

How to Help Autistic Students Manage Anxiety

Southern Utah Autism Conference 2026

The Presenters



Dr. Heather Kennedy



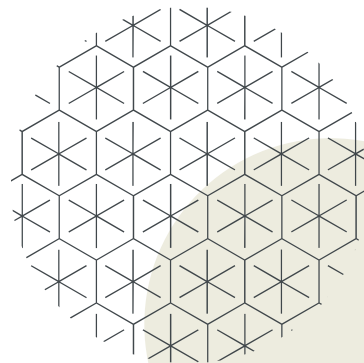
Dr. Mallory Poole



Dr. Nichole Wangsard

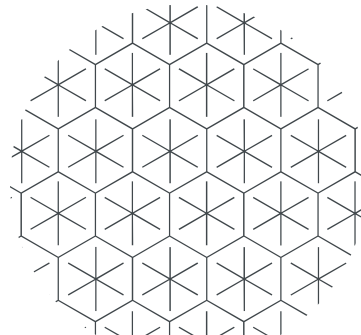
Our Purpose

- To review current literature on data related to autism and anxiety
- To discuss most common features of anxiety for autistic individuals
- To understand the needs of students in terms of managing anxiety in school
- To learn about approaches and strategies to help students manage anxiety

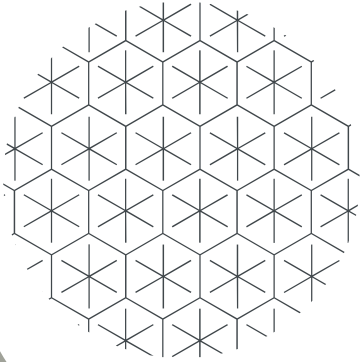


Our Agenda

1. Introductions
2. Anxiety and Autism
3. What NOT to do
4. What to do instead



Let's Get to
Know You!
Mentimeter!



Important Terms

Anxiety: Not necessarily diagnosed, clinically significant levels of anxiety that interfere with daily functioning

Externalizing: Symptoms that are visible to others (repetative behavior, meltdowns, aggression, defiance and refusal, physical symptoms)

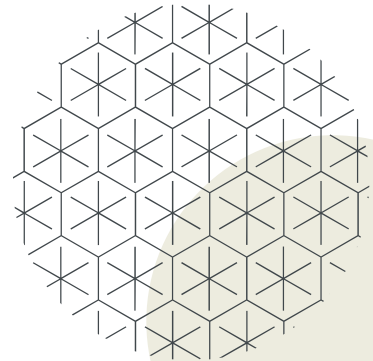
Internalizing: Symptoms that are not visible to others (worry, fearfulness, repetative or intrusive thoughts, depression, withdrawal)

Rates of Anxiety in ASD

- In research, rates varied between about 20% and 80%
- For children and adolescents, likely between 33% and 50%
- Girls and non-binary individuals more likely than boys
- Those with IQs under 70 less likely
- One of the most common co-morbid conditions
- Significantly impacts student experience in school

Difficulties with the Research

- Females and individuals with low IQs understudied
- Tend to rely on parent, teacher, or clinician report
- ASD and Anxiety overlap
- DSM definitions
- Different presentations
- Historical focus on ABA and other practices to minimize inappropriate behaviors and externalizing problems



