

## **Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders** ***Dealing with Stress and Anxiety***

Individuals with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome experience stress and anxiety on a daily basis. This high stress/anxiety level usually becomes obvious as loud and difficult behaviour. Your challenge, as a teacher, is to read the small signs of "anxiety rising", before you reach the stage of loud disruptive behaviour that will disorganize your entire classroom.

### ***Here are some of the common sources of stress/anxiety for ASD individuals:***

- weak language skills (inability to follow a verbal interaction "at speed", misunderstanding of what another person has said, inability to quickly and clearly express needs and wants)
- weak social interaction skills (unable to follow a social interaction "at speed", unable to read more subtle social cues such as tone of voice and facial expression, misunderstanding of motivation of another person, negative association with previous "social interactions gone wrong")
- academic work which is above the student's level (may be able to do the "form" but not understand the "content", may not understand the language of instruction, may be overwhelmed by the total amount of work, or the speed of presentation of new material)
- homework (see Tony Attwood's article "Should children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder be exempted from doing homework?", available on his website at [www.tonyattwood.com](http://www.tonyattwood.com) under "Papers")
- measurement of performance (eg. making mistakes, winning and losing, being first in line, being ranked in class) - this can cause stress even if the child is first, because they fear falling from that position - for these individuals, perfection and winning seem to represent "safety" (they are not striving for the top for the same reasons as other high achievers)
- change in routine or schedule (especially if the change is not anticipated and is explained verbally)
- sensory overload (may be hypersensitive to noise, light, touch, smell)
- "missing things" - this seems to be a focus of anxiety for some individuals with ASD (maybe because these individuals frequently "miss" pieces of information in the course of everyday events, and expend a lot of "thinking energy" trying to fill in the gaps in their knowledge - to miss an entire event may seem like too much to catch up on)
- seasonal disintegration - some individuals with AS experience higher anxiety at certain seasons of the year - this may correspond to seasonal allergies (some children may have conventional allergy symptoms like headaches, congestion, asthma and itchy eyes, as well as displaying frustration, inattention, emotional lability and other difficult behaviours)

### ***What are the "small signs" of stress rising?***

These will vary depending on the student. It is important for you to learn to identify these subtle behaviour changes in your ASD student, so that you have a chance to intervene before more spectacular negative behaviours occur. Here are some behaviours you might see:

- small "tics" and repetitive behaviours (eg. eye blinks, facial grimaces, nose or throat noises, head movements, arm or hand movements)
- language scripting (eg. reciting language from a movie or book, apparently unrelated to the situation) - certain phrases may reliably indicate stress (eg. "Do I HAVE to do it?")
- distressed or angry facial expression
- whole body movement (eg. getting up from desk and pacing, rocking, throwing things)
- inappropriate laughter
- rising volume and/or tone of voice

### ***What can I do to reduce stress and anxiety in the classroom?***

#### ***1. Identify the sources of stress***

- look at the context of the behaviour (what happened just before, at the same time, just after)
- make a "best guess" about the source, then make changes based on that guess (eg. if you think the level of the work is too hard, try modifying the academic materials, on the other hand, if you think the noise level in the classroom is too high, you might try to create a quiet working space for the student)
- if signs of stress lessen with the changes you make, you're on the right track; if stress level remains the same or rises, you need to look at the situation again, and see what else might be causing the student's distress

#### ***2. Structure and routine in the classroom***

- many teaching approaches that are advocated for working with ASD students take advantage of the calming effect of structure, routine and predictability (eg. TEACCH)
- typically developing students constantly take in auditory and visual information that helps them predict, with a fair degree of certainty, what will happen next - they also depend on their language skills to help them figure out what's happening, if suddenly the situation is unfolding in an unpredictable way
- ASD students do not take in this information, and life is often a series of unpleasant surprises - the more you can remove the element of surprise from the classroom situation, the calmer your student will be
- establish a routine early in the school year, write it out in social story format, use visual cues from the story (eg. reminder cards) to help the student connect the real-life situation to the one described in the story

#### ***3. Use visual supports to back-up verbal language***

- it's a good "rule of thumb" to back up all verbal information with written (and/or picture) support
- individual written/picture information sheets at the student's desk are optimal (even if you have a large visual for the entire class)
- presence of visual supports can decrease the general anxiety about missing information

