

Therapeutic
Relationships
with
individuals on
the Autism
Spectrum



Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability characterized by:

Deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts



According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary
Definition of Talk Therapy:

Psychotherapy emphasizing *conversation between* therapist and patient.

Counseling and Psychotherapy

(VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008)

- Insight-related mental health services are likely to have limited success with students living with ASD; psycho-educational is typically a more effective approach.
- Directive counseling is a necessity, as students require information otherwise lost due to challenges with social learning and social communication.
- Counseling that focuses on skill building should be conducted in rote, sequential steps, and make heavy use of techniques such as role play and coaching. Embed efforts to let skills be generalized.

Individualized support

“Therapists are not in the business to change clients, to give them quick advice, or to solve their problems for them.” (Corey, 2005).

- Challenges related to Theory of Mind and communication create the need, at times, to be more directive than many therapists are trained to be.
- Skill-building sessions often take priority over more common insight-oriented therapy.

Individualized Support and Techniques

- Traditional techniques such as mirroring, summarizing, reflecting, or silence often seem ineffective when working with this population.
- Traditional structure of the counseling process have to be individualized:

More emphasis on Rapport and Relationship Building



In depth Problem Definition



Several stages in Goal-setting



Individualized Interventions



Extended time for Termination



When working with clients with Autism Spectrum Disorder often there is a need to incorporate specific techniques into traditional therapy that can help us establish a stronger therapeutic relationship and improve therapeutic process and outcome.

Why is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Effective?

Cognitive behavioral therapy is

- a short-term
- goal-oriented psychotherapy treatment
- takes a hands-on, practical approach to problem-solving
- Its goal is to change patterns of thinking or **behavior** that are behind people's difficulties
- Individuals on the autism spectrum often have difficulty focusing on the “big picture”
- They work well with specific concrete goals
- Often concrete and visual thinkers
- Behavioral issues are often results of the lack of skills and understanding

Adjusting techniques and approaches

While counselors have been traditionally trained to perform talk therapy with their clients, it can be challenging when working with clients on the Autism Spectrum, since these individuals typically talk with therapists through monologues and fact-reciting and reporting emotional or subjective content often can be difficult for clients diagnosed with ASD.

Modifying and adjusting techniques and approaches can be essential in order to fit the client's need.

Visualizing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques can help the therapist transforming abstract thoughts and concepts into concrete ideas.

Although therapy will always rely on talk and communication it can be done with and through images and other visual tools.

The use of Art as a tool to help communication

Incorporating art into social skills building groups and individual counseling session can allow clients to express themselves through a different communication channel.

It can provide a more concrete and visual way of expressing their thoughts and feelings which can help the therapist teach social skills through metaphors, images and stories that they best understand.

When the client and therapist collaborate to create these stories and pictures, it allows the therapist to target the individual's unique challenges and goals, and help the client internalize them and incorporate them into to every day experiences

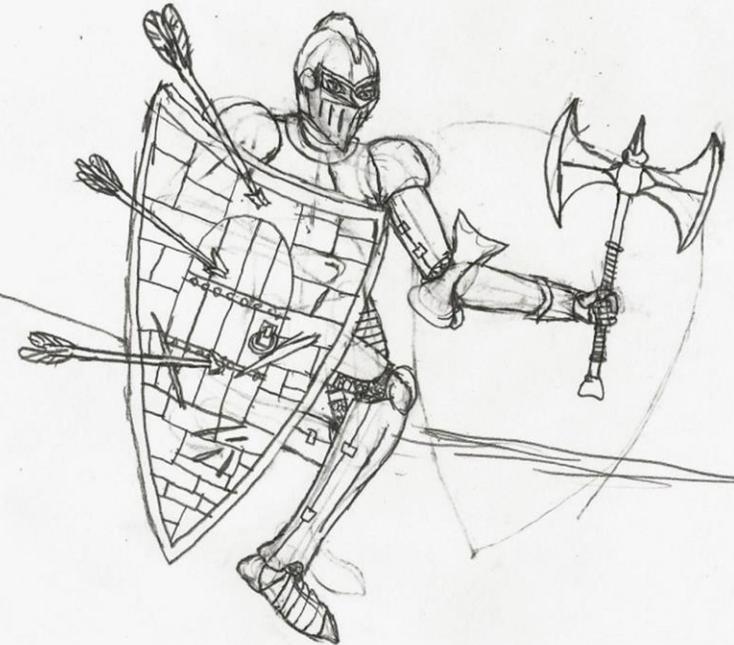
Stress and Anxiety



A picture drawn by a student on the spectrum prompted to provide a visual representation of “resilience.”

