

## Psychoeducational and Psychotherapeutic Support Strategies in Asperger Syndrome

Presented to:  
Kentucky Autism Training Center

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## Asperger Syndrome

- ▶ Characteristic symptoms of autism (mild to intense), average to above average intelligence
- ▶ On-time, age-appropriate language development (e.g., functional first words by 1 year, multiple word combinations by 2 years, full sentences by 3 years)

## Today's talk will apply to???

- ▶ Several subcategories of autism spectrum disorders: High Functioning Autism, PDD-NOS, Asperger Syndrome
- ▶ HFA characteristic symptoms of autism (mild to intense) average to above average intelligence, may have history of language delays
- ▶ **DSM V does not plan to differentiate between subtypes**

## Typical Differences seen in Asperger Syndrome or HFA

- ▶ Differences in Socialization
  - Socially "aloof", prefers solitary activities
  - or*
  - Socially active & interested, yet socially "odd"
  - Unusual quality eye contact
  - Flat/unusual emotional expression
  - Unusual/odd/indiscriminate imitation
  - Differences in peer play skills (or differences in adult interaction skills)
  - Challenges with understanding social rules

## Typical Differences seen in Asperger Syndrome or HFA

- ▶ Differences in Communication
  - Good vocabulary but difficulties with auditory comprehension (better expressive language than receptive)
  - Challenges in following verbal directions (esp. in groups)
  - Difficulty with the give and take of conversation
  - Driven or perseverative talk on preferred topics
  - Literal understanding of language (confused by metaphors/sarcasm)
  - Inappropriate/unusual questions
  - Unusual speech intonation, volume, rhythm, and/or rate
  - Challenges in asking for help
  - May use echolalia (immediate, delayed)

## Typical Differences seen in Asperger Syndrome or HFA

- ▶ Repetitive Interests, Activities, and Behaviors
  - Imagination may be less flexible; “creative” play may re-enact familiar scripts
  - Challenged by transitions/changes in schedule
  - Wants things “just so”
  - Unusual responsiveness to sensory experiences: sounds, visual details, touch, textures, foods
  - May engage in unusual body movements (flap hand, look at fingers, etc.)
  - Obsessive talk, compulsive actions and/or rituals

## Typical Differences seen in Asperger Syndrome or HFA

- ▶ Cognitive Functioning
  - Procedural, mechanical skills generally intact and may be outstanding! (e.g., math computation, reading decoding) **Baron-Cohen’ “systematizing”**
  - Complex processing of information relatively impaired (e.g., reading comprehension)
  - Difficulties with abstract thinking (concrete, misses the “big picture,” focuses on irrelevant details)
  - Needs support with organization (initiating, planning, carrying out, finishing tasks)
  - Sequencing challenges (may lack sense of time or be over focused on time)

## Typical Differences seen in Asperger Syndrome or HFA

- ▶ Fine/Gross Motor Differences (**not** seen in all)
  - Messy handwriting
  - Awkward gait
  - Clumsiness

## Intervention Areas in today's workshop

- ▶ Psychotherapeutic Interventions
  - Of interest to counselors, therapists, and other mental health professionals
  - Possibly of interest to family members or individuals with Asperger Syndrome/HFA
- ▶ Psychoeducational Interventions
  - Of interest to professionals working in schools or other educational settings
  - Of interest to family members
  - Possibly of interest to individuals with Asperger Syndrome/HFA

## Cognitive/Behavioral Therapy with Clients with Asperger Syndrome

- ▶ Associated Social-Emotional Difficulties
- ▶ Overall Tips
- ▶ Components of Therapy (Atwood, 1999)
  - Assessment
  - Affective Education
  - Social Skills Training
  - Cognitive Restructuring
  - Stress Management & Relaxation Training
  - Self-Reflection
  - Self-advocacy

## Social-Emotional Challenges Sometimes Associated with AS/ HFA

- ▶ Mood Disorders
  - e.g., Desire for friends but aware of difficulties with achieving and maintaining friendships
- ▶ Anxiety Disorder
- ▶ Social Interaction Difficulties
  - e.g., Need skills training
  - e.g., Difficulty recognizing other person's thoughts
- ▶ Rigidity in values and interests
  - e.g., May have difficulty with compromise
  - e.g., May make extreme statements, no middle ground
  - e.g., Can't befriend a co-worker
- ▶ Distortions in thinking, incorrect assumptions
  - e.g., either too negative or too positive self-image

## Tips for Therapy with someone with AS/HFA

- ▶ Who is requesting the therapy?
- ▶ Establishing rapport
- ▶ Practicing skills over and over
- ▶ Patience!
- ▶ Working with client to come to sessions regularly

