create a safe space to calm down or regroup**
 - Sensory deprivation or quiet areas change the amount of sensory input the child is exposed to. This can be very helpful in situations where sensory overload contributes to anxiety.
- **Create a portable sensory tool box**
 - This tool is used to reduce sensory sensitivities and improve tolerance to stressful, anxiety provoking situations. Examples on what to include are sensory activities such as calming jars, headphones, stress balls, and rubber bands.



There is the autistic tendency to
*awfulize things causing increased
anxiety;*

....They are all staring at me!

....I can't do it.

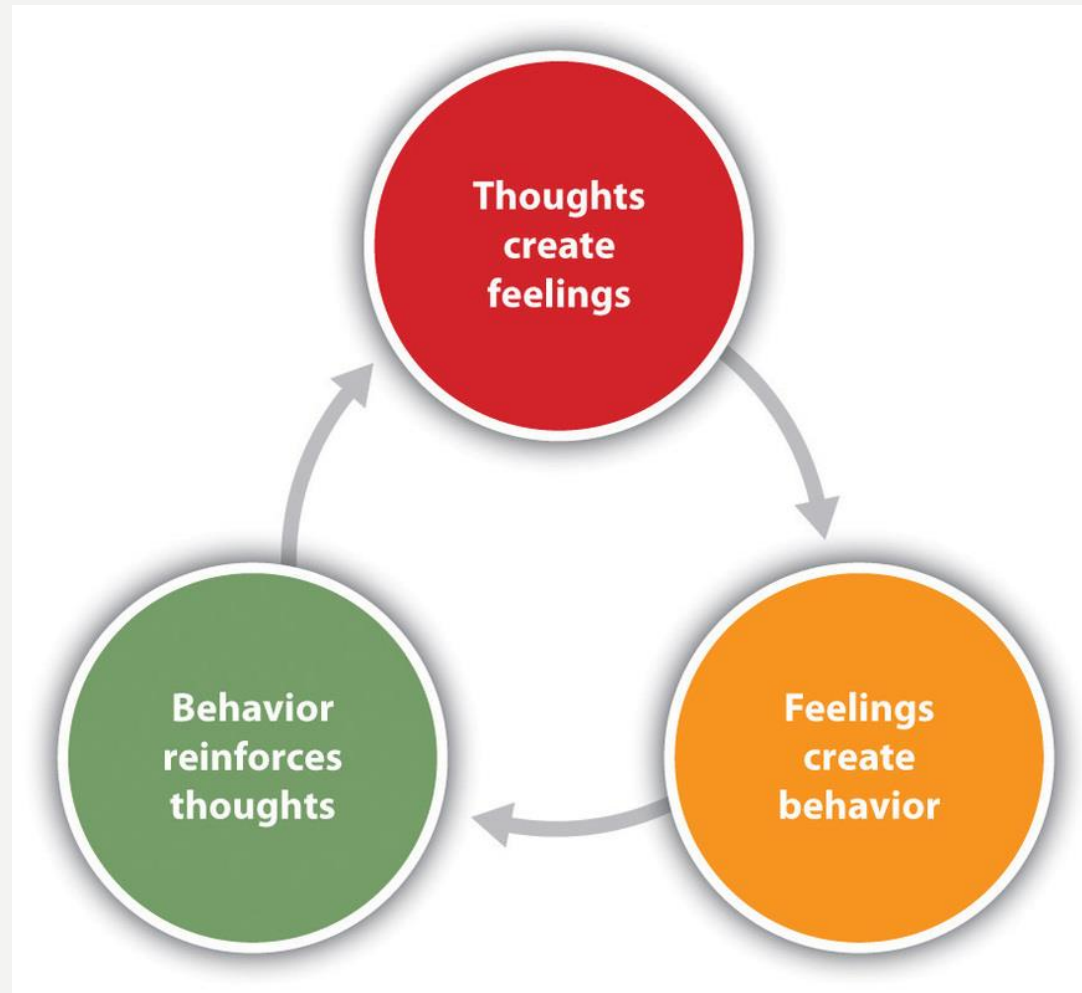
.....He'll never be my friend now!

.....That's it! I've ruined my work!