The picture of the knight successfully blocking the arrows being shot at him allows a support professional to discuss the following types of issues:

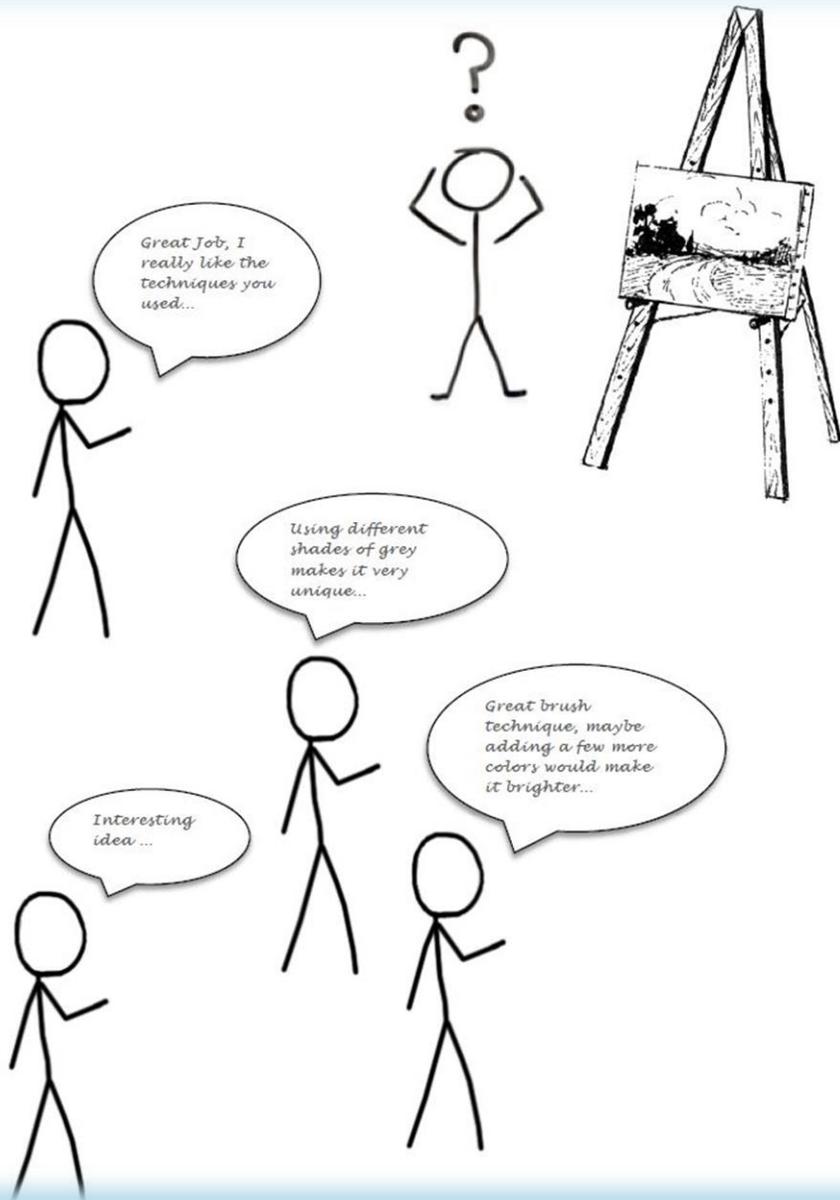
- What are the arrows being shot at, you?
- Who or what is shooting those arrows?
- What makes up the shield you use to block the arrows?
- Do you have more than one shield? And if not, how can I help you create another one?
- When and where is it safe to remove part of your armor?



