



**BUILDING POSITIVE THINKERS:**  
Ways to Reduce Anxious Thinking  
Within Individuals with Autism

**David Meichenbaum, Ph.D.**  
Director of Community Consulting & Clinical Services  
Email: [dmeichenbaum@thesummitcenter.org](mailto:dmeichenbaum@thesummitcenter.org)



[www.thesummitcenter.org](http://www.thesummitcenter.org)

1

**Objectives**

1. Identify limitation(s) of traditional/typical responses to anxiety/worry in individuals with autism.
2. Understand thinking errors that influence negative feelings and behaviors.
3. Describe tools that can help address negative thinking tendencies in individuals with autism.
4. Identify key considerations for increasing the generalization of positive thinking across settings.

[www.thesummitcenter.org](http://www.thesummitcenter.org)

2

Building Positive Thinkers:  
**Limitations of Typical Responses**

[www.thesummitcenter.org](http://www.thesummitcenter.org)

3

**Case Example**

Kai is a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student who has autism. When presented with a (perceived) challenging task, he becomes upset, makes repeated negative comments (“I can’t do this”, “I am not smart”), and refuses the work.

His teachers have responded by **modifying his work, offering him assistance, removing expectations, giving him extra practice, having him make up missed work, giving reward for completion, and offering sensory breaks/walks.**


4

**Limitations of ‘Typical’ Responses**

- Responses often involve the offering of some sort of accommodation or prompt, such as:
  - Setting up for success
  - Helping to avoid stressful situations
  - Removing expectations
  - Rescuing when frustrated
  - Providing reassurance
  - Offering preferred items and breaks
- Recognize every accommodation and prompt is a result of **some other behavior/skill not occurring**

[www.thesummitcenter.org](http://www.thesummitcenter.org)

5

 **Key Considerations**

**Unaccommodating Accommodations**  
vs.  
**Accommodating Accommodations**

---

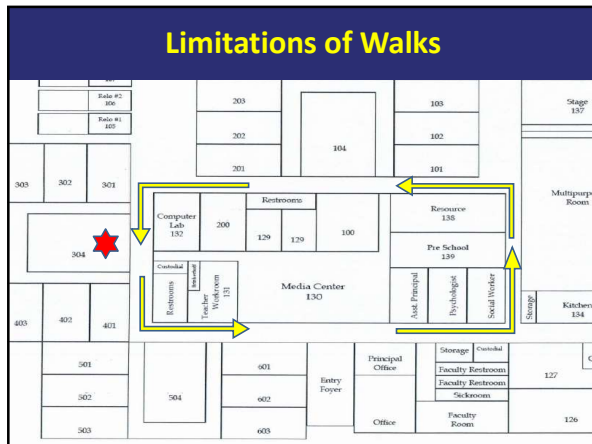
Is your response/support designed to **get “them”/ “us” through the day**

OR

Is your response/support designed to **develop and encourage skills** reducing future challenges

[www.thesummitcenter.org](http://www.thesummitcenter.org)

6



7

### Limitations of 'Typical' Responses

- Many responses do not take into account, nor address, the impact of negative thinking.

The Cognitive Triangle

www.thesummitcenter.org

8

Building Positive Thinkers:  
**Mindset Matters**

www.thesummitcenter.org

9

### Understanding Anxiety - Mindset Matters -

**THINK**

↓

**FEEL**

↓

**ACT**

www.thesummitcenter.org

10

### Mindset Matters - 'I can't because I think I can't' -

<p><i>"I can do it"</i></p> <p>↓</p> <p>Confident</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Begin work</p>	<p><b>THINK</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>FEEL</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>ACT</b></p>	<p><i>"I can't"</i></p> <p>↓</p> <p>Anxious</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Resist work</p>
--	--	---

11

### Mindset Matters - 'I can't because I think I can't' -

- Individuals who are repeatedly sad, anxious, irritable, or angry are more likely to demonstrate negative thinking

- Negative thinking can become **habitual**

www.thesummitcenter.org

12

**Mindset Matters**  
**- Common Thinking Errors -**

Fortune Telling  
Binocular Thinking  
Discounting the Positive  
Polarized Thinking  
Catastrophizing  
Jumping to Conclusions  
Blaming Self  
Out of your control

www.thesummitcenter.org

13

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**  
**- Evidence -**

- CBT has been **well-established** as an **evidence-based treatment for anxiety**
  - Carpenter et al., *Depression & Anxiety* (2018)
- Has **beneficial long-term outcomes**
  - Van Dis et. al., *JAMA Psychiatry* (2020)
- **Effective with children**
  - *Cool Kids* (Rapee et al., 2006)
  - *Coping Cat* (Kendall & Hedtke, 2006)

www.thesummitcenter.org

14

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**  
**- Treatment Components -**

