

Teens and Adults with Asperger Syndrome/High Functioning Autism: Building Positive Futures!

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AutismONTARIO
see the potential *voir le potentiel*

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My Mission!

Agenda

- Build a comprehensive support system for teens & adults
- Discuss integrated counselling, treatment & support approaches
 - Evidence-based (where possible)
 - Practice-informed
- Outcomes: 1. Speak better “autism”
2. Teach strategies



Common Myths

- Always aloof/uninterested in others
- Do not need relationships
- Lack insight & empathy
- No eye contact
- All are intellectual geniuses
- “Lazy” & “unmotivated”

- Cannot benefit from counselling
- No chance for career success



Strengths & Assets

- Bright, creative, unconventional world view
- Persistent, focused, “on their terms”
- Hardworking, honest & loyal
- Sense of humour
- Courageous!

- Competitive advantages for some jobs



Alone & Misunderstood

- Civil Rights issue
- Invisible
- Fail to finish school, develop friendships, date, drive, or retain employment.
- Relationships break down
- DAVID



Typical Presenting Problems

- Loneliness/No friends
- Wants boy-/girlfriend
- Failing school or work
- Anger/rage
- Parenting
- Couple discord
- Denies diagnosis
- Writer's block
- Staring/Scaring
- Self-abuse



Typical Presenting Problems Cont...

- Hates authority
- Gay & isolated
- High anxiety & panic
- Frustrated sexually
- Avoidant, suspicious
- On computer all day
- Successful/Isolated
- Teachers/professors
- Depressed/suicidal
- Substance abuse



Goal: Look Beyond the Diagnosis!

- DSM 5 -- Autism Spectrum Disorder
 - No longer “Asperger disorder”
- Four adult patterns
 - Severe mental health issues
 - Dependent with limited life skills
 - Working & coping
 - Well educated & successful



Goal: Be the Most Positive Person in the Room!

- Understand history
 - Bettelheim still haunts us
- Almost every significant service advance came because of hard-fought family advocacy
- People with ASD tend to interpret any negativity/raised voice as rejection



To Open Up Discussion

If uncomfortable with diagnosis:

- “Who’s your autism hero?”
- “Lets think about ways to turn autism to your advantage!?”
- “I try to speak the autism language....!”



Goal: Become Aware of Past Bullying!

- Low self-esteem, gullibility, hypersensitivity to criticism, approval seeking, social naiveté
- “Predator magnets: physical or sexual abuse, cyber-bullying, teasing.
- Can result in paranoia, self-harm & PTSD

- JONATHAN



Goal: Identify Additional Mental Health Concerns!

“Comorbidity”

- Anxiety, Panic, PTSD
- Eating disorders
- Mood disorders
- ADHD
- Suspicion & Paranoia
- Substance abuse



Quick Assessment

Positive Prognosis

- ✓ Strong family support
- ✓ Parent/couple teamwork
- ✓ Coping OK with school or work
- ✓ Non-violent history
- ✓ Makes responsible decisions re: sexuality & peer group
- ✓ Special interest leads to healthy past-times.
- ✓ Accepts/Proud of ASD
- ✓ No substance abuse
- ✓ No criminal record
- ✓ Has at least one friend
- ✓ Willing to go for professional help



Goal: Learn About “Executive Function”!

Problems with:

- Initiating
- Organizing
- Planning
- Monitoring
- Flexibility
- Making choices
- Switching attention
- Keeping appointments
- Multi-tasking
- Transitions
- Generalizing learning
- Working memory
- Self-monitoring
- Regulating emotions
- Mental flexibility
- Homework/chores
- MARY – “Asperger time!”

- “Executive secretary”
- Electronic organizers



Goal: Understand Mind & Context Blindness”!

Difficulty with...

- “Mind reading” social cues, 412 emotions
- Expressing empathy
- Speaking too loudly or softly
- Literal interpretations [“Let’s toast the bride”]
- Joking-around, sarcasm, lying or coercion
- Group participation
- Being rude, blunt, never apologizing
- Exhaustion – “I’m all peopled out!”

- GORDON



Goal: Develop Talents Around “Special Interests”!

“Fact professors” ...

- Trains
- Weather
- Collecting
- Sports
- History
- Math, Science
- Astronomy
- Cars
- Architecture
- Technology
- Science fiction
- Art/Music
- Geography
- Religion
- Beer/wine-making
- Mechanics
- Bronies
- Japanese art



Goal: Become Sensory Aware!