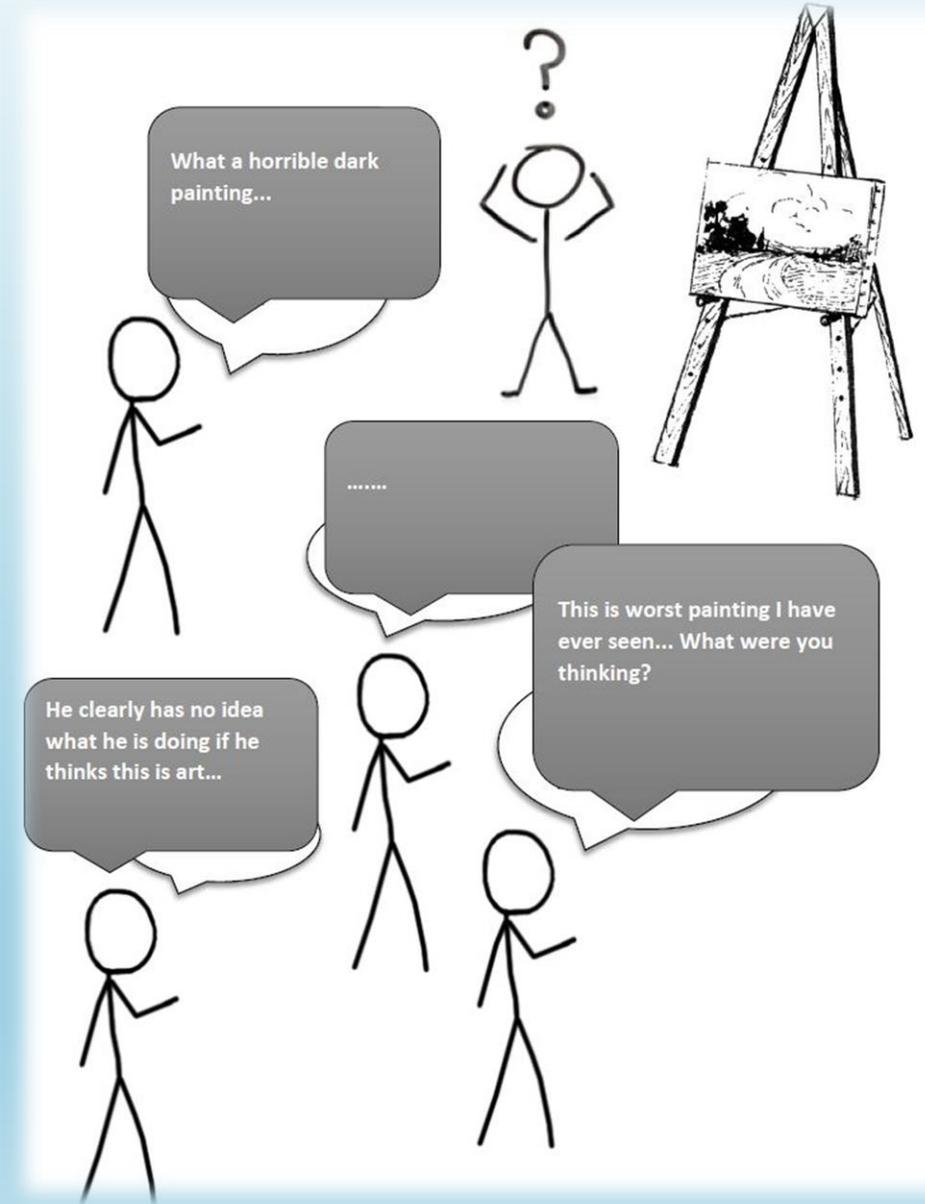
Visualizing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Techniques

- As counselors we understand that one's thoughts and beliefs effect one's decisions and behaviors.
- It's our responsibility as mental health professionals to help the clients understand how their thoughts control their emotions.
- Unhelpful, negative thinking patterns often heighten stress and anxiety which often times present itself through projecting one's own thoughts onto others ...

Reality



Projected Irrational Thoughts



Worst case scenario

Most likely scenario

Best case scenario



Writing out rational and irrational thoughts can help clients identify unhelpful thinking styles.