- CBT treatment components include:
  - Psycho-education (understanding of anxiety)
  - Skills training
  - Relaxation and stress-reduction
  - Behavioral activation
  - Graded-exposure to worry/fears
  - **Cognitive-restructuring/Positive Rethinking**
    - Fact-checking/Probability Testing

www.thesummitcenter.org

15

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**  
**- Effectiveness -**

- CBT is most effective for those who are **introspective and able to identify and articulate their thoughts and feelings** (Renaud, Russell, Myhr, 2014)
- Controlled trials of CBT have indicated **moderate effect sizes for youth with ASD** (Ung et al., 2015)
  - Effect sizes decrease, however, for individuals who have more difficulty reporting on their internal states (i.e., thoughts and feelings)

www.thesummitcenter.org

16

**Autism & CBT**  
**- Challenge -**

- Although some individuals with autism may have difficulty communicating their thoughts, **we should not ignore the role negative thinking has on their feelings and behavior** (e.g., voc-skills training).
- There may be even a greater need for individuals with autism to engage in CBT-'type' interventions, given **rigid, concrete, and perseverative negative thinking** can result in great and more frequent escalations of mood and behavior.
- Few do seek CBT

www.thesummitcenter.org

17

**Autism Spectrum Disorders**  
**- Anxiety -**

- Approx 40% of individuals with ASD are diagnosed with at least one anxiety disorder (van Steensel, et al, 2011)
- The most common comorbid anxiety disorders:
  - social phobia (17–30%)
  - specific phobias (30–44%)
  - generalized anxiety disorder (15–35%)
  - separation anxiety disorder (9–38%)
  - obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD; 17–37%)

(White et al, 2009)

www.thesummitcenter.org

18

### Autism Spectrum Disorders - Feeling Anxious -

**Example Triggers/Setting Events**

- Changes from routine/expectations
- Transitioning from/relinquishing preferred items
  - When will I get it back?
- Starting something “new”
- Anticipating exposure to upsetting stimuli
- Lack of certainty
- Feeling unconfident

www.thesummitcenter.org

19

### Building Positive Thinkers: Strategies for Building Positive Thinkers

www.thesummitcenter.org

20

### Case Example 1 - Discounting the Positive -

**Scenario:**

Jordan is a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student. He has been described as being a rigid and concrete thinker. Jordan has perseverated on the notion that his Physical Education teacher does not like him. Jordan and his mother have asked for him to be removed from his general education PE class.

www.thesummitcenter.org

21

#### CHECK & REFLECT

Plan: Following each PE period I will evaluate and share with others how I felt about the period. I will engage in a brief PE-Post Check and Reflect.

CHECK AND REFLECT QUESTIONS:	Circle Response	
	YES	NO
Did my teachers greet me?	YES	NO
Did my teachers have a conversation with me?	YES	NO
Did my teachers give me a compliment? (e.g., Good Job)	YES	NO
Did my teachers challenge me this period?	YES	NO
Did my teachers encourage me? (e.g., You can do it)	YES	NO
Did my teachers laugh <u>AT ME</u> ?	NO	YES
Did my teachers listen to my concerns?	YES	NO
Did I try my best?	YES	NO
Were there any concerns/problems?	NO	YES
OVERALL, was my teacher supportive of me today?	YES	NO

www.thesummitcenter.org

22

### Building Positive Thinkers - Check and Reflects -

- Provides a means to consider the evidence
- Allows for concrete and factual decision making
- Increases attention to the positive
- Supports **positive rethinking**

www.thesummitcenter.org

23

### Participation Code

# RETHINK

www.thesummitcenter.org

24

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
- Making Positive Concluding Statements -

Thought bubbles containing the following text:

- That was not so bad.
- I did it.
- That was easier than I thought.
- Asking for help, helped.

www.thesummitcenter.org

25

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
- Making Positive Concluding Statements -

Thought bubbles containing the following text:

- That worked out.
- That didn't take long
- It's done. Now I can do something else.
- It feels good to have completed this.

www.thesummitcenter.org

26

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
- Making Positive Concluding Statements -

www.thesummitcenter.org

27

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
- Consider the Facts -

- Look at the facts
- Make evidence concrete and noticeable
- "Tilt the balance"  
(e.g., Vacation example)

www.thesummitcenter.org

28

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
-Embed Positive Thinking into Skill Building-

**GETTING STARTED**

1. Stop what you are doing
2. Go to the assigned area
3. Think positive ("I can do this")
4. Begin work
5. Keep working for 1 minute
6. Celebrate

www.thesummitcenter.org

29

**Case Example 2**  
- Upset By Change -

**Scenario:**

PJ, 7, is upset by unexpected changes in his routine. To create predictability, his team has implemented a visual schedule. PJ's teachers hope each day does not bring an unexpected alteration to his visual schedule. Unfortunately, on Friday the teacher receives a call from PJ's OT indicating that she cannot come when expected. As expected, PJ has a meltdown.

