

Autism in the Workplace: Strategies for Success

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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



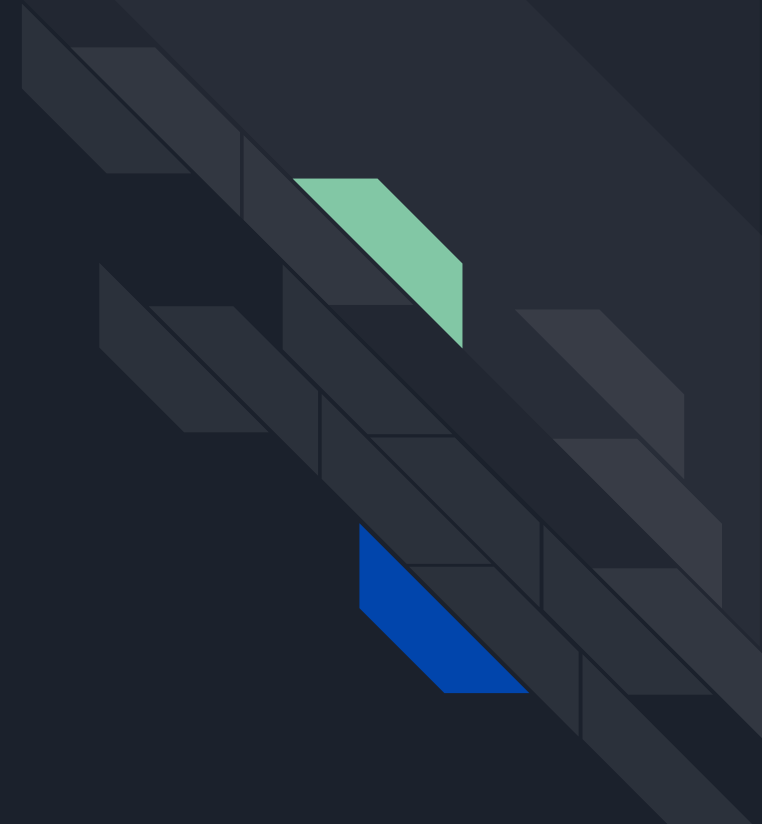
Warning Sign



Solution



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





Triggers

General

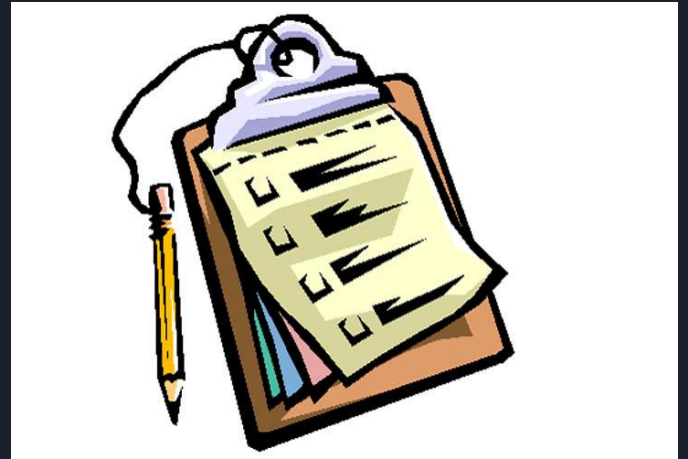
- Sudden change
- Anticipation
- Sensory stimuli
- Unpleasant events
- Crowds
- Making decisions
- Communicating with others
- Losing things
- Explaining diagnosis

Specific to Work

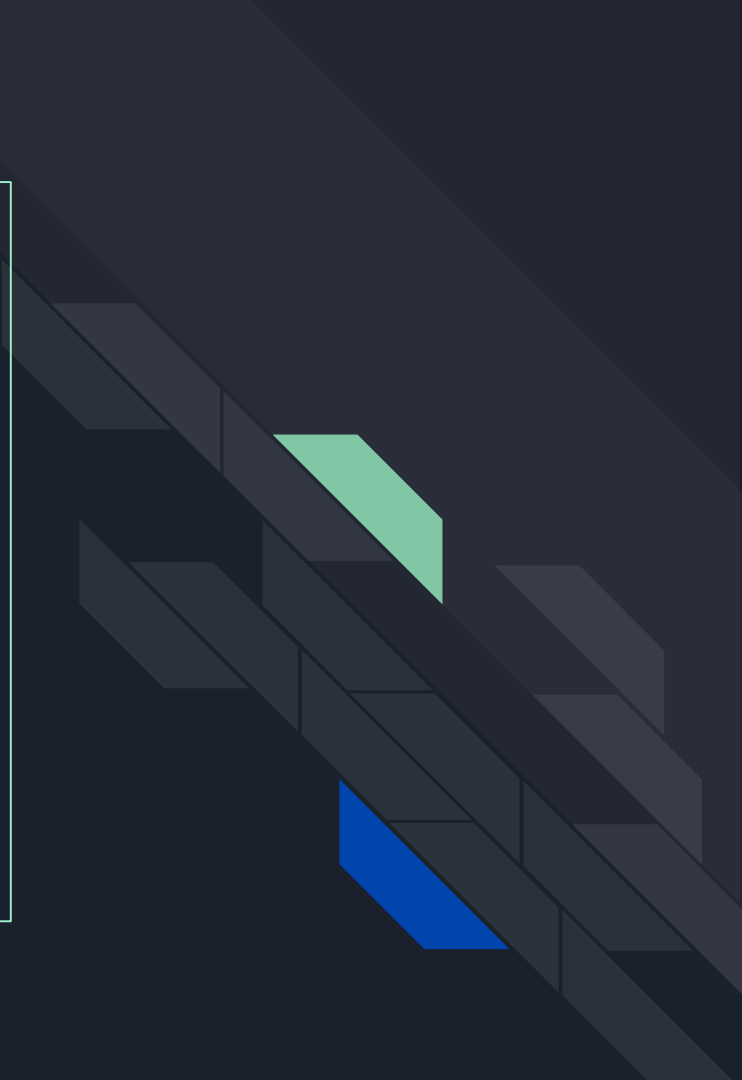
- Preparing for an interview
- Anticipating the day's events upon waking up
- Knowing how to do job
- Responding to feedback or criticism
- Watching coworkers do things "wrong"
- Noises, lights, temperatures, sensory stimuli
- Managing work-life balance

