



# Autism in the Workplace: Strategies for Success

By: Johnathan Payne, MEd. and Grace Powell, OTS



# Learning Objectives

1. Demonstrate understanding of the most common challenges experienced by adults with autism in the workplace as a way to prepare for the transition.
1. Learn practical strategies to overcome these challenges in the workplace.

# Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Refresher

- Areas affected:
  - Communication
  - Socialization
  - Interests and patterns of behavior
- Therefore:
  - Difficulty expressing emotions and thoughts
  - Difficulty making and keeping relationships
  - Difficulty dealing with change and transitions
- For adolescents and adults, these can lead to difficulty during the transition to independent living, further education, or **employment**.



# Employment

- Employment as a gateway to other valued outcomes:
  - Financial well-being
  - Sense of accomplishment
  - Self-worth and confidence
  - Promote independence
  - Lead to new friendships and supportive relationships
  - Connections to the larger community

(Lee & Carter, 2012)

- ~53% of young adults with ASD had work experiences since leaving high school
  - Lowest rate among disability groups

(Shattuck et al., 2012)



# Expectations vs. Reality

- Growing up is hard for anybody
- What you expect?
  - More money
  - More free time
  - More independence
  - More freedom
  - More overall happiness
- The reality?
  - Overwhelmed
  - Uncertain
  - Anxiety
  - Feeling like a “failure”
- Prepare for adulthood by knowing what to EXPECT and learn how to overcome these barriers.



# The **expected** challenges...

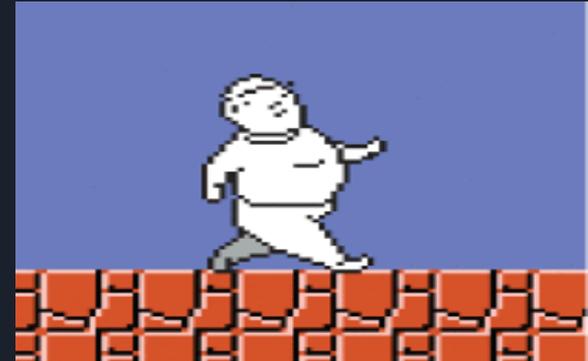
1. Anxiety



2. Social situations



3. Self-efficacy



# Anxiety

Top categories that cause anxiety:

- Coping with change
- Anticipation
- Sensory stimuli
- Unpleasant events

(Gillot & Standen, 2007)

What are some other reasons specific to employment that would cause stress for an adult with autism?



# Coping Skills to Address Anxiety

Trigger



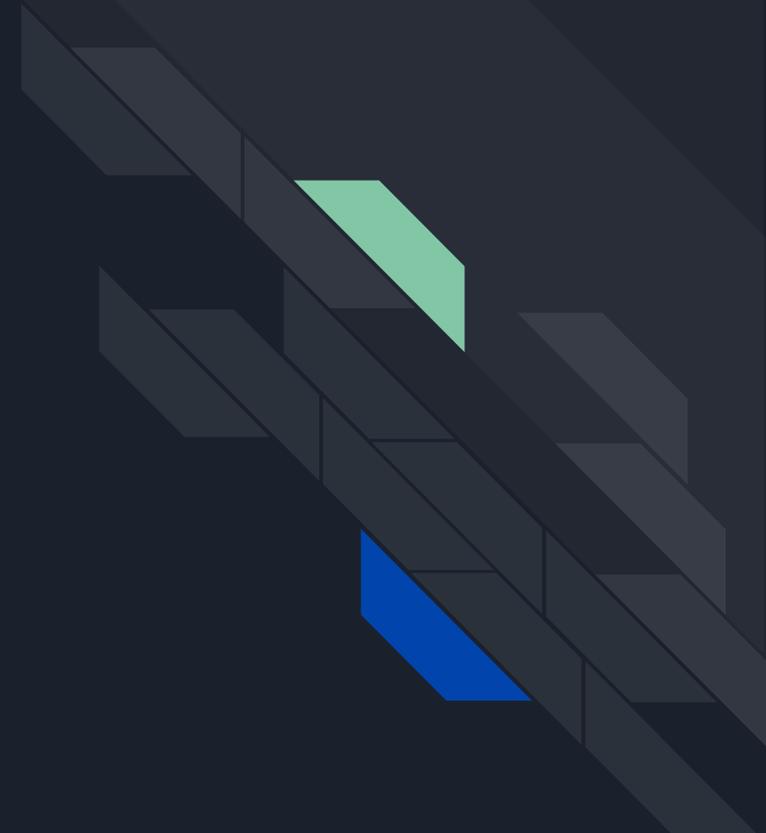
Warning Sign



Solution



The **first step** to managing anxiety in your life is to become aware of your **triggers.**





