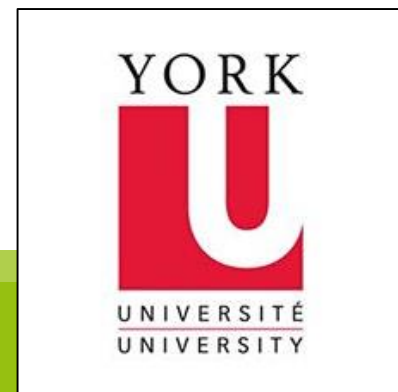


Promoting mental health in autistic people: The importance of context and support

Presented by: Jonathan Weiss Ph.D. C.Psych



AutismONTARIO
see the potential *voir le potentiel*



The broader context of COVID-19

- ▶ This an unexpected time in our lives
 - ▶ Disruption and change in a way we have never seen before
- ▶ Feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness and anger are normal reactions and are common
- ▶ This is not business as usual
- ▶ The following presenting is not about COVID-19. But think about how you could take the principles and apply them during this time



Overview

- Brief review of evidence on mental health difficulties
- The notion of thriving and positive mental health
 - Breaking down positive contextual targets
 - Peers
 - Family
 - Recreation / Leisure
 - Post secondary opportunities
 - Discussion of individual level supports
- Example of bringing context and individual support together in a relevant adolescent context: School



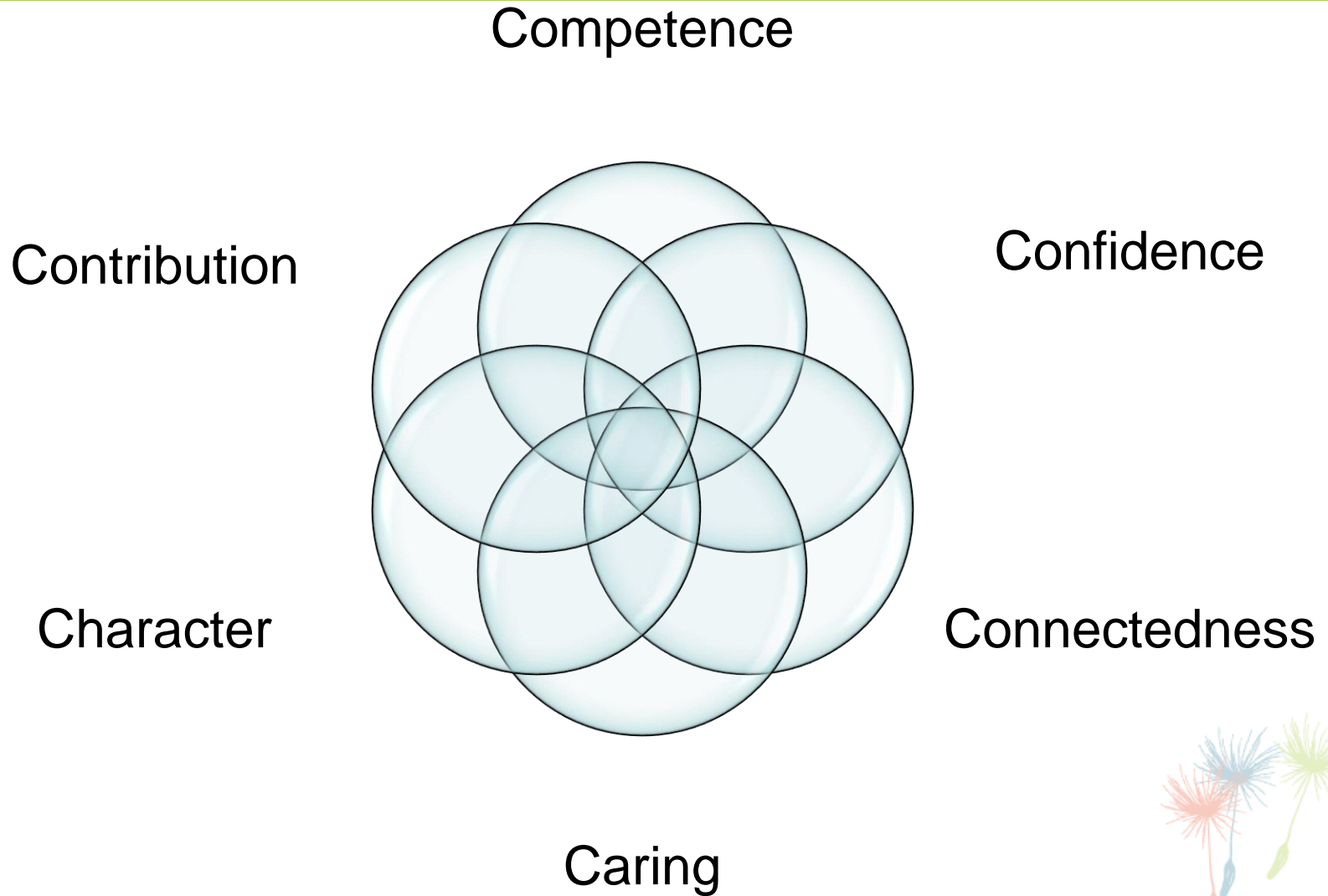
So...