## Therapy Components: Assessment

- ▶ Interview
- ▶ Rapport
- ▶ Parent & Teacher Behavior Checklists
- ▶ Self Checklists for Adults
  - (ASEBA, BASC, MMPI-RF, Burns Anxiety and Depression)
- ▶ Reviewing school assessments, records
- ▶ Parent or Partner Interview

## Therapy Components: Affective Education

- ▶ Improve ability to detect others' emotions
  - Body Language Tips
  - Journal re: self and others' reactions
    - (e.g., to compliments)
- ▶ Understanding one's own emotions
  - Worksheets

## Therapy Components: Social Skills Training

- ▶ Problem-solving
- ▶ Role-play (e.g., compliment practice)
- ▶ Bubble Talk
- ▶ Explaining/reviewing social "rules" through social stories
- ▶ Social Effectiveness Therapy (Turner & Beidel)

## Social Effectiveness Therapy

- ▶ Originally designed for individuals with social phobia, social anxiety
- ▶ A complete social skills program—instruction and rehearsal
- ▶ Ideally—16 weeks of group meetings
- ▶ ECU has used this program for teens and adults with Asperger Syndrome from 2005–2010

## Therapy Components: Cognitive Restructuring

- ▶ Identifying and changing negative self-talk
- ▶ Identifying and changing cognitive distortions
- ▶ Enhancing thinking flexibility, learning to seek clarification
- ▶ “Rose Colored Glasses!”

## Therapy Components: Stress Management, Coping, & Relaxation

- ▶ Relaxation Training
- ▶ Problem Solving
- ▶ Goal/Priority Setting
- ▶ Scheduling and Organizational Assistance
- ▶ Coping Strategy Training
- ▶ Organizational Strategy Training



## Therapy Components

- ▶ Self-understanding
- ▶ Education about the autism spectrum
- ▶ Self-advocacy
- ▶ Connecting with others on the spectrum
  - Online
  - In person (informally, through social or advocacy groups, conferences)
  - Bibliotherapy

## Therapy Components: Home/Residential Motivational System

- ▶ Written Reward System
- ▶ Responsibility List
- ▶ Task List
- ▶ Other Home Strategies...
- ▶ Key... to have someone monitoring and supporting—parent, tutor/advocate...
  - e.g. has this person been coming to class? Showing up for meals?



## CHANGING GEARS:

### Psychoeducational Intervention

#### 4 BASIC PRINCIPLES



1. Individualize
2. Make events predictable
  - Routines
  - Schedules
3. Make expectations clear (visually)
4. Make learning interesting (special interests)

## Psychoeducational Intervention

#### 3 BASIC STRATEGIES



1. Routines
2. Written, Individual Schedules
3. Written Directions (Work System)

## NEXT:

- ▶ Psychoeducational Intervention Techniques to Address Specific Characteristics Associated with HFA/AS



## Techniques:

### Language and Communication

- ▶ Write it down!
- ▶ Adjust complexity of language
- ▶ Provide step by step written directions
- ▶ Present information visually
- ▶ Use concrete speech. Teach slang, teasing, etc.
- ▶ Support help-asking skills

## Techniques: Social Interaction

- ▶ Allow alone time
- ▶ Educate peers and enlist their support
- ▶ Promote peer interaction (clubs, structured games, special interests)
- ▶ Matter of fact, caring manner (not subtle facial, emotional cues)
- ▶ Individualized Social Rules
- ▶ Avoid extended verbal social reasoning (How do you think I feel?)
- ▶ Help generalize social routines, rules
- ▶ Concrete social skills training
- ▶ Remember that unusual social behavior is part of the person--don't "work on" everything

## Techniques:

Restricted Interest, Sameness Need, Sensory Issues

- ▶ Use areas of special interest
  - Reinforcers
  - To promote peer interaction
  - To increase interest in academics
  - To develop career and academic skills, choice of major
- ▶ Provide alternate activities for sensorily difficult situations
- ▶ Individualized schedule to ease transitions and changes
- ▶ Finished routines
- ▶ Use repetitive motor behaviors as a clue that the person needs something

## Techniques: Managing Emotional Swings/Crises

- ▶ Teach social behaviors in "neutral" times
- ▶ Provide a "get away"
- ▶ Use direct, short verbal phrases; try giving written directions ("Please sit down.") Limit "reasoning".
- ▶ Try to make sure student can meet task demands (e.g., simplify demand if needed)
- ▶ Functionally analyze the emotional behavior

## Techniques: Managing Associated Difficulties

- ▶ Organizational Assistance
  - Backpacks, fanny packs, labeled folders
- ▶ Highlight Important Material
  - Highlight key concepts
  - Reduce # of items on page, use larger print, highlight where answers are to go
- ▶ Help with handwriting
  - Shorten assignment
  - Reduce or eliminate "copying" from board, etc.
  - Teach keyboarding
  - Let person choose (pencil, pen, printing, cursive)
  - Allow audio recording answers for assignment
  - Use peer note taker