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.**



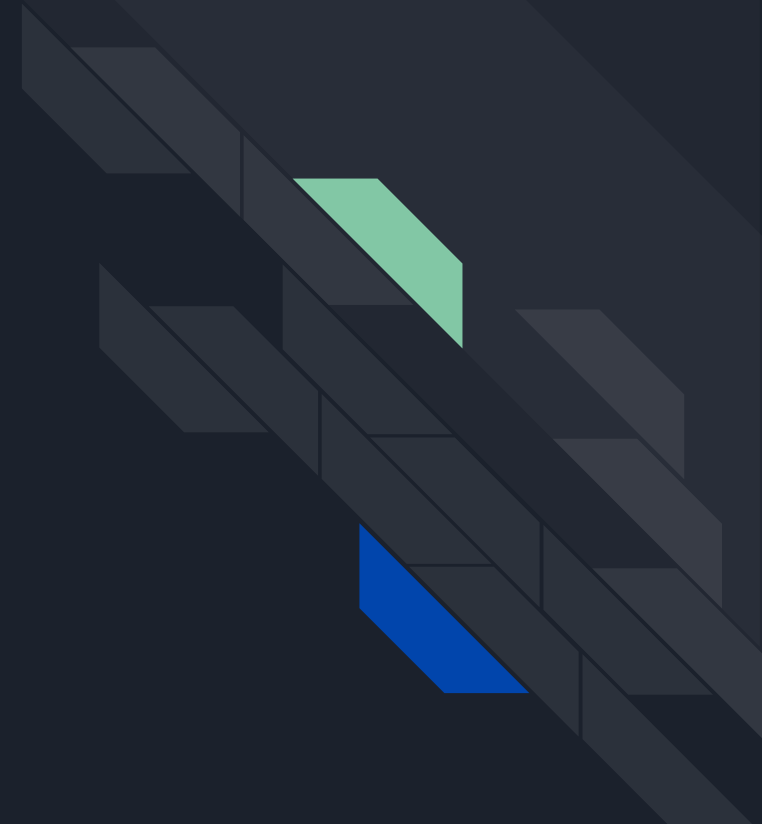
“It’s entirely circumstantial--mine’s pretty much circumstantial so, you know, as soon as I see... as soon as something happens that upsets me, it’s instantaneous--BANG! Like a bucket of cold water to the face.”

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 **copng 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:

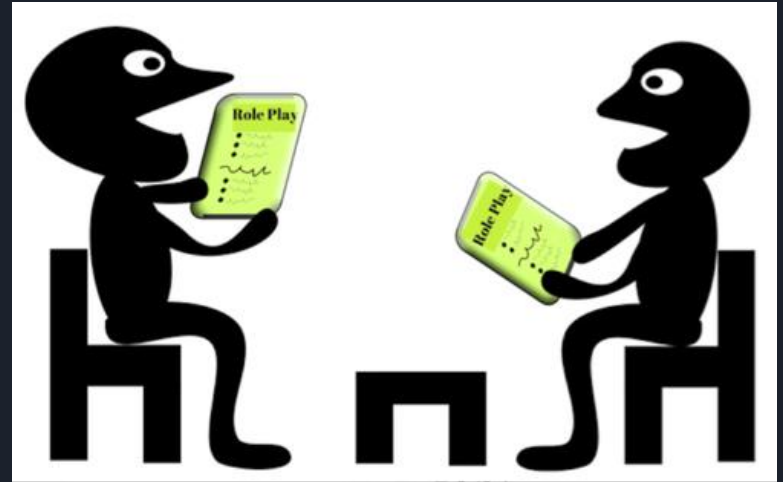
- Showing up on time
- Showing interest in job
- Demonstrate willingness to try new things
- Overall enthusiasm and ATTITUDE

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

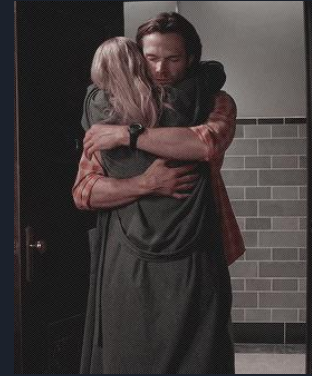
- Similar to role play but instead of practicing with your close family and friends, you make a video to watch and critique
 - What does your body language say?
 - How many times did you look down and away?
 - Is every response relevant to the topic?
- Write down 5 ways you could improve that particular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



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