- The absence of mental health problems is not the same thing as good mental health
- Positive outcomes need to be defined by positive constructs
 - *If I were to ask you to describe what successful living means to you, what words would you use?*



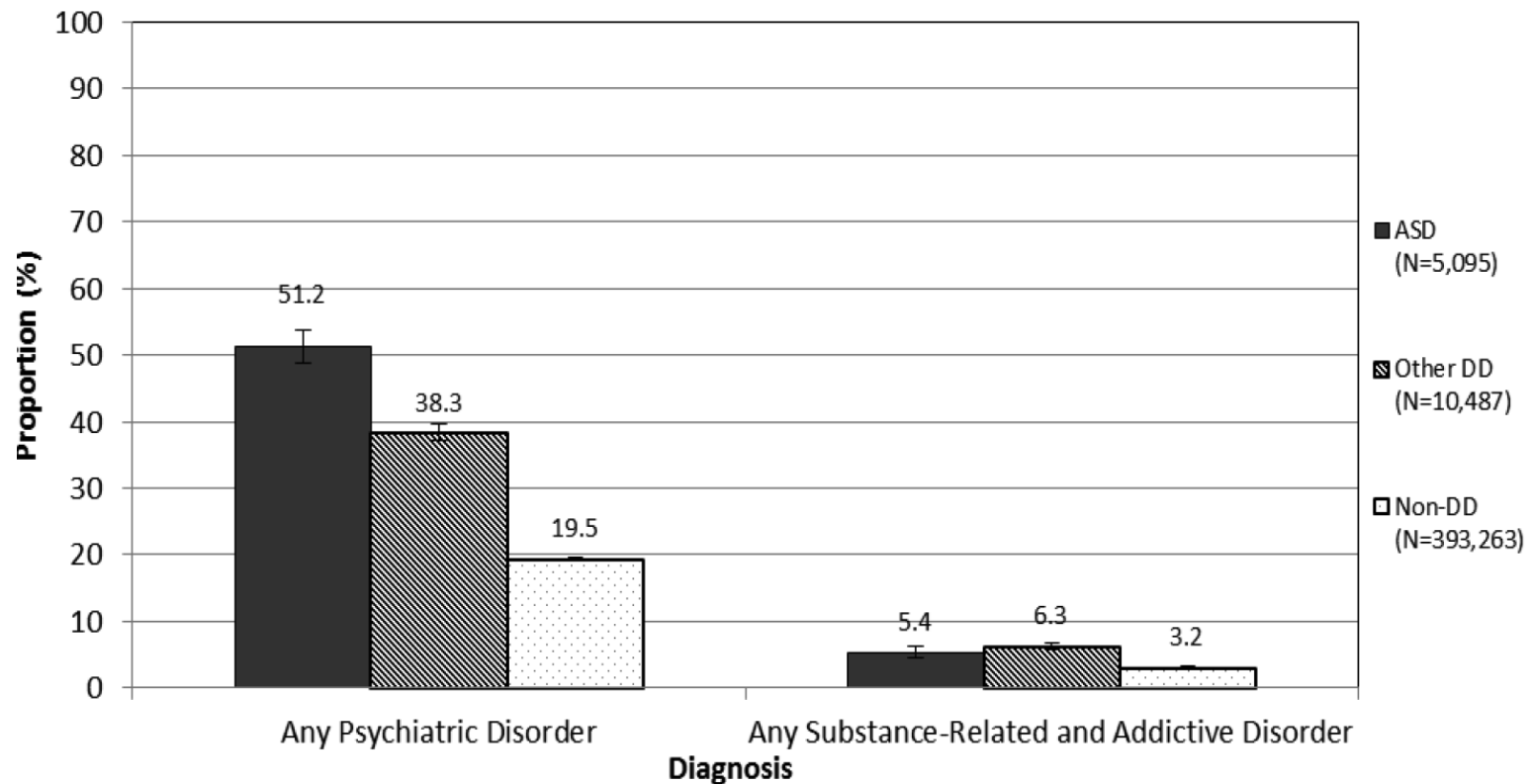
We all deserve to THRIVE



ORIGINAL PAPER

Health Concerns and Health Service Utilization in a Population Cohort of Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Jonathan A. Weiss¹ · Barry Isaacs² · Heidi Diepstra² · Andrew S. Wilton³ · Hilary K. Brown^{3,4} · Caitlin McGarry⁷ · Yona Lunsky^{3,5,6}



There are so many autism-related stressors in our society



SOCIAL CONFUSION /
OVERLOAD



REJECTION, ISOLATION,
VICTIMIZATION



PREVENTION OR
PUNISHMENT FROM
PREFERENCES



HYPERSENSITIVITY



LACK OF MEANINGFUL
REGULAR ACTIVITY POST
HIGH SCHOOL
(EDUCATION/EMPLOYME
NT)



HOUSING ISSUES



PHYSICAL HEALTH



More or less since COVID?

- ▶ Many of you would probably rate stress, and distress, as higher
 - ▶ Loss of formal support
 - ▶ Loss of school / work access
 - ▶ No respite
 - ▶ Lack of access to AAC
 - ▶ Disruption of positive routines
 - ▶ Being physically cramped / isolated
 - ▶ Concerns about COVID and health
 - ▶ Exposure to illness in people we know or that we see on media
 - ▶ And the list goes on and on.....



More or less since COVID?

- ▶ Perhaps some of you may say that there is currently LESS stress
 - ▶ Less autism-related stressors and better alignment with autistic self
 - ▶ School / Work
 - ▶ Peers
 - ▶ Family pressures

