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.

Case Example

Kai is a 5th 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.

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
Limitations of ‘Typical’ Responses

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

The Cognitive Triangle

- Thoughts
- Feelings
- Behavior

Mindset Matters

- ‘I can’t because I think I can’t’ -

"I can do it"

THINK

↓

Confident

FEEL

↓

Begin work

ACT

"I can’t"

↓

Anxious

↓

Resist work

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
Mindset Matters - Common Thinking Errors -

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

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)

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

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)

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

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%)

(Davis et al, 2009)
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

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Building Positive Thinkers:
Strategies for Building Positive Thinkers

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Case Example 1
- Discounting the Positive -

Scenario:
Jordan is a 6th 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.

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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

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Participation Code
RETHINK
Building Positive Thinkers
- Making Positive Concluding Statements -

That was not so bad.
I did it.

That was easy than I thought.
Asking for help, helped.

Building Positive Thinkers
- Consider the Facts -

• Look at the facts
• Make evidence concrete and noticeable
• “Tilt the balance”
  (e.g., Vacation example)

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.
Case Example 1
- 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

Case Example 2
- 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

Case Example 3
- Self-Doubt -

Scenario:
Theo is a 10th 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 abilities. Staff respond by providing him with a lot of reassurance. While time consuming and disruptive to instruction, reassurance can get him back on track.

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

Building Positive Thinkers
- Teach Self-Reassurance -

Reassurance
- Comments from others that remove doubts or fears
  “You got this!” “No problem” “It’s is 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 is almost over”
  “It’s going to be OK” “I can ask for help”

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

Growth vs. Fixed Mindset
- https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/


### 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

### 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.**

### Concluding Remarks

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

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