Title: Cognitive-behavioral group treatment for anxiety symptoms in children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders

Topics: Family, effective instruction  
Grant Year: 2004

Principal Investigators: Judy Reaven, Ph.D. and Susan Hepburn, Ph.D.  
Funding: $60,000

Institution: The University of Colorado  
Duration: 2 years

Purpose: To determine the effectiveness of anxiety therapy, often used with typically developing children, when applied to children with autism.

Objectives: Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are at a high risk for developing anxiety symptoms. Cognitive behavioral therapies (CBT) have been used to effectively treat anxiety in typically developing children, but have not been used or researched with children with autism-related anxiety symptoms. CBT is based on the understanding that thought (cognition) influences behavior and feelings; by restructuring thought processes, and through the improvement of problem solving skills or coping mechanisms, individuals can help improve behavior. The researchers sought to investigate the effectiveness of a cognitive-behavioral group treatment in reducing anxiety in children with autism.

Study: Thirty-three children with autism (ages 8-14) and their parents participated in the study. Ten of these children were involved in the twelve-week treatment and the rest were placed in a control group. Each weekly session consisted of time spent in a large group, group meetings that separated parents and children, and time spent in individual parent-child pairs. The research team wrote original treatment manuals, based on general cognitive-behavioral approaches, to address the problems faced by individuals with ASD. Parents, children, and facilitators each had different versions of the manual.

Results: Results were based on the comparison of Screening for Childhood Anxiety and Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) scores before and after the treatment period. The SCARED is a self-reported survey instrument used to identify anxiety symptoms. Parents reported a significant decrease in anxiety symptoms among the children in the treatment group, though the children in the treatment group reported no change in anxiety symptoms directly proceeding treatment. At the six and twelve-month follow ups, however, the children reported decreased anxiety symptoms and parents reported maintenance of the effects.

Significance and Implications: Considering the high co-occurrence of ASD and anxiety disorder diagnoses, these results can be extremely helpful for addressing anxiety and improving the lives of children with ASD. The study indicates that the cognitive behavioral therapy designed by the researchers was effective in decreasing children’s anxiety, as reported by children with autism and their parents. This study also displays the effectiveness of group
treatments, which allows for more people to benefit at once. According to the results, CBT (and particularly the manual designed by the researchers) should be considered when developing interventions to help children with autism decrease their anxiety.

**Practical Relevance:** These results are particularly useful for parents and educators of children with ASD that suffer from high anxiety. Parents of these children can present the study results to a child’s teacher or therapist and suggest using this clinical technique to manage anxiety. Educators and clinicians can employ this program in their classrooms or clinics as part of an effort to help decrease anxiety and manage related problem behaviors.

**In Publication:**

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