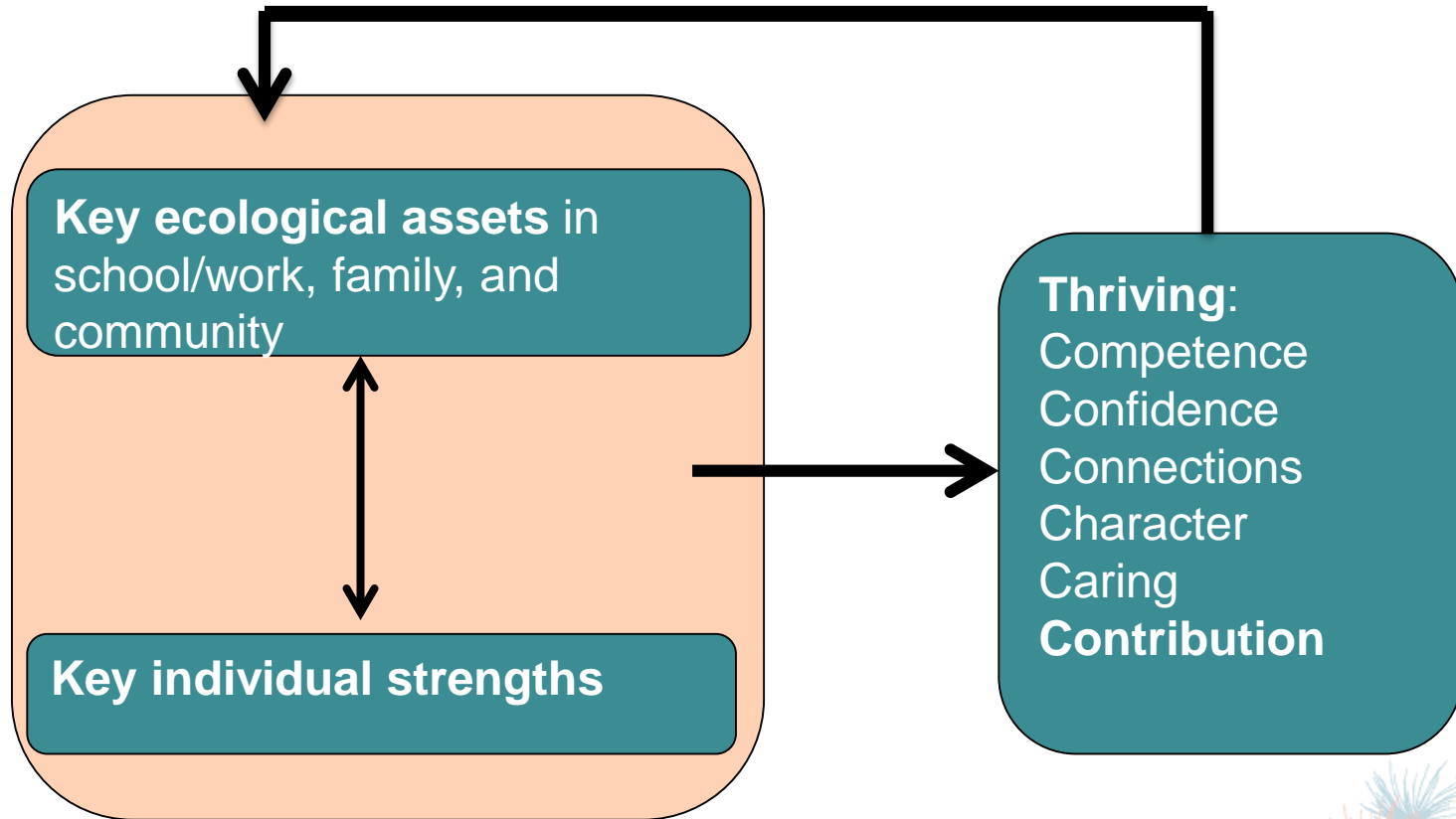


What does this tell us about autistic mental health?

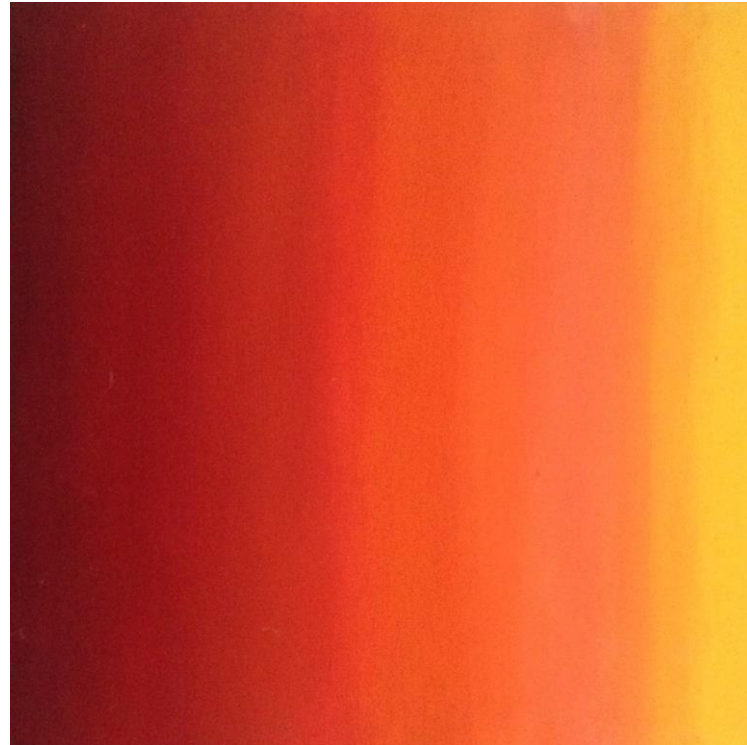
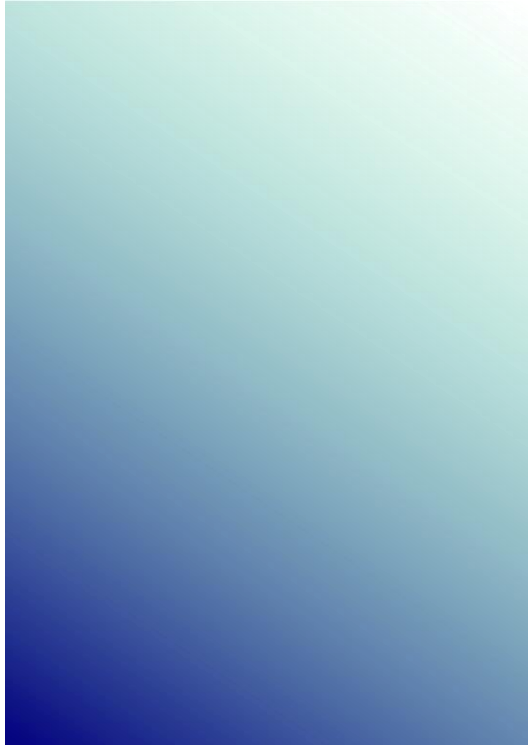
- Not just about the person
- **Contexts** that people develop and live in are major sources of distress
- We need to support the person, but also must analyze and change the contexts



