Strategies for Addressing Anxiety Related to COVID-19

Facilitators: Karen L. Weigle, PhD & Jill Hinton, PhD
Licensed Psychologists

www.centerforstartservices.org
What we will cover:

• Anxiety in IDD
• Strategies to manage anxiety
• Fostering Learned Hopefulness
Some Anxiety Symptoms

- Restless, fidget, pace
- Sweating
- Elevated pulse rate
- Fatigue
- Poor concentration
- Inattention, distractibility
- Memory problems
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Sleep problems
- Agitation
- Yell, scream, aggression
Rates in IDD

• People with ASD are about 4 times more likely to develop a “clinically significant disturbance” *

• IDD in general: Higher than neurotypical population
  o 19.1% in past year**
  o 31% lifetime rate/adolescence rate**

*Bradley et al. (2004)
Developmental Effects

- Alter clinical features, producing symptoms similar to those described for children without ID
- General effects described in research about children
  - Tantrums
  - Freezing
  - Crying
  - Nightmares
  - Clinging
- Cognitive disintegration: global deterioration
- Regressive and primitive behaviors may be common
Strategies

Denise Bronzino, PhD, Clinical Director, NY START 5
Maggie Robbins, MA, LCAT, RDT, Clinical Director, NC START Central
Alyse M. Scura, LMHC, Clinical Director, NY START 5
Best Practices for Addressing Anxiety

- Meet individuals where they are
- Incorporate both open and closed questions
- Provide visual supports
- Adapt to the individual’s level of emotional understanding
- Allow “sitting in silence” or processing time
- Provide opportunities for communication through a variety of modalities: art, movement, AAC, visuals and writing
- MOST IMPORTANTLY: VALIDATE!
Consider Vulnerabilities When Implementing Support

• Communication
  o Limited coping reservoir may lead to atypical presentation of anxiety

• Address associated conditions: feelings of hopelessness or feeling burdensome, lack of autonomy and mood disorders

• Executive Functioning
  o Impulse Control
  o Working Memory
Behavioral Strategies: Environment & Caregiver

Anxiety is contagious!

- Importance of creating/maintaining calm, structured, and predictable environment
  - Morning check-in
  - Schedule, plan for the day
  - Taking space
- Caregiver self-care
- Caregiver mindfulness-based strategies in supporting individuals with IDD
Behavioral Strategies for the Individual

- Exercise, movement, yoga
- Mindfulness-based strategies
- Grounding techniques
- Diaphragmatic or deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Soles of the Feet
- Meditation
Case Examples

Morning family relaxation exercise with “Jack”

Anxiety monster metaphor with “Michael”

Nurturing the wilting flower with “Sam”

Soles of the Feet meditation with “Allison”
Strategies

- Increase expression of feelings and correlating corresponding coping strategies
- Visuals with mood and coping skills: stoplight system, 5-point scales, my mood/my choice
- Allowing space/time for processing that is consistent with the individuals processing times
- Journaling, timers, incorporate mood tracking into a session
- Implementation of trauma informed approaches that validate past experience as it relates to present emotional expression
- Positivity Journal, Mindfulness, Validation
**Strategies**

- Implementation of strength spotting and PERMA for resilience and self-esteem building
- Provided agreed upon choices for emotion support to reduce anxiety. Individuals may struggle to identify strategies independently due to executive functioning
  - Provide reminders, visuals, practice when things are going well
- Timed approach to emotion processing in order to practice transition back to supportive daily schedule
- Reframing “attention seeking” as “connection seeking”
Connection Seeking

Reframing "ATTENTION SEEKING"
by looking beyond behaviour to unexpressed needs

CONNECT WITH ME
(Connectivity Seeking)
See me. Hear me. Accept me. Show interest & delight in me. Hold me in your mind.

UNDERSTAND ME
(Attunement Seeking)
Consider & respond to my needs; organise, validate & hold my feelings; be curious about what’s happening for me.

PROTECT ME
(Attachment Seeking)
See my extreme distress and the different ways it is being expressed; support me to regulate; help me to feel safe.

Hidden Treasure with Tracey Farrell
Adapted DBT Strategies for Anxiety

- Utilization of adapted DBT strategies can promote reframing of challenging situations and instead provides recognition of how current emotional states impact action
  - Thoughts/Feelings/Action
  - Emotion Recognition Scale
DBT Strategies

- Emotion Regulation Skills System for Cognitively Challenged Clients, Julie Brown
- DBT-Informed Approach
  - All The Time Skills
  - Calm Only Skills
All the Time Skills: Clear Picture

- Clear Picture: helps notice what is happening inside and outside in that moment
All the Time Skills: Safety Plan

- Safety Plan: helps to know how to handle risky situations that are happening now or in the future.
All the Time Skills: New-Me Activities

- New-Me Activities: helps focus attention, feel better, distraction and fun!
Calm Only Skill: Expressing Myself

- Expressing Myself: sharing what is on their mind and in their heart to help stay on track.
More Strategies

- Social Stories
  - Provides support in helping the individual in understanding the “why”
  - Provides context and a practice for how things will happen or expectations

- Routine and Structure
  - Provides consistency
  - Predictability
  - Concrete supports
More Strategies

- Easy Access to tools and resources
- YouTube Channel
- Search NYSTART Region 5
Summary of Strategies

• Provide structure which creates a calmer, predictable environment; sense of control
• Teach strategies to regulate physiological responses
• Help to identify and express emotions
• Focus on strengths

Goal is to address immediate stressors AND build resilience
What Contributes to Resilience

- Biology
- Psychosocial
- Self-Regulation
- Mental Agility
- Optimism
- Self Efficacy
- Connection
- Positive Systems
QUESTIONS?
Resources


• https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=nystart+region+5