Neurodevelopmental Conditions and Anxiety
Common Causes/Effective Solutions
Webinar Sponsored by NJCTS
Presented by Christopher Lynch, Ph.D.
Psychologist and Author of:
Totally Chill: My Complete Guide to Staying Calm
Anxiety Management for Kids on the Spectrum: Your Guide to Preventing Meltdowns and Unlocking Potential

Diagnostic Overshadowing

What is Anxiety?

- Cognitive Symptoms: Worry, rumination, repetitive thoughts and images involving danger,
- Physical Symptoms: Tension, rapid breathing, increased heart rate, trembling, sweating, dizziness, nausea,
- Emotional Symptoms: Fear, panic, stressed, irritability
- Behavioral Symptoms: Avoidance, exacerbation of tics and compulsions, behavioral challenges
Anxiety in Intellectual Disability


474 participants, ages 7 to 20, Borderline to Moderate Intellectual Disability, 38.6% Had met criteria for at least one disorder, highest were disruptive behavior disorder: 25.1% and Anxiety Disorder: 21.5%.

Anxiety in Autism


31 Studies, 2,121 <18yo with ASD, some used interviews (41.9%), some used questionnaires (58.1%) to assess Findings: 39.6% at least one comorbid DSM-IV anxiety disorder

Anxiety in ADHD


Literature review of clinical studies across the lifespan Report a 25% Comorbidity rate Note that excess symptoms of ADHD including deficient working memory andPoor sleep
Anxiety in Tourette Syndrome


Looked at 126 Children with Tourette Syndrome

Found 21% comorbidity with Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Recommend screening for both anxiety and depression

---

Why are anxiety levels so high across so many neurodevelopmental conditions?

- Neuroanatomical brain differences
- Neurochemical differences
- Common psychological and neuropsychological characteristics of neurodevelopmental conditions
- Stigma, stress, and strain

---

My Story

Photo Credit: Christopher Lynch, Ph.D.
Cognitive Factors

- Difficulty Adjusting to Change
- Inflexibility

- Difficulty Adjusting to Transition
- Fixed Routines

Cognitive Factors: Strategies

- Minimize Abrupt and/or Multiple Changes
- Ease into Transitions
- Prevent Routines from forming in the first place
- Provide Praise when change and transition are handled well

Sensory Sensitivities

- Noise
- Touch
- Sight
- Small
- Taste
- Others (e.g., Vestibular, Pain, Temperature)
- Overall Narrow 'Sensory Comfort Zone'
Sensory Sensitivities: Strategies

- Minimize Unpleasant Stimulation
- Use Environmental Strategies
- Come up with a coping plan
- Be aware of and aim to keep in Sensory Comfort Zone

Social Challenges

- Language demands in social situations
- Sensory factors in social situations
- Social Skills Development
- Understanding Social Rules and Nuances
- Social anxiety due to tics and other behaviors

Social Challenges: Strategies

- Set up social situations that are likely to foster success not failure (small, structured, strength based)
- Work on social skills to build up confidence (with a focus on Generalization)
- Foster a tolerant atmosphere
Language Demands

- Expressive
- Receptive
- Pragmatic
- Non-Literal

Language Demands: Strategies

- Use Visual Supports
- Clear Communication (Reduced Language when necessary)
- Give Means for Expressing Frustration and Anxiety

Task Frustration

- Motor Skills
- Executive Function Skills
- Abstract Thinking Skills
- Key Academic Areas
Task Frustration: Strategies

- Give means to express task frustration
- Remediate, accommodate, or celebrate
- Consider the timing of tasks
- Present challenging tasks on a graduated basis

Tourette Syndrome, Anxiety and OCD

- More than a third of persons with Tourette Syndrome have comorbid OCD
- Anxiety and it’s reduction through compulsions or rumination is a key component of OCD

Teaching Stress and Anxiety Management Skills

Why?

- Cannot eliminate anxiety
- Won’t always be a supportive person nearby
- Helps to develop confidence, problem solving skills and independence
Relaxation Skills

- Deep Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Imagery
- Meditation
- Yoga/Tai Chi

Strategies for Children with Higher Support Needs

- Means to Express Anxiety
- Music
- Peaceful Place
- Comfort Object
- Active Strategies: e.g. Stress Ball
- Care for the Caregivers

Getting Professional Help for Anxiety Disorders

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Relaxation
- Exposure Therapy
- Cognitive Reframing
- Coordinating with School
- Coordinating with pediatrician, specialists, psychiatrists, and other medical professionals
The Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Anxiety and fear over the virus
- Adjustment to new and changing routines
- Maintaining academic progress and motivation with less one-to-one support
- Coping with the confines of quarantine
- Practical challenges of virtual learning
- Less sociating and extracurricular activity
- UNCERTAINTY

Coping with the Pandemic

- Answer questions honestly but at a level that the child can process
- Maintain structure with regular sleep/wake cycle, routines, and environmental cues
- Add in variety
- Watch for signs of stress (irritability, sleeping problems, change in appetite, crying, behavioral changes)
- Get Individualized Supports for Learning when needed
- Use virtual mental healthcare

Christopher Lynch, Ph.D. Resources
Christopher Lynch, Ph.D. Resources (Continued)

Website: morethanbehavior.com

Blog: Psychology Today: Autism and Anxiety

Social Media: @morethanbehavior

Key Takeaways

- Mental health needs are common across a wide range of neurodevelopmental conditions
- There are things we can do to the environment to address mental health
- These are coping strategies that, with some modification, anyone can effectively learn and practice to improve mental health

Thank You!

Questions and Answers

Christopher Lynch, Ph.D.

[Contact Information]