The dynamics of thriving



No one size fits all



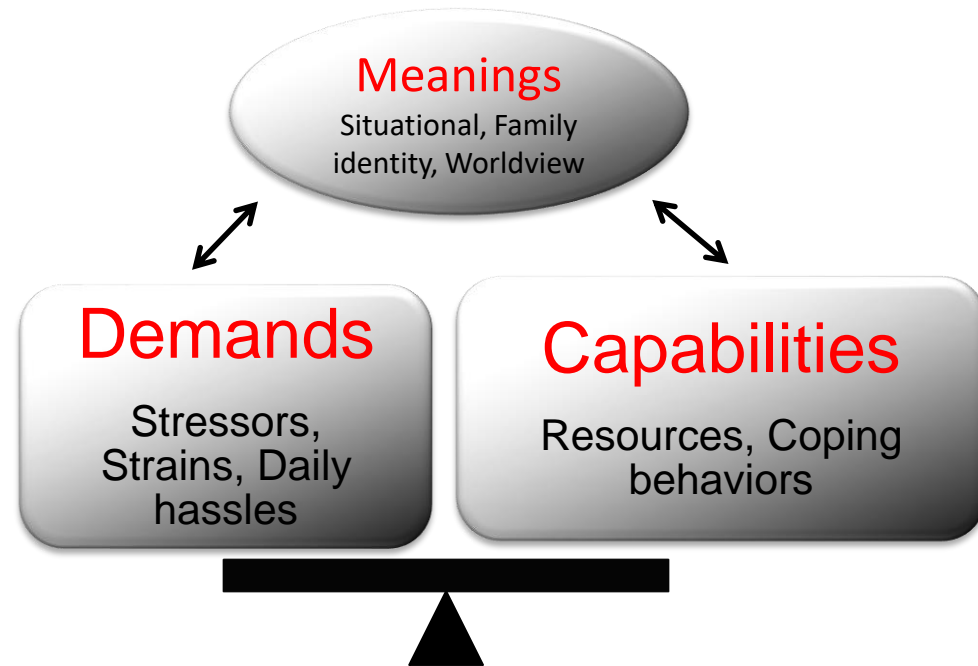
Lauralee Klindt



Supporting families

- ▶ Families are working to balance
 - ▶ many demands (expectations, internal pressures, outside pressures)
 - ▶ With our capabilities (our external resources, internal strengths, social strengths, etc.)
 - ▶ It's not just the objective demands and resources that matter, but how we make sense of our situation

Family Adjustment and Adaptation Resource model (Patterson)



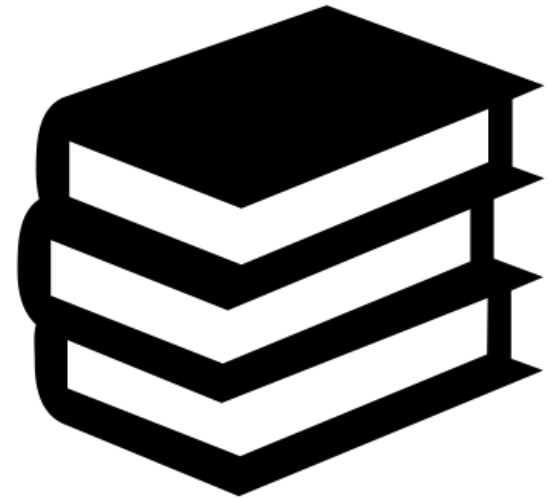
Supporting families

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Workshops (Blackledge & Hayes, 2006)
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction (Lunsky et al. 2017)
- Mindful Parenting (Singh et al., 2006)
- Parent to parent
 - Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction & Positive Empowerment Supports (Dykens et al., 2014)



Addressing demands in school / work settings

- Greatest concerns within an inclusive education setting are **not** academic achievement
 - Problematic social interactions
 - Negative social comparisons
 - Unpredictability
 - A lack of fit



Reed, P., Osborne, L. A., & Waddington, E. M. (2012). A comparative study of the impact of mainstream and special school placement on the behaviour of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *British Educational Research Journal*, 38(5), 749–763.