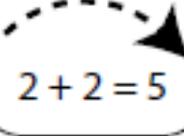
It allows the therapist to help the client separate anxiety driven irrational thinking patterns and help them shift to a more rational, positive thought process.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Unhelpful Thinking styles can be very common with individuals on the autism spectrum struggling with anxiety.

- **Mental Filter:** “tunnel vision” - only seeing the negative aspects of situations. Only paying attention to certain type of evidence.
- **Jumping to conclusion:** predicting the future, and mind reading (see projecting example above)
- **Over -generalizing:** believing that the results of one situation predict the results of all future situations. If your thoughts often involve the words "all," "never," "always," and "every" you might be over-generalizing.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

<p>All or nothing thinking</p>  <p>Sometimes called 'black and white thinking'</p> <p><i>If I'm not perfect I have failed</i></p> <p><i>Either I do it right or not at all</i></p>	<p>Over-generalising</p> <p><i>"everything is always rubbish"</i></p> <p><i>"nothing good ever happens"</i></p> <p>Seeing a pattern based upon a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw</p>
<p>Mental filter</p>  <p>Only paying attention to certain types of evidence.</p> <p><i>Noticing our failures but not seeing our successes</i></p>	<p>Disqualifying the positive</p>  <p>Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another</p> <p><i>That doesn't count</i></p>
<p>Jumping to conclusions</p>  <p>$2 + 2 = 5$</p> <p>There are two key types of jumping to conclusions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mind reading (Imagining we know what others are thinking)• Fortune telling (predicting the future)	<p>Magnification (catastrophising) & minimisation</p>  <p>Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophising), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important</p>

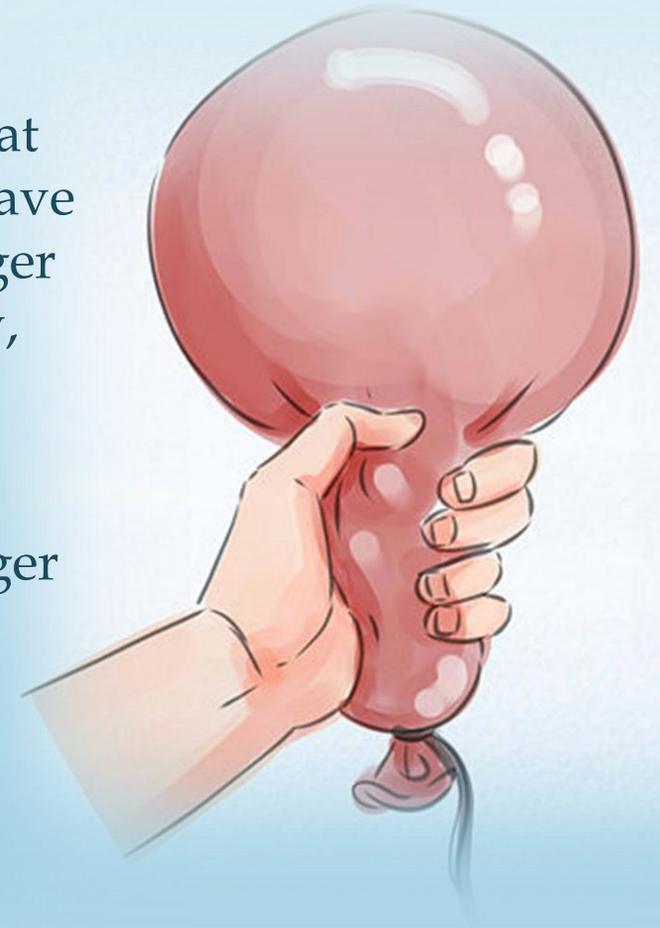
Balloon full of Anger

Helping our clients understand what anger is and how to release it appropriately can be very important.

Using balloons to represent anger can be an effective technique that provides a visual picture of what anger is and the force that it can have on oneself and one's environment. It can allow them to see how anger can build up inside and how, if it is not released slowly and safely, anger can explode and hurt them and/or others.

