Managing Anxiety in Individuals with ASD

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- ASD can present differently from person to person in onset, symptoms and severity
- ASD affects 3-4 males to 1 female
- Different skills domains can be affected.
- The rate of concurrent psychiatric, medical, motor and speech impairments is high.
- Differing presentations can make diagnosis and intervention extremely challenging.

Treatment Approach

- Should come from a multidisciplinary approach, with interventions designed to address not only developmental, cognitive and adaptive skills, but also medical and psychiatric comorbidities.

Multidisciplinary Team

- Psychologists, behavioral therapists(e.g social skills, behavioral mgt, individual therapy)
- Speech and language services
- OT/PT services
- Pediatricians, Neurologists and Psychiatrists

Anxiety in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder may be particularly vulnerable to developing anxiety more frequently and sometimes more intensely than typical children.
- Recognizing that anxiety can manifest differently from person to person is the first step in crafting an effective, individualized treatment plan that involves parents, teachers and health care professionals.

Anxiety in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Individuals with ASD experience higher rates of anxiety as compared to other groups (Bellini, 2004; Russell & Sofronoff, 2005; White et al, 2009.)
- 44-55% of children with ASD meet criteria for an anxiety disorder (White et al, 2009); with rates of symptoms of anxiety varying from 11-84%.
Anxiety in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Anxiety is often higher in individuals with better language and cognitive abilities. As children with ASD get older, they become more aware of their social environment and often have difficulty navigating their environment in concert with growing middle school demands.

- Children with ASD can be easily overwhelmed by social or unfamiliar situations.

- For these individuals, it can be difficult understanding how others feel or how others may react to a situation at hand and this can cause the child to feel stressed and anxious.

- Difficulties communicating anxiety symptoms can further complicate matters and often times can manifest in an increase in challenging behaviors, such as stimming, temper tantrums, self-injury, or social avoidance.

Medical Problems

- Metabolic/genetic conditions
- Seizures
- Sleep disorders
- Allergies

Medical Problems

- Ruling out medical issues such as infections (ear, respiratory, skin,) GI problems, as well as sleep disorders is extremely important, particularly in lower functioning, nonverbal individuals where changes in challenging behaviors may be indicative of an underlying medical problem.

CBT for Anxiety

- Some studies have shown that behavioral interventions can improve anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents with autism who struggle with anxiety. Cognitive behavioral therapy can be especially helpful for high-functioning adolescents and adults with autism and anxiety (Chalfant, Rapee, & Carroll, 2007, White et al, 2009.)
Medications for Anxiety

- While there are no medications approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) specifically for ASD-related anxiety, medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs,) which are commonly used to treat anxiety disorders in the general population have been used with some benefit in persons with ASD and anxiety, in conjunction with behavioral interventions or cognitive behavioral therapy.
- 60% of poor responders to behavioral tx respond to meds

Stress management

- Identify Stressors- Provides information to parents and to the child. Assists in identifying those situations where environmental changes may be addressed to aide with stress prevention.
- Stress hierarchy- Categorizes the stressors for the child. Use of visual aids

Stress Reduction

- Let them make choices whenever possible.
- Being consistent with “house rules” provides predictability. Exercise and relaxation should be part of the routine of the day!
- Utilize visual supports .
- Know your child’s stressors and minimize when possible.
- Plan ahead and be prepared!

Research Still Needed!

- Few (if any) empirically supported, validated treatments for low-functioning children with autism and related difficulties.
- Although more research is needed, a recent study examining the effects of modified mindfulness-based therapy (MBT) showed a significant reduction in anxiety in the intervention group.

References