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT)

- Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy as Treatment:
 - The most effective treatment for anxiety disorders is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Cognitive-behavioral therapy uses graded exposure, or taking small steps toward facing anxiety-inducing situations, as well as teaching modes of relaxation. It also uses cognitive restructuring, or identifying and working to change irrational thought patterns, and modeling appropriate thinking. **CBT is based on the premise that working to change maladaptive thinking, such as magnifying negatives or overgeneralizing, can lead to a change in maladaptive behavior.** To think about it in another way, CBT seeks to train an individual to reconceptualize the way they process the world and then acquire skills that will allow them to apply this new way of looking at things.
 - There are certainly some possible issues using traditional CBT with children and adolescents with an ASD. CBT is very verbally-based and often quite abstract. In order to deal with these issues, it is found that incorporating more concrete visuals and child specific interests, as well as parent involvement, are all extremely important. Some suggest that CBT may not work as well for children with ASD due to their impairments in theory of mind (a capacity necessary to engage in CBT strategies), but psychologists have shown improvement in higher-functioning children with ASD after CBT.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT)



CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THINKING

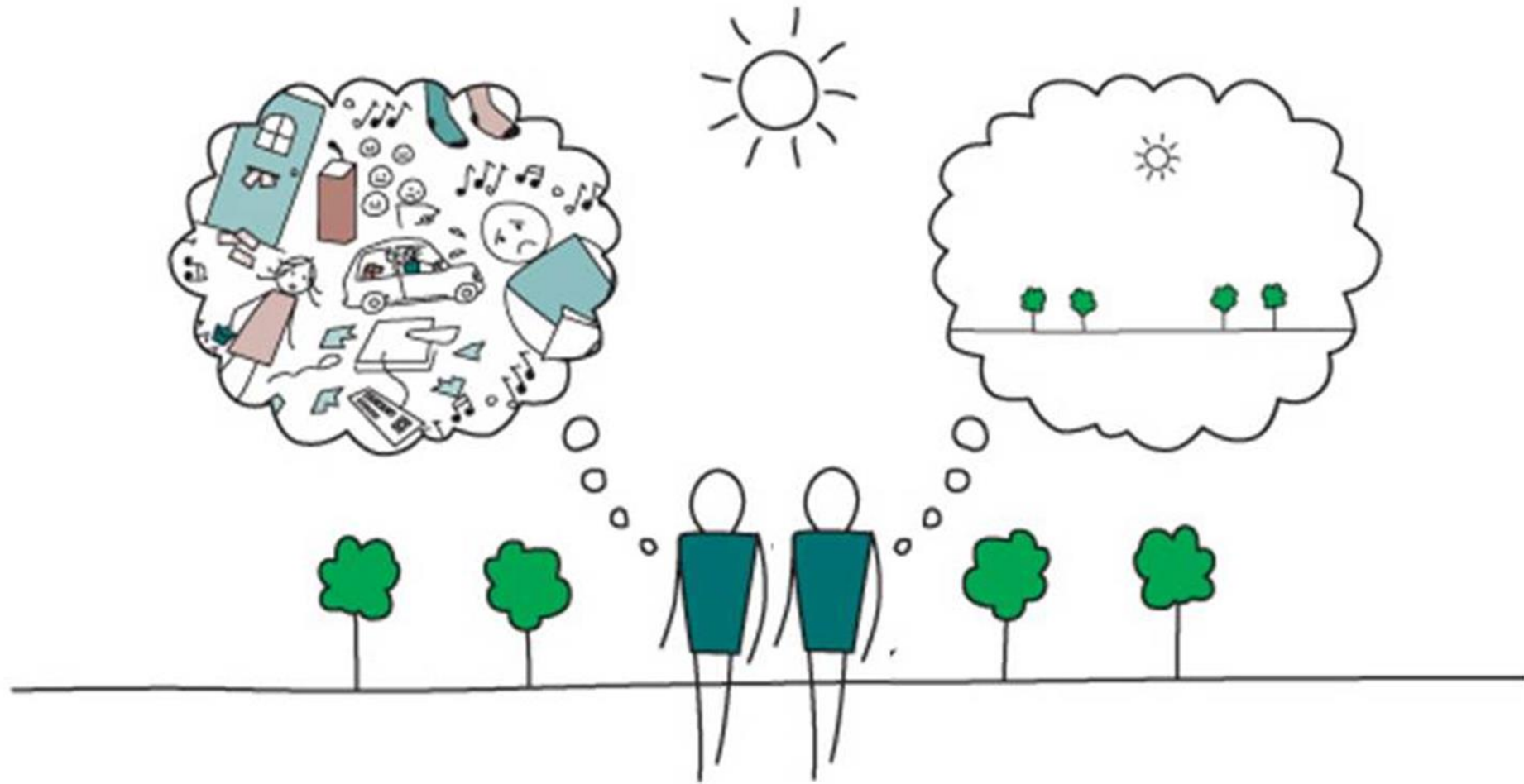
- One common tool is dealing with thoughts, thought chains, and learning how to stop or re-direct negative thoughts. It is very important to understand what produces anxiety.
- Anxiety or fear begins as a thought or perception of a situation that gets interpreted negatively, and thus produces a fear response. It will be important for you to help your child identify the thought that produced the negative feeling, and consequently produced the reaction.
- This process may take time because it is not always easy to readily identify thoughts.
 - Once a thought can be identified, it will be important to teach your child about how these thoughts can be traps that lead to more fearful thoughts. *Thinking Traps* and *Hopping Down the Worry Path* forms can be used to help teach about how thoughts can spiral out of control if we let them. Once your child has a good concept of how thoughts and feelings work, it will be important to teach your child how stop or redirect their thoughts when they start having negative thoughts about a certain situation.
 - *The STOP Plan* and *Challenging Negative Thinking* forms may be helpful in teaching your child how to formulate alternative positive thoughts when confronted with something that they perceive as negative. With each of these suggested intervention ideas always keep in my the developmental level of your child, and tailor the forms as you may see fit to meet the needs of your child. Remember you know your child best, and are in a position to provide the best help for your child.