# Triggers

## General

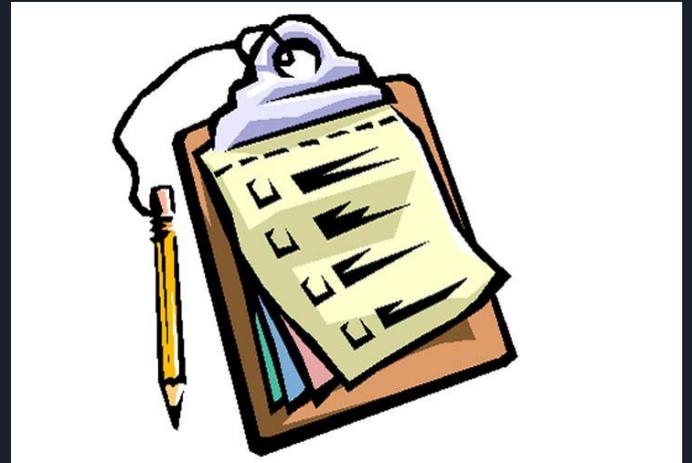
- Sudden change
- Anticipation
- Sensory stimuli
- Unpleasant events
- Crowds
- Making decisions
- Communicating with others
- Losing things
- Explaining diagnosis

## Specific to Work

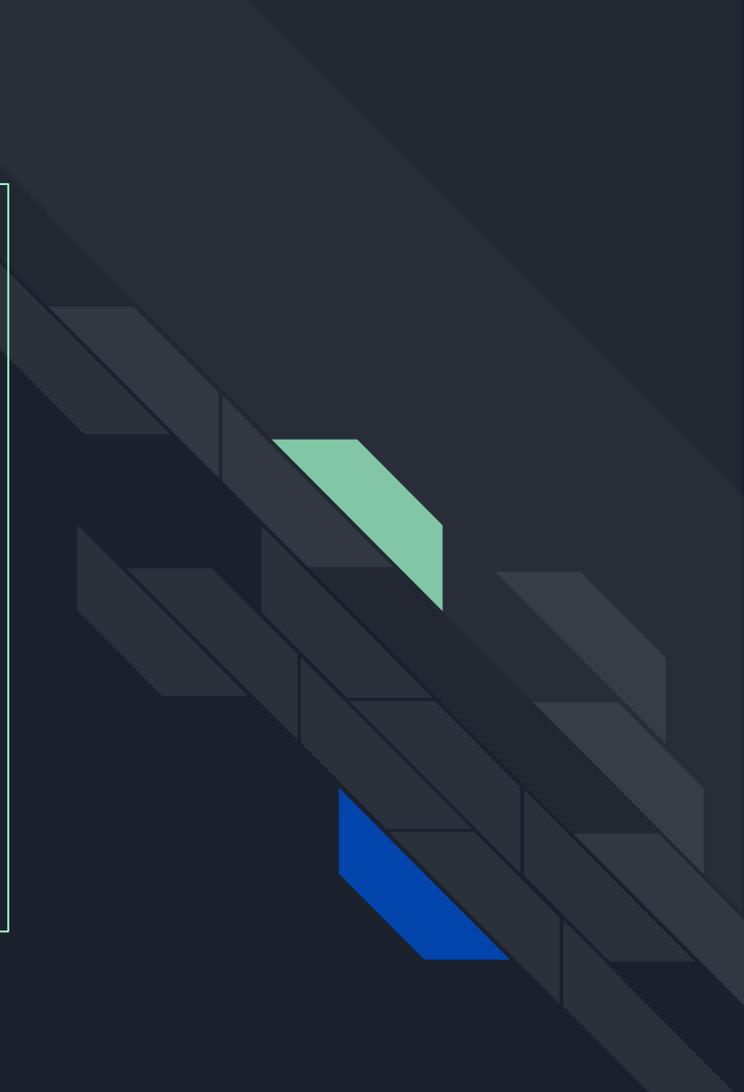
- Preparing for an interview
- Anticipating the day's events upon waking up
- Knowing how to do job
- Responding to feedback or criticism
- Watching coworkers do things "wrong"
- Noises, lights, temperatures, sensory stimuli
- Managing work-life balance