It can be an effective technique for individuals who have difficulty controlling their anger and for individuals who internalize their anger instead of expressing it.

Be aware of sensory sensitivity when using the technique with individuals on the autism spectrum.



Using Visual CBT to teach social communicational skills

Inside - Outside Boxes *Inner-Outer Thoughts*

- Put images and/or words on the outside of the box to represent the qualities and thoughts you share with others.
- Put images and/or words on the inside of the box that represent the inner qualities and thoughts that are hidden to most people.



My Reputation on Campus

Living on Campus can be both fun, and a challenge. It is fun and interesting to live alone, but living alone can also be a challenge. I don't have parents or family members nearby to remind me to do things any longer, and must rely often on myself to stay focused and organized.

Living on campus with people I don't know well is also a challenge. It's important to behave in a way that helps me create a reputation I can be proud of.

I want my reputation on campus to be:

- Someone who is

Today, I'll work on making a positive reputation by:

My Reputation on Campus

Living on campus can be both fun, and a challenge. It is fun and interesting to live alone, but living alone can also be a challenge. I don't have parents or family members nearby to remind me to do things any longer, and must rely often on myself to stay focused and organized.

Living on campus and attending class with people I don't know very well is also a challenge. It's important to behave in a way that helps me create a reputation I can be proud of. I know I don't want to have a reputation that I am not very proud of.

I do not want my reputation to be:

Instead, I want my reputation on campus to be:

Today, I'll begin on making a positive reputation by:

My Reputation on Campus

Read aloud daily!

My name is John and I am...

- Someone who is nice

I will be like Buddy- someone people can go to for anything and not feel judged

I will do this by always listening when someone needs to talk and never judging them for their actions.

- Someone who is easy going

I will not look for fights, keep my composure and try to be more passive.

I will do this by sharing stressful or emotional situations with 3 or 4 people instead of anyone who will listen to my story. After I get it out to those people I will make the decision to let it 'roll off my back'

- Someone who cares about others

I will be like my Mom- she will do anything for anybody

I will do this by beginning to care about what others think about things and talk with them about it if they want to.

- Someone who is clean

I will dress nice, bath daily, brush my teeth twice a day and practice good basic hygiene (deodorant, shaving, ect.) I will also do my laundry every week and clean my dorm room so I am not so stressed out when I can't find things.

- Someone who is independent

I will do things on my own and if I need help ask.

I will do this by learning how to best ask for help, start doing things I want to do alone if no one else wants to come.

- Someone who is well-balanced

I will balance fun time with school

I will do this by staying on task, cutting back on breaks, not procrastinating, save my fun time for Friday's after tutoring and I will continue working on academics on Sunday afternoon.

- Someone who is hard working

I will be someone who gets their work done and turns in presentable work.

I will do this by Staying on task, no matter how big or small the assignment is I will always give 100% effort.

Morning Journal

❑ **As I prepare to start my day, I recognize that I:**

_____ Feel calm, and enthusiastic about the day

_____ Feel somewhat calm, but with a controllable level of anxiety, frustration or other similar feelings

_____ Feel overwhelmed – or close to overwhelmed – and probably should do something that will help me relax, or call the College Program staff for advice or support

❑ **I understand that sometimes the unexpected can occur. Classes can be canceled suddenly, and plans that I have made can fall through for a variety of reasons. If unexpected events occur today, I will handle it by: (space for comments)**

❑ **Staying focused is important in helping me stay organized, and keeping my anxiety level low. One thing I plan to do today that will help me stay focused on my goals is: (space for comments)**

Evening Journal

☐ As I finish up my day, I realize that I:

_____ Feel calm, and enthusiastic about the day

_____ Feel somewhat calm, but with a controllable level of anxiety, frustration or other similar feelings

_____ Feel overwhelmed – or close to overwhelmed – and probably should do something that will help me relax, or call the College Program staff for advice or support

☐ One thing that occurred today that I did not expect was: (space for comments)

☐ I handled that unexpected event:

_____ Very well! _____ Pretty well _____ OK _____ Not so well _____ Poorly

☐ If I had the event to do over again, I would do it:

1. The same way
2. Differently, and here's how: (space for comments)