MINDFULNESS

- Mindfulness provides children with simple, practical tools to work directly with their nervous systems, helping them regulate emotional states and focus attention to the present.
 - BlissfulKids.com
 - GoZen.com
 - Headspace app
 - Mindshift app
 - Calm app
 - Simple Habit app





Mind Full, or Mindful?

BREATHING

- Breathing techniques can be used to manage anxiety. Learning to breathe calmly will help prevent hyperventilation, or over-breathing, which can lead to more anxiety due to increased heart rate, dizziness, or headache.
- The steps to learning to breathe calmly are simple and portable, but do require some practice in order to be most effective. Breathing calmly will be most effective when your child is seated upright, as this will increase the capacity of the lungs to fill with air. Learning to breathe calmly also requires the child to take smooth, slow, and regular breaths. This technique is best taught when the child is calm, and then once the skill is learned begin to teach the child how to use this technique when in anxiety producing situations.
- The four steps to breathing calmly are as follows:
 - Take a slow deep breath in through the nose, breathing into the lower stomach (e.g. belly breath) for about four seconds, hold breath for about 1-2 seconds, exhale slowly through the mouth for about four seconds, wait a few seconds before taking another breath.
 - Repeat this process for at least 6-8 breathing cycles per minute. This process should be practiced at least twice a day for five minutes (depending on your child's developmental level).



BREATHING PRACTICE

- <https://youtu.be/UxbdX-SeOOo>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=51&v=sh79w9pn9Cg



VISUAL TECHNIQUES



- **Visual Techniques**

- Children and teenagers with ASD are often visual learners. This means that visual timetables, Social Stories™, picture schedules or photographs of themselves in certain situations can help them know what to expect.
 - For example, if your child gets anxious when you drop them off at school, you could take some photos of what you'll be doing while you're not together. You could include photos of you driving home, grocery shopping, gardening and so on, as well as a clear picture of you coming back to pick them up. You could also have photos of what your child will be doing – walking in the school gate, sitting in the classroom, playing sport, eating lunch and so on.
- If your child gets anxious when there's a change in routine, daily or weekly visual schedules can help prepare him. When you know a change is coming up (for example, no swimming lessons during school holidays) you can show this on your schedule. Leading up to the change, look at the schedule regularly with your child so that he knows the weekly routine will be different.
 - Some children find it helpful to be warned about a change or an event a day in advance. Some like to know a week in advance. But for some, too much warning can mean they worry until the event happens.

ROLE PLAYING

- **Role Play and Rehearse**

- Preparation is the key for some children with ASD and anxiety. Rehearsing or practicing situations that your child finds stressful can help her understand the situation in a visual way, with the addition of physical preparation as well.
 - For example, if going to the hairdresser makes your child feel anxious, you could try taking them for a practice run. You could ask the hairdresser if you could come at a time of day when it's quiet and calm, then go through the steps with your child; or they could watch someone else get their hair cut.
- If your child gets anxious in social situations you could also practice these together. You could practice different situations and take turns playing different roles. Try to keep the scenarios short and simple, and encourage and praise your child.





QUESTIONS?

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