Examples of ways to address inclusivity

- Quiet areas, clubs, and specialized orientation programs
- Faculty / manager / peer training
- Self-determination
- Mentors, counselling services, and peer support groups
- Technological and on-line assistance, including AAC
- Individualized accommodation
- Assistance with daily living

Anderson, A. H., Stephenson, J., & Carter, M. (cont'd)



Connectedness to positive peers

- Mentorship programs
- Online hangouts
- Self-advocacy groups
(see A4A / Autistics United/ Autistics Aloud / Asperfemme)
- What's important:
**You are accepted,
appreciated and you
MATTER**



Supporting students on the autism spectrum
student mentor guidelines

By Catriona Mowat, Anna Cooper and Lee Gilson



Accept difference. Not indifference.

Collective activity with peers

- Peer connection in meaningful, personalized activity
 - Choice and self-determination are important components



SAIT cooks up job opportunities for students with autism

JAMIE KOMARNICKI, CALGARY HERALD | 08.12.2014 |



Bridgette Biddell cuts vegetables during her class at SAIT Polytechnic as part of a pilot project to train four students with autism spectrum disorder. *LEAH HENNEL*



With a practised hand, Colin Bradford chops bunches of cilantro into tidy little piles.



Positive opportunities need to extend beyond work/school

- **Recreation activities** buffer the relation of perceived stress and QoL in autistic adults (Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Smith DaWalt, Greenberg, & Mailick, 2017)

Bishop-Fitzpatrick, L., Smith DaWalt, L., Greenberg, J. S., & Mailick, M. R. (2017). Participation in recreational activities buffers the impact of perceived stress on quality of life in adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism Research, 10*(5), 973–982. <http://doi.org/10.1002/aur.1753>

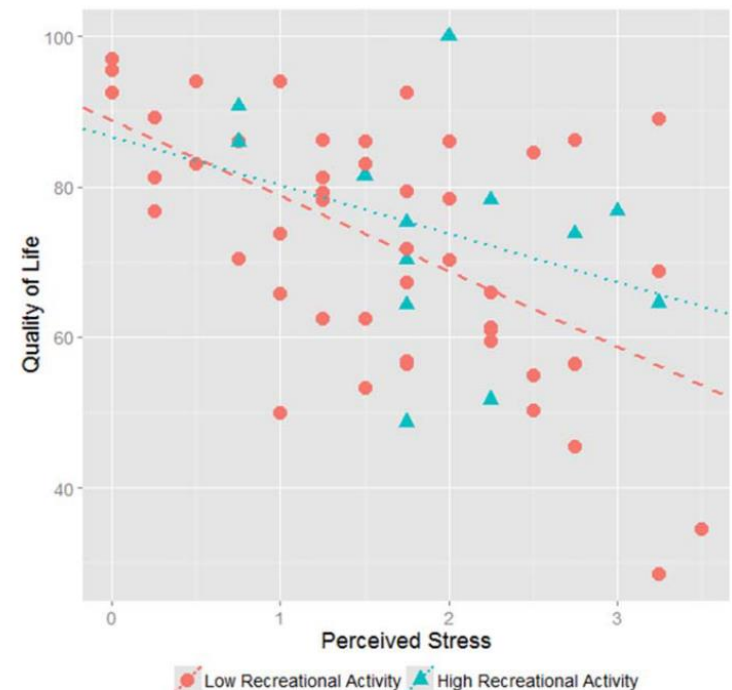


Figure 3. Mother-reported recreational activities moderates the association between perceived stress and QoL in adults with ASD.

What about individual focus?

- This does not make individual supports useless, but does emphasize programming for healthy contexts as the starting point
- An individual support cannot be about changing a person
- It needs to be about helping them manage stressors and the impact of stressors, and should be informed by their past experiences
 - Goodness-of-fit is key



If you are in love with something, adore something, are intensely involved, or fixated or honed in on one thing- I want to say don't let anyone take that away. No one has the right to have you have to broaden things. If you have at least just one dream, and you adore it and it is part of your routine, then no one has the right to take that from you. And you should have that for your entire life.

-Michael McCreary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBVpgyIXllw&list=PL6YxDLuEsji5xwAoP6sEwKujhlljMVDzn&index=2>



Evidence for traditional therapy

- Similar effects regardless of what is being provided
- Many (but not all) show improvement over a short period of time
- We know almost nothing about long term outcomes

CBT (ERP) vs. anxiety management therapy to address OCD in Autistic teens and adults (Russell et al. 2013)

CBT vs. non-directive person-centered counselling to address anxiety in Autistic teens (Murphy et al. 2017)

CBT vs. MBSR to address anxiety and depression in Autistic adults (Sizoo & Kuiper, 2017)

Group CBT vs. group recreational activities for Autistic adults to improve quality of life, self-esteem and psychiatric symptoms (Hesselmark, Plenty & Beejerot, 2014)

CBT vs. a social recreation program for Autistic adolescents to address anxiety (Sung et al. 2011)

CBT vs. treatment as usual to address anxiety disorders in Autistic adults (Langdon et al. 2016)

Why similar benefits from different interventions?