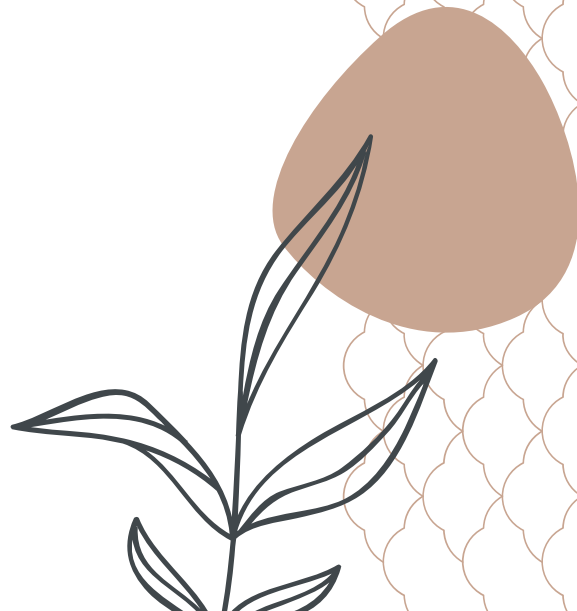
Autism-specific Anxiety

**Intolerance of
Uncertainty**

- Cognitive inflexibility

Social Anxiety

Sensory Concerns





**How we can
help!**

The background features several abstract, organic shapes in muted colors: a large brown shape on the left, a large light green shape in the center, and a large grey shape on the right. A small, stylized leaf illustration is positioned at the top center. The main text is centered over the light green shape.

Back to Mentimeter!

Menti link

How Schools and School Personnel Make it Worse

Schools

- Changing schedules
- Changing expectations
- Social challenges
- Sensory concerns

Staff

- Ignoring internalizing symptoms (50% of students)
- Overprotecting
- Sanctions/criticism



Overprotecting and Underempowering

- Shield students from all sources of anxiety, instead of teaching them to deal with it
- Ex: exempting from all public speaking, constant escape from difficult tasks, automatically grouping them with friends, over-reassuring, intervening in minor social conflicts, solving problems for them

Turn and talk: Why do we do this?

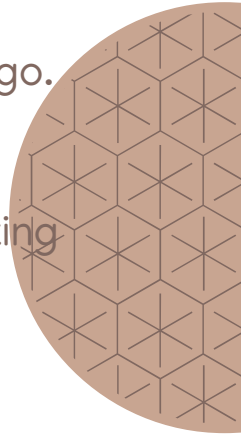
- Instead, move from overprotection to empowerment and support as appropriate.
- Ex: gradual exposure, validate feelings, build coping skills, collaboration with student and parents

Could we act this out?

Mallory acts as student with autism with issue: I can't find my pen in my backpack.
Starts to spiral.

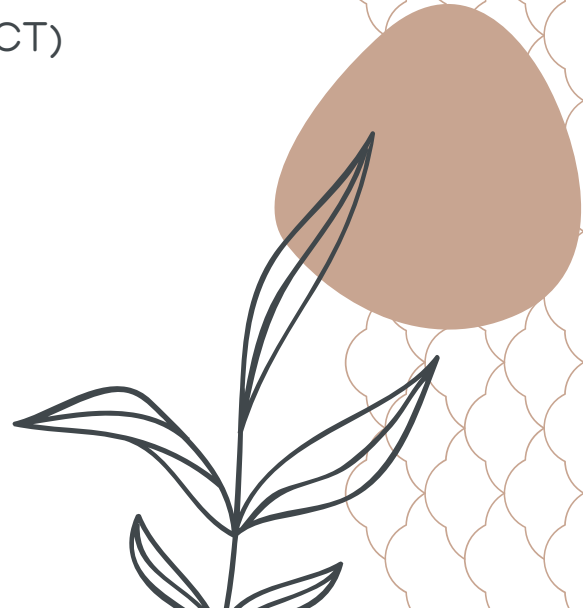
Nichole comes up and hands Mallory a pen and says something like, "Here you go.
No reason to get upset."

Heather comes up and helps Mallory problem solve finding the pen while validating feelings.



