

# IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING ANXIETY ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

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# OBJECTIVES

- Discuss:
  - anxiety and how anxiety disorders are diagnosed
  - the overlap of anxiety and autism
  - approaches to managing anxiety

# WHAT IS ANXIETY?

- When there is a real danger, an "alarm" goes off in our bodies to help us prepare for the danger
- Some people have overactive, or false, alarms
- Experiencing anxiety occasionally is a normal part of life and can be adaptive
- Anxiety becomes a disorder when:
  - It is prominent and persistent
  - There are accompanying symptoms
  - It causes significant impact on daily functioning

Reaven, J., Blakeley-Smith, A., Nichols, S., & Hepburn, S. (2011)

SYMPTOMS  
OF  
ANXIETY  
CAN  
INCLUDE:

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Feeling nervous, restless, or tense

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Having a sense of impending danger, panic, or doom

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Having an increased heart rate

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Breathing rapidly

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Sweating

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Trembling

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Feeling weak or tired

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Trouble concentrating

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Having trouble sleeping

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Experiencing gastrointestinal (GI) problems

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Having difficulty controlling worry

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(Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)

## DSM-5 AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

### Anxiety disorders:

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Selective Mutism
- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder
- Specific Phobias
- Agoraphobia
- Other Specified/Unspecified Anxiety Disorder

### Also to consider:

- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders
- Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders

# HOW COMMON ARE ANXIETY DISORDERS?

## CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS

- Anxiety is one of the most common psychological disorders in children and adolescents (Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2005)
- Estimates are that 10-20% of youth have an anxiety disorder (Kendall, Crawford, Kagan, Furr, & Podell, 2017)

## ADULTS

- Nearly 20% of U.S. adults had an anxiety disorder in the past year (Harvard Medical School, 2007. National Comorbidity Survey [NCS], 2017)
  - Higher for females (23.4%) than for males (14.3%)
  - Approximately 31.1% of U.S. adults experience any anxiety disorder at some point in their lives

ARE PEOPLE WITH  
AUTISM MORE  
LIKELY TO BE  
ANXIOUS?

- Increased rates of anxiety and anxiety disorders in those with autism
- Estimates range from 10-80% for at least one anxiety disorder (White, Oswald, Ollendick, & Scahill, 2009)
  - A commonly used estimate is closer to 40% (e.g., Simonoff et al., 2008; van Steensel, Bogels, & Perrin, 2011), which is approximately double the rate in the general population
  - May be more likely to experience specific phobias including medical fears (Evans, Canavera, Kleinpeter, Maccubbin, & Tager-Flusberg, 2005)
- Anxiety is present across individuals all levels of cognitive functioning, but the type of anxiety problem may be influenced by cognitive ability (van Steensel et al.; White et al., 2009)



WHAT  
DOES  
ANXIETY  
LOOK LIKE  
IN PEOPLE  
ON THE  
AUTISM  
SPECTRUM?

- Physical symptoms (e.g., sweating, rapid breathing, increased heartrate), GI problems, trouble sleeping or concentrating
- Can also look like:
  - Emotional lability (e.g., sudden or rapid changes in mood)
  - Emotional responses not matching the situation
  - Behavioral challenges such as aggression, anger, self-injury
  - Hyperactivity or impulsivity
  - Sensory-seeking behaviors
  - Increase in repetitive behaviors or vocalizations
  - Withdrawal or refusal to participate in activities



## IS IT ANXIETY OR ASD?

- Not a core symptom of autism
- Change from baseline presentation or functioning
- Symptoms worsen in response to environmental factors (e.g., school return or response to a specific trauma)
- Specific fears
- Symptoms respond to treatment for anxiety

WHAT DO I  
DO IF I  
THINK I OR  
MY CHILD  
HAS  
ANXIETY?

- **Keep track of symptoms**
  - When and where
  - Triggers
  - Specific observations/symptoms
- **Discuss with other caregivers**
  - Teachers
  - Therapists
  - Child care providers
- **Talk with your (or your child's) doctor**
  - Inform of concerns prior to the appointment
  - Allow time for an extended appointment
  - May request questionnaires or recommend referral for additional evaluation

## EVALUATING FOR ANXIETY

- May take place with your primary care provider/pediatrician, a psychiatrist, or a mental health provider (e.g., psychologist)
- Components of an anxiety evaluation may include:
  - An interview with you (and your child)
  - Informal observation
  - Information from school providers (if applicable)
  - Rating forms completed by the individual (depending on age), parents/caregivers, and/or a child's teachers

## INTERVENTIONS

### Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) focused on anxiety

- CBT is evidence-based (e.g., Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006; Chorpita, 2007) and aims to reduce symptoms of anxiety
- CBT teaches individuals to:
  - recognize physical, cognitive, and behavioral forms of anxiety
  - identify specific triggers
  - use a combination of physical, cognitive, and behavioral tools to manage anxiety
- CBT is often provided by a mental health provider one-to-one but there may also be some group therapy options

### Optimize other interventions

- ABA
- Speech-language, occupational, and physical therapies
- Educational interventions and supports

Medication(s) sometimes considered as part of a treatment plan for anxiety

## WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCING ANXIETY

- Communicate your empathy
- Model brave/non-anxious behavior and use of coping strategies
- Try to prevent avoidance
- Remind the individual to use their coping strategies
- Reinforce brave/non-anxious behavior and use of coping skills

Strategies that are not typically helpful include: excessive reassurance, being too directive, permitting or encouraging avoidance, and becoming impatient

IT CAN BE  
HELPFUL TO:



Have an organized, predictable routine at home and school



Prepare for transitions



Provide accurate information to remove uncertainty and “unknowns”



Help recall times they have successfully overcome their anxiety



Use visual supports (e.g., feelings thermometer) and make things concrete



Teach relaxation strategies (e.g., deep breathing)



Coach in positive self-talk



Support healthy habits (e.g., physical activity, sleep)

# RESOURCES

## PARENTS

- "Freeing Your Child from Anxiety," by Chansky
- "Helping Your Anxious Child," by Rapee, Spence, Cobham, & Wignall
- "Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child," by Mannassis
- "Anxiety-Free Kids- An Interactive Guide for Parents and Children," by Zucker
- The Association for Behavioral & Cognitive Therapy ([www.abct.org](http://www.abct.org))
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org))

## CHILDREN AND TEENS

- "Wemberly Worried," Ages 4-8, Kevin Henkes
- "What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety," Ages 6-12, by Huebner
- "Mind Over Basketball: Coach Yourself to Handle Stress," Ages 8-14, by Weierbach & Phillips-Hershey
- "My Anxious Mind: A Teen's Guide to Managing Anxiety and Panic," by Tompkins & Martinez
- "The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anxiety and Worry," by Schab

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Waisman Center Live Presentations
  - 4/23 Autism and Safety
  - 4/30 Autism and Behavioral Supports
- Waisman Center COVID-19 page:  
<https://www.waisman.wisc.edu/covid-19/>
- WI Regional Resource Centers:  
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/cyshcn/regionalcenters.htm>
- Autism Society: <https://www.autism-society.org/covid-19/>
- Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website on stress and coping: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>



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Thank you for  
listening!

QUESTIONS?