- Common therapeutic factors
 - Autism-informed alliance
 - Autism-informed individualized approach
 - EMPATHY
 - Hope
 - Belonging
 - Connectedness
- Many options could benefit even more people



An example: Our MYMind research

- A focus on the **awareness of the present moment, enhanced non-judgmental observation,** and reduced automatic responding (Kabat-Zinn, 2003)
- MYMind is a conjoint parent – autistic adolescent / adult program

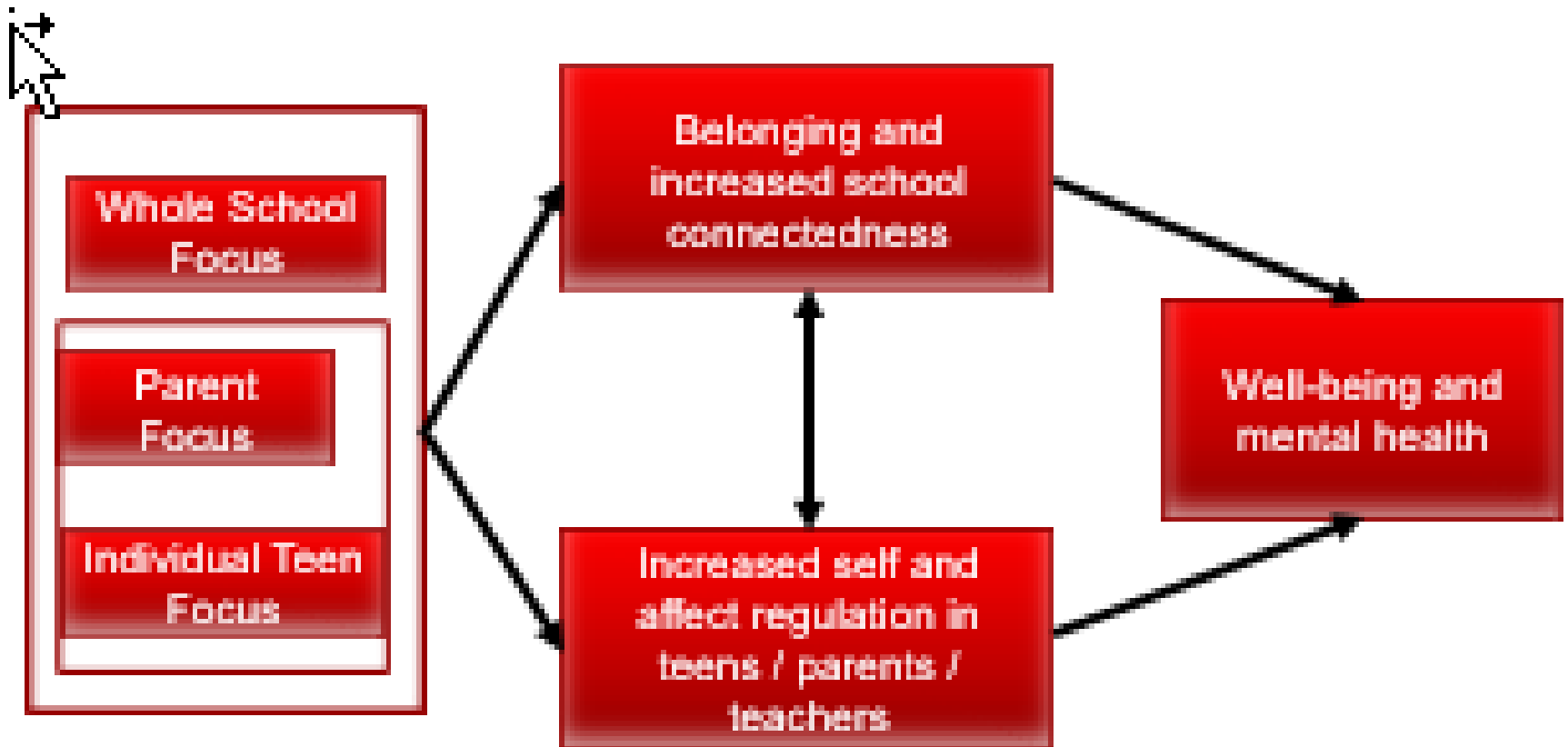


Good school example of bringing it together

Shochet, I. M., Saggars, B. R., Carrington, S. B., Orr, J. A., Wurfl, A. M., Duncan, B. M., & Smith, C. L. (2016). The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) Conceptual Model to Promote Mental Health for Adolescents with ASD. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 19(2), 94–116.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-016-0203-4>