# Identifying Triggers

- Keep a stress awareness diary for a few weeks that lists:
  - Date
  - Time
  - Event
  - Severity
  - Symptoms
  - Coping strategies used
- Look for patterns
- Ask yourself to gain clarity about situation:
  - Controllable or uncontrollable?
  - Important or unimportant?



The **second step** to managing anxiety in your life is to recognize **warning signs.**



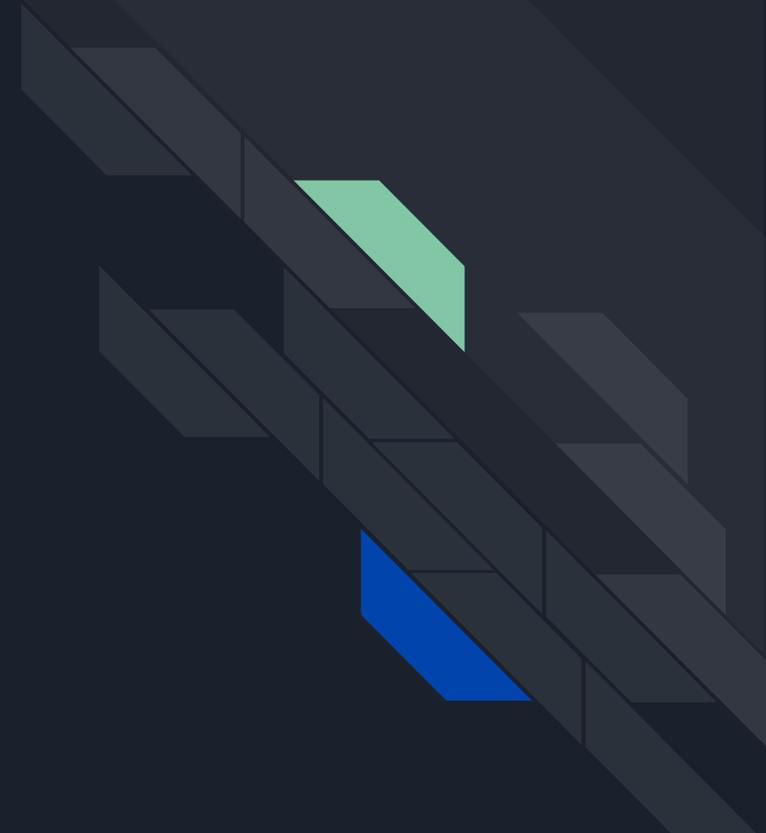
“It’s entirely circumstantial--mine’s pretty much circumstantial so, you know, as soon as I see... as soon as something happens that upsets me, it’s instantaneous--BANG! Like a bucket of cold water to the face.”

OR

“I find that it builds up, it doesn’t just happen like an explosion--it, ah, sort of one thing might trigger it, get it rolling, and then, something else might crop up um that might cause me to get a little bit more anxious like losing stuff.”

(Trembath, Germano, Johanson & Dissanayake, 2012)

The **third step** to managing anxiety in your life is to develop **coping strategies** to use in times of need.



# Coping Strategies

- Listening to music
- Watching movies or TV
- Sleep
- Exercise
- Journaling
- Withdrawal
- Talking it out
- Self-talk
- Deep breathing
- Computer games
- Drugs and alcohol





# Mindfulness- Deep Breathing

## WHY?

- Sympathetic nervous system: “fight or flight”
  - Turns “on” with stress
  - The gas pedal
- Parasympathetic nervous system: “rest and digest”
  - Turns “on” with deep breathing
  - Acts as a “brake”

## HOW?

- Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth
  - One cycle lasting about 6 seconds
- Purposefully notice your breath
  - Feel your stomach rise and fall
- **DEEP** breathing vs shallow breathing
- Let go of thoughts and stresses as you exhale



Let's Practice!!

