

Creating a Group Intervention for Transition-Aged Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Introduction

- Many individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) experience a drastic shift during the transition from high school to adulthood and find themselves with a significant loss of structured supports (Anderson et al., 2018).
- Successful transition to adulthood requires planning for post-secondary education or employment, healthcare delivery, housing and daily living; however, many individuals with ASD do not get this support (Anderson et al., 2018).
- In addition, young adults with ASD are more likely to be socially isolated than young adults with other disabilities (Orsmond et al., 2013).
- Participation in social activity and interaction is associated with quality of life and general functioning, making it an important target for support in transition-aged young adults (Orsmond et al., 2013).

Complex Care Center (CCC)

- The CCC at URM provides integrated behavioral health services as part of a larger multidisciplinary team that serves patients age 19+ with childhood onset conditions.
- Approximately half of that patients served at CCC have a diagnosis of intellectual disability, and a subset of that group also have autism.

Project Objectives

- This project focuses on:
 - learning more about the specific needs of transition-aged patients with ASD or related social differences by conducting a needs assessment.
 - Developing a group intervention based on empirically supported interventions

The Survey

Collection

- The survey was created to poll patients at URM's CCC to gauge their interest regarding various group topics. Patients were asked to indicate which topics interested them from a list and that their choices would inform the development of upcoming groups.
- Survey participants were invited to complete a survey when coming in for their appointment at URM's CCC.
- Specifically, the surveys were disseminated to patients between the ages of 19 and 30 years old with autism or similar social differences.

Participants

Age	# of participants	Gender	# of participants
18-21	2	male	5
22-24	3	female	3
25-30	3		

Survey Results

Topics	Votes
Self-Care: Managing Stress	7
Social Skills: Dealing with Conflict/Problem-Solving	5
Social Skills: Dating	5
Finding Community Activities/Events	5
Social Skills: Meeting New People	4
Social Skills: Making Conversation, "small talk," Chatting	3
Social Skills: In the Workplace	3
Social Media/Online Safety	1
Self-Care: Hygiene	0

Discussion and Future Directions

- The CCC at URM intends to host regular psychoeducational series for individuals with autism or similar social differences utilizing interest data from this survey.
- Unfortunately, survey collection was limited due to onset of covid-19 social distancing restrictions. Due to this limitation, it would be important to continue discussion/surveying of relevant topics from the group attendees to ensure their needs and interests are being met.
- Current survey results indicate a preference for group intervention focused on managing stress, rated by 7 of the 8 respondents. Approximately half of the participants also voted for dealing with conflict/problem-solving, dating, finding community activities, and meeting new people.
- Given self-care: managing stress was the most popular topic, rationale and a sample group outline is provided as part of this project.
- When implementing these workshops, post-intervention surveys should be given to evaluate the effectiveness and satisfaction of each workshop. These surveys may focus on clarity of information provided, usefulness of information provided, and any suggestions for improvement.

Workshop Considerations

- A number of groups have been developed for young adults with autism to assist in building social and communication skills across domains. Most of these interventions are in the form of 6-12-week group interventions (UCLA PEERS for Adults and Careers; Laugeson et al., 2015, ACCESS; Oswald et al., 2018).
- However, there are some 1-time interventions, such as UCLA PEERS's Dating, Friendship, and Conversation bootcamps, suggesting there is some benefit in offering this type of intervention.
- Focus-groups for the development of groups for young adults with ASD suggested that participants prefer interactive and dynamic training, and involved caregivers were interested in information that paralleled the group content (Oswald et al., 2018).
- Additionally, some of these groups offered a supported social hour following group to encourage social connection and use of skills (Connor, et al., 2019).

"Self-Care: Managing Stress"

Stress Management and ASD

- Managing stress is generally important for young adults but may be particularly important for young adults with autism, as up to 40% of individuals with autism have significant anxiety (Nah et al., 2018).
- Previous groups with a cognitive behavioral therapy approach (CBT), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), and a combination of these, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), have shown to be effective in improving coping efficacy for young adults with ASD (Sizoo & Kuiper, 2017).
- The current workshop outline incorporates the MBCT approach with considerations for individual with ASD.

Sample Group Outline

- Introductions (Name and share something about you)
- Introduction to mindfulness
 - What is mindfulness? Using visuals to demonstrate
 - Mindful eating experiential exercise followed by reflections
- What is CBT? Briefly discuss the connection between thoughts behaviors and emotions, and use a couple examples



- Focus on creating distance from thoughts
- Body scan experiential exercise




- Discuss incorporation of daily mindful moments ("homework")
 - Suggest exploring Youtube for mindfulness clips, mindfulness apps, etc.
- Wrap-up
 - 2-minute deep breathing (can do with a visual for in and out breaths)
 - Handout available for participants and extras for caregivers (reviews the workshop, suggested mindfulness exercises & apps)
 - 30-minute post-workshop social (light snacks and refreshments provided)

References

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