- Touch
- Hearing/Auditory
- Sight/Visual
- Oral
- Motion
- Smell
- Motion
- Balance
- Taste/Diet
- Balance

➤ “Synaesthesia”

➤ ‘Shut down’ if
overstimulated!



Goal: Create Autism Favourable Environments!

- Lighting
- Noise cancelling...
- Diets
- Medication
- Learning styles
- Assigned roles in groups
- Technology
- Humour
- Hand shakes? Hugs?
- “Verbal deep pressure” →

- Creativity (swings)
- Colours
- Fragrances
- Clothing
- Furniture
- Locations for solitude
- Reduce crowding
- Sensitive family, profs...

Speak quieter, more slowly, more succinctly, maintain positive frame of mind.



Goal: Provide Autism-Affirmative Psychotherapy!

- Throw out a supportive lifeline!
 - Provide a safe harbour
 - Be a good host
- Build trusted, helping relationship!
 - Casual small talk
 - Use reflective/empathic listening
 - Appropriate (“silly, intellectual”) humour
 - Be more directive, interrupt more
 - Allow time for “special interest” talk



With Angry/Anxious People...

Speak (“Verbal Deep Pressure”)...

- More quietly, but firmly
- More slowly
- More succinctly
- Maintain positive attitude

Hug with... your eyes, your voice, your listening
& a positive frame of mind!



Who Can Benefit from “Talk Therapy”?

- Minimum level of concentration
- Reasonable memory/Some insight.
- Generalizes outside office.
- Can label feelings a little/Verbalizes well.
- Shows up for sessions fairly regularly.
- Can sit for 30+ minutes.
- Absence of extreme delusional thinking
- Little perseverative questioning



“Subjective Scaling” in Therapy

- Subjective ratings 0-10
- Stimulates conversation
- Quickly covers several sensitive issues
- Data collection & analysis
- Can provide immediate feedback
- Highly flexible
- Gives person sense of power

(Munro, 2015)



“Rule-making” in Therapy...

- A rule-driven learning style
 - Don't invade personal space
 - Don't stare
 - Don't comment on people's bodies
 - Don't tell sexist, racist, homophobic jokes
 - Don't make sexual innuendos
 - Don't hug or touch people, unless it is someone close.

Luke Jackson



Boundary Self-Evaluation...

A 5 Is Against the Law

5. **Physically hurtful or threatening**
4. **Scary behaviour**
3. **Odd behaviour**
2. **Reasonable behaviour**
1. **Very informal social behaviour**

Kari Dunn Buron (2007)



Goal: Addressing Sexuality!

- Loneliness
- Asexuality, LGBTQ, straight, fluid
- Atypical sensory needs
- Birth control & Safe sex
- Sexual pleasure & expression
- Internet introduction websites



Goal: Use CBT Strategies!

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

- Anxiety & anger
- Teach “Ways your thoughts play tricks on you!”
 - black + white thinking
 - catastrophizing
 - mindreading
 - Labeling



Maintain Maximum Intelligence!

Simone

- “Meltdowns” (Rudy Simone)
 1. Temper
 2. Depression

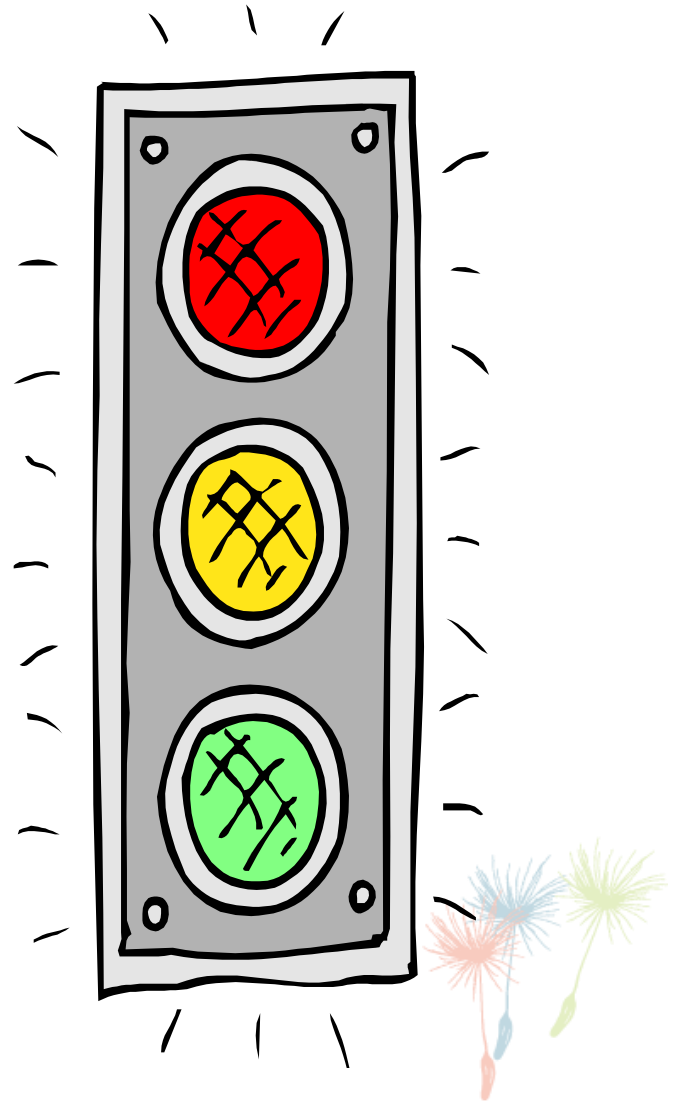
Remind individual to remain cool-headed!