Breathe in



# Cognitive Restructuring

- I am incompetent for this job
- I will never be good at this job
- My boss hates me
- All of my coworkers think I am stupid
- What else?

OR

- I have many strengths to use as I do this job as best as I can.
- This is new. Expect to feel anxious. It's normal!
- It's okay to make mistakes. Everybody does.
- I don't know what other people are thinking so I need to stop guessing



# Social Skills for Employment

# Social Skills- Communication

- Communicating TO others and interpreting information FROM others
  - Know your audience
  - How does communication look differently in the workplace in comparison to family and friends?
- “Communication skills are ranked FIRST among a job candidate’s ‘must have’ skills and qualities,” according to a 2010 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers



(Department of Labor, 2017)

# Communication- The Interview

## Nonverbal Language:

- Sitting up straight
- Making eye contact
- Demonstrating that he or she is listening
- Dressing professionally
- Handshakes
- Facial expression



## Verbal Language:

- Relevance of content shared
- Answering questions with more than one-word answers
- Sharing information and ideas
- Pitch, speed, voice quality
- Timing of starting and stopping the communication





# Communication- During the Job

## Nonverbal Language:

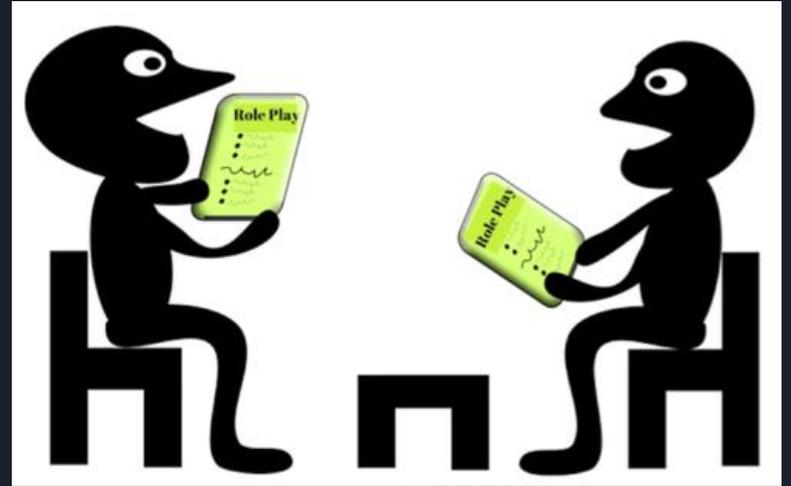
- Showing up on time
- Showing interest in job
- Demonstrate willingness to try new things
- Overall enthusiasm and ATTITUDE

## Verbal Language:

- Sharing information
- Asking for help
- Responding to conflict
- Responding to criticism
- Appropriateness in conversations
  - Do you talk about religion, politics, finances, race, sexual orientation, etc. at work?

# How to Practice? Role Play

- Develop scenarios specific to your situation
- Interview:
  - Have a family member or friend sit down and ask you questions that may come up in the interview
  - In person or over the phone?
  - The more you practice, the more confident you will feel!
- Responding to conflict:
  - Practice the scenario at home and be able to transfer that skill to the workplace



# How to Practice? Video Recording

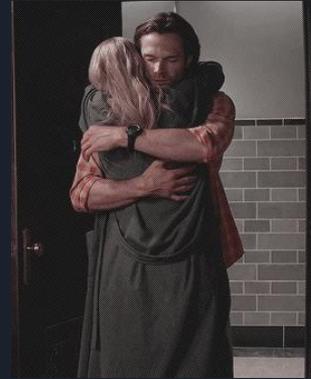
- Similar to role play but instead of practicing with your close family and friends, you make a video to watch and critique
  - What does your body language say?
  - How many times did you look down and away?
  - Is every response relevant to the topic?
- Write down 5 ways you could improve that particular skill