Whole school focus



Whole school focus

Whole School Focus


- 1) Index for Inclusion
- 2) Resourceful Adolescent Program for Teachers – Autism adaptation

Parent Focus

- 1) Resourceful Adolescent Program for Parents – Autism adaptation

Individual Focus

- 1) Resourceful Adolescent Program for Adolescents – Autism adaptation

- Support the development of a school culture, policy and practice that promotes school connectedness
 - A focus on what needs to have for successful inclusion for all
 - Comprised of a school committee of staff, parents, students and researchers
 - Recruits activities to help the school to identify priorities, develop and refine an informed inclusion plan
- 

Whole school focus

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- Teachers' focus on **school connectedness**
 - warm relationships
 - student inclusion and sense of belonging
 - identification and encouragement of student strengths
 - equity and fairness
- Help teachers to manage their stress
- Provide resources and strategies in teaching curriculum



Parent Focus

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Individual Focus

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- Family connectedness and affect regulation
- Parent emotional reactivity
- Promote teen capacity for regulation
- Improve parent–teen attachment
 - Healthy autonomy



Individual Focus

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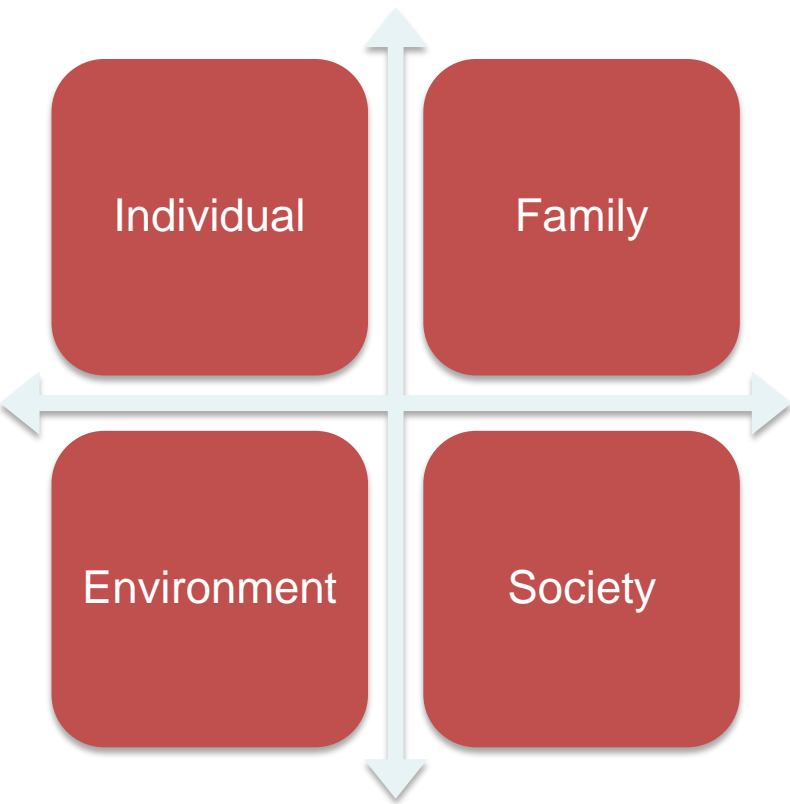
Individual Focus

- 1) Resourceful Adolescent Program for Adolescents – Autism adaptation

- Resources, personal and keeping calm ‘bricks’
 - personal strengths
 - self-regulation
 - understanding social support networks
 - perspective taking
 - preventing and managing conflict
 - interpersonal relationships to foster wellbeing



Final thoughts



- Skills to manage stress
- Good physical health and physical activity
- Sense of control over one's life
- Reciprocal, non-stressful relationships
- Caregivers who are nurtured and supported
- A safe place to live and learn
- An environment with limited stresses
- Meaningful activities in community





Thank you! Questions?

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