DAILY SCHEDULE	
8:00	JOURNAL
8:30	MATH
9:20	RECESS
9:45	PEPPER TALKING ART
11:00	LUNCH
11:30	COMPUTER
12:30	RECESS
12:45	CENTERS
2:05	DISMISSAL

www.thesummitcenter.org

30

**Case Example**  
- Upset By Change -

**Unaccommodating Accommodation:**

- Setting up a visual schedule and hoping for no change

**(Potential) Negative Thought:**

- I can't do change

**Alternative Skill Not Occurring:**

- Dealing with unexpected changes in routine

**Intervention Plan:**

- Build ability to deal with change ("Oops", "Detour")
- *Build a predictable response to unpredictable events*

**Response to Intervention:**

- ↓ melt downs when change

www.thesummitcenter.org

31

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
- Social Stories -

- Clarify expectations
- Clarify how environment will respond
- Can desensitize upcoming experience
- Can prime positive thinking
- Clarify reinforcement
- Allow for rehearsal
- Can build confidence

www.thesummitcenter.org

32

**Case Example 3**  
- Self-Doubt -

Scenario:

Theo is a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who occasionally becomes agitated in class. When upset he "shuts down" and does not participate in class activities. When staff approach him, he makes a series of negative comments about himself and his inabilities. Staff respond by **providing him with a lot of reassurance**. While time consuming and disruptive to instruction, reassurance can get him back on track.

www.thesummitcenter.org

33

**Case Example**  
- Self-Doubt -

**Unaccommodating Accommodation:**

- The need to provide continuous reassurance

**Alternative Skill Not Occurring:**

- Self-reassurance

**Intervention Plan:**

- Skill Building
- *Generalization Planning – Skill of the Week with R+*

**Response to Intervention:**

- ↓ verbal reassuring prompts
- ↑ self-reassurance

www.thesummitcenter.org

34

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
- Teach Self-Reassurance -

- **Reassurance**
  - Comments from others that remove doubts or fears  
"You got this!" "No problem" "It's almost over"  
"I understand, It's going to be OK" "I am here to help"
- **Teach Self Reassurance**
  - Self- comments that remove doubts or fears  
"I got this!" "No problem" "It's almost over"  
"It's going to be OK" "I can ask for help"

www.thesummitcenter.org

35

**Building Positive Thinkers**  
- Some Additional Positive Thinking Skills-

- **Self-Reassurance**
  - Reinforce student for being able to anticipate what you are about to say
- **"FLIP IT"**
  - Turning negative thoughts into positive thoughts
- **Superflex vs. Rock Brain**
  - Madrigal & Garcia Winner, 2008 [www.socialthinking.com](http://www.socialthinking.com)
- **Growth vs. Fixed Mindset**
  - <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/>

www.thesummitcenter.org

36

**Building Positive Thinkers**


**- Skill Building with Planned Generalization -**

- 1) Identify a **Skill of the Week** (Name it!)
- 2) Provide **direct instruction** to individual (or to class)
- 3) **Communicate** skill to team (How to notice/respond)
- 4) **Answer “why should they”**(Competing against habits)
- 5) **Make it a goal** (Wow Moment, IDN, DRC, Token Board)
- 6) **Review prior to activities** how skill may be used
- 7) **“Seize” moments** (provide incidental instruction)
  - Highlight skill demonstrated by others (increase exemplars)
- 8) Deliver praise and **behavioral reinforcement**
- 9) Before starting discuss and anticipate barriers


www.thesummitcenter.org

37

**Concluding Remarks**



- Consider the **impact of thoughts, on one’s feelings and actions.**
- Accommodations/prompts/consequences may only be **short-term solutions.**
- **Skill building should include teaching positive thinking.**

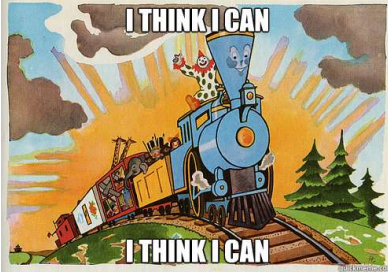


www.thesummitcenter.org

38

**Concluding Remarks**

Don’t just develop skills, **develop a belief.**



www.thesummitcenter.org

39