- Anxious: 30 IQ drop
- Angry: 60 IQ drop (Attwood)



Use VISUALS...

Stop, Think & Go



Additional Anger Strategies...

- Get a pet
- Artful expression
- Journaling
- Write letter/Don't send it!
- Sensory diet
- Medication (smaller doses?)



Goal: Use ACT Strategies!

Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT)

- Mending “broken spirits”
 - The old guru therapist...
 - Present-focused mindful (e.g., meditation, yoga)
 - Solitude as a restorative
- Commitment to true values
- Full acceptance of feelings, life problems & diagnoses



Goal: Combine Individual & Family Therapy!

- Written permission to talk to family
- Couple work!
 - Teamwork
 - Build NT partner's support network
- Who is the real client?
 - Individual?
 - Parent(s)?
 - Step parent?
 - Sibling?
 - Grandparent(s)?



Family Strategies

- “One minute rule”
- The Name of the Game is Reframe!
 - E.g., “You’re an extremely bright person!”
 - “He’s not lazy, he’s suffering from depression!”
- Managing ‘False Hope’ & Expectations
 - E.g., Finding Executive Secretaries
 - Think in three month windows
- Setting proper boundaries
 - E.g., Loosen boundaries
 - Tighten boundaries



Goal: Psychoeducation!

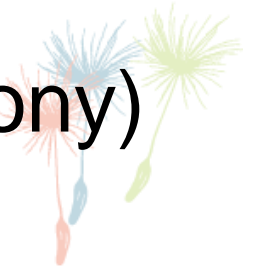
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Mental health supports
- Treatment methods
- Personal self-care

- Presentations
 - Include individuals with ASD



Goal: Look for Other Support Options!

- Mentors
- ASD support groups
- CBT therapy groups
- Alcoholic anonymous
- Service dogs
- Drama & theatre group
- Join a group (history, birdwatching)
- Start a club (e.g., gaming, Animé, Brony)



Goal: Finding Employment!

Life Skills (Hawkins, 2004)

- Grooming, hygiene
- Manners (please, thank you, being punctual)
- Boundaries (avoiding racial slurs, sexism, swearing)
- Flexibility/change
- Ability to ‘read’ others
 - Working hard to please
 - Self-responsibility
- “A Bachelor of Arts is often less useful than...”



Goal: Thinking Outside the Box About Employment!

Self-Employment

- An option for some

Thorkil Sonne (Specialisterne)

- Danish software executive, son Lars has ASD
- Untapped Potential: Only 6% find f.t. work
- Intense, deeply cerebral interests
- Employ 1,000,000 worldwide.
- Established in Toronto, Montreal, BC, as well as the US & other countries



ASD Advantage

- Bright, creative, unconventional world view
- Persistent, focused, “on their terms”
- Hardworking, honest & loyal
- Endearing/Sense of humour
- Courageous!
- “Competitive advantages” for some jobs
- Many are happy...!



Conclusions

- Respect the intelligence
- Verbal deep pressure
- Hug with...!
- I hope ...
 - You can now speak better “autism”!
 - You’ve learned some helpful strategies!



**If the world was left to
you socialites, we
would still be in caves
talking to each other!**

Temple Grandin