# “Flipping the Switch”

- How do you communicate with your friends? Your family? Your boss? Your co-worker?
  - Why is it different?
  - What are the expectations of each person?
  - What would happen if you greet the interviewer the same as a friend?
- Examples:
  - Saying hello
  - Asking for help
  - Email vs text
  - Showing excitement

(Department of Labor, 2017)





Self-Efficacy



# Self-Efficacy

- Career Decision Self-Efficacy (CDSE): the degree to which individuals feel confident at completing tasks related to career decision making
- The largest effects on CDSE are self-esteem and vocational identity.
  - **Self-esteem: general self concept**
  - Vocational identity: career specific self-concept

(Choi et al., 2012)

Reasons adults with autism may experience low self-esteem:

- Negative comparisons to others
- Thinking globally
  - “Everything is harder for me”
- Overly critical of self
- Teasing or bullying
- Feeling excluded
- Differences = defects

(Ford, n.d.)

# Strengths Based Approach

To address self-esteem, let's focus on the strengths that are an asset to employers.

- Particularly attentive to details
- Meticulous about rules
- Accuracy
- Highly reliable
- Conscientious
- Technically savvy
- Retain detailed factual knowledge
- Evidence excellent long-term memory



# Strengths Based Approach

Example of jobs that seek out these skills:

- Programming
- Engineering
- Accounting
- Library science
- Mathematics
- Drafting
- Journalism
- Lab technical tasks
- Electricians
- Architects
- Musicians
- Bankers
- Plumbers
- Many others!



# A Cultural Shift: Starting with YOU

- Microsoft, along with other companies, has pioneered a new hiring initiative to hire individuals with autism
- “It’s a talent pool that really hasn’t been tapped...We were missing out on an opportunity to bring talent in with autism... People with disabilities are a strength and a force of nature in this company.” - Jenny Lay-Flurrie, chief accessibility officer at Microsoft





# Professional Help

## Anxiety and Self-Efficacy:

- Cognitive Behavior Therapy
- Professional Counseling

## Social Skills:

- Workplace mentor
- STAGES Transition
- Social Clubs for peer modeling



# Conclusion

- **Learn**
  - About yourself-- Anticipate the challenges and know your strengths.
- **Practice**
  - Knowing the skills and interventions that are effective, put them to work on a regular basis.
  - Get better at it over time.
- **Have a specific plan**
  - What specifically will you do when that situation comes up again?
    - The challenge I have
    - Triggers and warning signs
    - Coping skills to deal with the situation





Questions?



# References

- Choi, B.Y., Park, H., Yang, E., Lee, S.K., Lee, Y., & Lee, S.M. (2012). Understanding career decision self-efficacy: A meta-analytic approach. *Journal of Career Development*, 36(5), 443-460. doi: 10.1177/0894845311398042
- Ford, Louise. (n.d.). Enhancing self-esteem and self-identity in the child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Retrieved from <http://www.amaze.org.au/uploads/2014/10/Louise-Ford.pdf>
- Gillott, A., & Standen, P. J. (2007). Levels of anxiety and sources of stress in adults with autism. *Journal of intellectual disabilities*, 11(4), 359-370.
- Grossman, P., & Taylor, E. W. (2007). Toward [understanding](#) respiratory sinus arrhythmia: relations to cardiac vagal tone, evolution and biobehavioral functions. *Biological psychology*, 74(2), 263-285.
- Lee, G.K. & Carter, E.W. (2012). Preparing transition-age students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders for meaningful work. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49(10), 988-1000. doi: 10.1002/pits.21651
- Müller, F. E. (2001). Challenging and changing stress-producing thinking. *The Western journal of medicine*, 174(1), 49.
- Shattuck, P.T., Narendorf, S.C., Cooper, B., Sterzing, P.R., Wagner, M., & Taylor, J.L. (2012). Postsecondary Education and Employment Among Youth With an Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Pediatrics*, 129(6), 1042-1049
- The National Autistic Society. 2017. Anxiety in autistic adults. Retrieved from <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/anxiety.aspx>
- Trembath, D., Germano, C., Johanson, G., & Dissanayake, C. (2012). The experience of anxiety in young adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 27(4), 213-224.
- United States Department of Labor. 2017. Mastering soft skills for workplace success. Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/>