Overview of Evidence-Based Strategies

- Proactive accommodations
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Addressing Intolerance of Uncertainty
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)



Proactive Steps

Environment

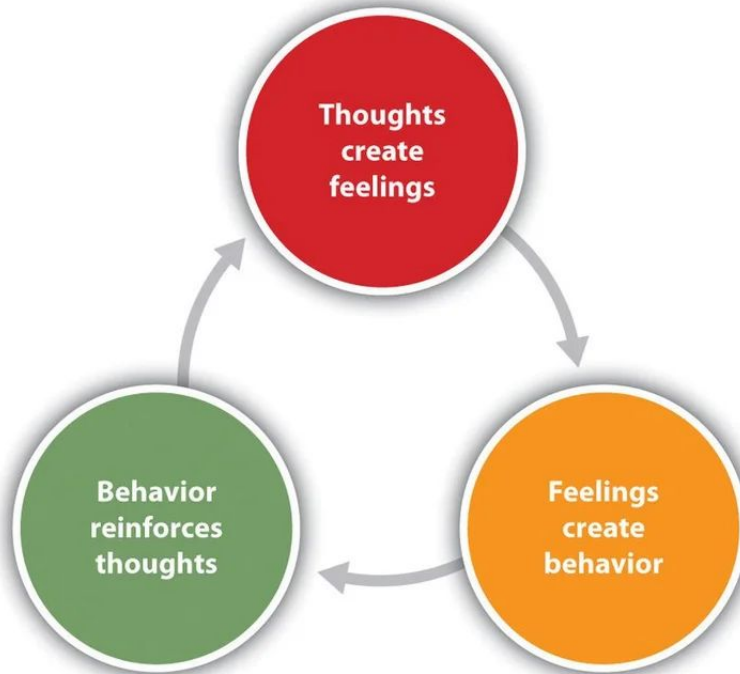
- Sensory minimizing (headphones, light covers)
- Designated safe spaces and people
- Routines with visual supports

Instruction

- Social skills instruction
- Social stories
- Planning ahead and communicating
- Modeling and practicing



Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)



- Strong effectiveness in clinical settings
- Strong to moderate effectiveness in school settings

CBT in School

- Psychoeducation (defining and learning about anxiety)
 - Facing fears (gradual exposure with support)--learning to sit with the feeling
 - Teaching relaxation skills (Mindfulness)
 - Teaching cognitive restructuring
 - Teaching problem solving skills
 - Coordination with parents (increases effectiveness)
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- Curricula like “Facing Your Fears in School”

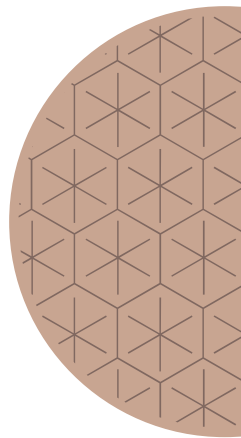
Dealing with Uncertainty

Emerging research suggests that this specific difficulty is responsible for a large portion of anxiety, especially in autistic children.

Intolerance of uncertainty = all unexpected events are negative

- Include it in psychoeducation
- Kids need communication (2 way)
- Introduce controlled uncertainty (self-determination)

Turn and talk: What are some things your students are uncertain about? How could you introduce this in a controlled way?



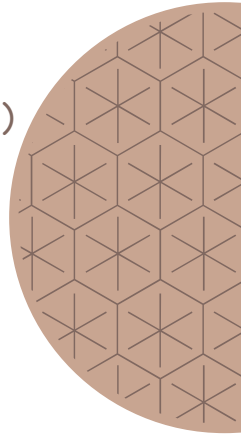
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: ACT Dealing with Anxious Thoughts

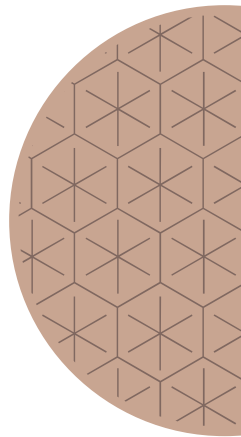
Three Key Principles:

1. Defusion: create distance from thoughts
2. Acceptance: notice and accept the feelings
3. Mindfulness: reduces tendency to spiral

What Can you do Monday?

- Create safe environments
- Communicate with students and parents
- Teach students about their anxiety
- Gradually expose students to fears (in a safe and supportive environment)





References Page I

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