#### **4. Visual/written schedules**

- all students with AS should work from a visual/written schedule
- large schedules can include all of the day's events - need to be readily available for checking throughout the day (may be posted in the classroom, or at the student's desk)
- anxiety over transitions and changes in schedule are reduced when the schedule is written down (student comes to count on the information being correct and the "last word" on what is happening)
- smaller "task schedules" can help students to manage academic work independently (they can see how much there is to be done, and when their breaks will be)
- may be useful to teach student how to read a digital clock, and connect their personal schedules to observable time displays (ASD individuals tend to have a poor inner sense of the passage of time)

#### **5. Modified academic work**

- focus on the language level of the academic tasks - this is frequently the stress-inducing piece (eg. student may be strong in math, but may not understand the language used to describe new concepts)
- instructions should use simple language structures and vocabulary
- make use of visual instructions and demonstration
- support student's learning of new vocabulary (have appropriate level dictionary available at workplace, demonstrate how to use the dictionary, perhaps begin a "personal dictionary" of new words learned in the context of school topics)
- intersperse "language-intense" tasks with activities that are more visual, to allow "thinking breaks"

#### **6. Use of favourite topics**

- you can get an anxious child to approach new concepts by presenting them in the context of favourite topics
- use your imagination - eg., if a child likes maps, and your math topic is measuring linear distance, get the child to measure different driving routes through the city and compare to see which is longer
- get into the habit of figuring out the key objective of an academic activity, then brainstorm with other school personnel about how to achieve that goal using unconventional means (eg. "1-to-1 counting", rather than "use a number line")
- for a child who loves gross motor play, add counting and letter/word skills into play with a small trampoline, physio ball or other items from your sensory room

#### **7. Homework**

- the student with ASD expends a lot of energy during the school day, just keeping up with the requirements of the regular classroom activities
- if that student has to also do several hours of homework at night, they will constantly be running at a very high stress level
- if the ASD student consistently cannot finish the regular workload in the classroom, you should probably decrease the overall amount of work (as well as modifying the way of presenting the concepts, so that individual tasks are not as taxing)
- if you want to encourage the pattern of doing some academic activities outside of the school environment, consider allowing the child to do special interest projects that they can work on at their own speed, and that can then be presented by the child to his/her classmates
- also consider the fact that many ASD students already have extra therapy and tutoring sessions outside of school hours - their schedules are often formidable

## **8. Direct teaching of social skills**

- this is most effectively done through social stories, social problem solving and role-playing
- as teaching staff, you have the best opportunity to observe the student's interactions with peers in the classroom and on the playground, and to identify problem situations
- this information can be passed on to persons who are working 1-to-1 with the student (may be the resource teacher, an educational assistant, tutor, parent or outside professional), so that direct teaching of more positive social responses can occur
- once social skills have been presented in a 1-to-1 setting, teachers and EA's in the classroom can support the student in using those new skills in everyday situations

## **9. Body breaks**

- intersperse sit-down thinking activities with chances for the student to get up and move around (some schools may have special rooms set up for students to take a fun "body break")
- physical movement can help ASD students to release tension, clear their heads and be ready to sit down and concentrate again

## **10. Seasonally modified classroom requirements**

- certain individuals on the autism spectrum have extreme reactions to seasonal changes - this may correspond to physical allergies to specific substances (eg. mould, dust)
- changes you may notice are increased stress/anxiety and irritability, increased emotional lability (quick laughter, tears and anger), as well as an increase in difficult and disruptive behaviour
- if you have a student who disintegrates seasonally, you need to modify classroom requirements to handle the child's changed physical state
- generally, you might want to decrease the amount (and level) of spoken language that must be processed, allow more frequent "body breaks", work more through highly favourite topics, maintain academic activities rather than introducing new topics
- some children may need to have a shorter school day during their worst seasons

***\* the student with ASD should have identified "safety people" within the school, available at all times during the school day (these are adults, not peers) - these "safety people" are known to have the answers to difficult social questions and are able to help the ASD student find workable solutions to everyday problems - all identified helpers should have a working understanding of this particular student's difficulties \****