

# The Emotional Toolbox

Tony Attwood, August 2012



Tony Attwood, a well-known psychologist in the field of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), conceptualized the Emotional Toolbox. It represents a collection of tools (strategies) designed to help people deal with negative emotions.

The Emotional Toolbox for individuals with an ASD is designed to increase the number of strategies available to prevent and manage negative emotions such as anxiety, anger and sadness. The Emotional Toolbox aims to do two things: reduce the intensity of the emotions being experienced and help the person understand the role thoughts play when one is faced with anxiety-producing situations. There are eight types of tools, each of which is defined below.

## **Physical Tools: physical activities that quickly release emotional energy**

- Jump on a trampoline, on the spot or on a big ball
- Go on the swing
- Take a walk, go for a run or a bike ride, dance, swim
- Play sports or do exercises
- Do house work
- Watch a comedy (to laugh)

## **Relaxation Tools: slowly release emotional energy and help to calm and lower the heart rate**

- Retreat to a quiet place
- Do progressive muscle relaxation (tension-release)
- Draw or paint
- Do crafts, read, listen to music
- Rock gently
- Access fidget items (e.g. stress ball, stones, soft objects, worry beads)
- Organize personal belongings or do relaxing chores
- Watch a television program, favourite film, look at a photo album
- Listen to a recorded message from an important person in one's life (parent,

grandparent)

- Ask for a break and incorporate breaks into the day

### **Social Tools: help manage emotions and change moods through interaction with a person or an animal**

- Go see a person you trust
- Talk to a friend, teacher, parent, grand-parent, counselor or support person
- Show altruism – help others or do something for someone
- Volunteer (help classmates, students in another classroom, in the library or office, at a local pet store)
- Spend time with a pet

### **Thinking Tools: capitalize on intellectual strengths to teach how to change thinking and manage emotions**

- Replace poisonous thoughts with antidotes (positive self-talk)
- Create a mantra (positive and calming statement)
- Imagine a calm, positive or happy scene or area
- Imagine a positive result through visualization or Cognitive Picture Rehearsal
- Use logic and facts to put the situation in perspective
- Engage in an academic task that helps one calm down and feel successful
- Keep an object that symbolizes calm
- Create a “happy book/album” of successes, fun activities, talents and strengths
- Peruse “self-help” information
- Refer to strategies on the 3-point or 5-point scales, emotional thermometer, etc.

### **Special Interest Tools: provide pleasure, relaxation and serve as an “off switch”**

- Engage in a special interest for a specific amount of time (make time more concrete with a timer, watch, etc.)
- Incorporate special interests into the schedule

- Incorporate special interests or talents into the curriculum, employment or volunteer work

### **Medication: used to treat mood disorders**

- Work collaboratively with health care professionals
- Follow the physician's instructions
- Record any side effects (positive and negative) and discuss with the physician
- Understand that medication is a tool but that it should not be the only tool in the toolbox

### **Other Tools: reduce anxiety or effects of negative emotions but do not belong in a specific category**

- Read biographies and autobiographies of people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Develop self-advocacy skills
- Educate others about strengths, needs and accommodations necessary for success
- Self-reinforce for using new tools
- Identify sensory tools that allow avoidance of certain negative sensory stimuli or minimize their effects

### **Inappropriate Tools: tools which are harmful or counter-productive; it is crucial to identify inappropriate tools so that they may be replaced with more appropriate tools**

- Substance abuse
  - Prescription or illicit drugs
  - Alcohol
- Self-harm or suicidal ideation
- Violence, aggression and revenge
- Promiscuous behaviour

It is imperative to start filling the Emotional Toolbox at a young age. Learning is a lifelong process and it is important to regularly add tools to the toolbox,

examine the tools to make sure they are still useful and remove harmful tools or any tools that negatively impact the well-being of the person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Have an open-mind and discover the limitless possibilities for tools that can be added to the Emotional Toolbox.

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