

# The Relationship between Social Anxiety and Loneliness among Young Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Kathryn Fitzpatrick<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Tiana Bayrami, M.A.<sup>1,2</sup>, Daniel Janulaitis, M.A.<sup>2</sup>, Yasamine Bolourian, M.A.<sup>1,2</sup>, Jessica Hopkins<sup>1</sup>, Elizabeth Laugeson, Psy.D.<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience & Human Behavior, Los Angeles, CA; <sup>2</sup> The Help Group – UCLA Autism Research Alliance, Los Angeles, CA;

<sup>3</sup> Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Los Angeles, CA;



UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior  
The Help Group- UCLA Autism Research Alliance



## BACKGROUND

- Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) often exhibit social deficits that may negatively impact their psychosocial functioning and interpersonal relationships.
- Research suggests impaired social functioning in children with ASD may be associated with a higher incidence of social ridicule and peer rejection (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000) and greater risk for experiencing social anxiety as compared to typically developing youth (Bellini, 2004).
- Overall, these social impairments may lead to greater self-perceived loneliness and isolation.
- While the majority of research literature in this area has focused on school-aged children on the spectrum, there is less research examining correlates of social functioning among adults with ASD.
- The present study aims to examine the relationship between self-perceived social anxiety and feelings of loneliness in young adults with ASD without intellectual disabilities.

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

- $N = 17$  young adults with ASD presenting for social skills treatment
- Age:  $M = 21.3$ ;  $SD = 2.78$ ; Range = 18 to 27 years of age
- Gender: Male 82% ( $n = 14$ ), Female 18% ( $n = 3$ )
- Ethnicity: Caucasian 64.7% ( $n = 11$ ); Latino/Hispanic 5.9% ( $n = 1$ ); African Amer 5.9% ( $n = 1$ ); Asian Amer 17.6% ( $n = 3$ ); Other 5.9% ( $n = 1$ )
- Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino & Gruber, 2005) Total Score:  $M = 67.71$ ;  $SD = 12.035$

### MEASURES

- Social Anxiety Scale (SAS; La Greca, 1998)
- Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; DiTomasso, & Spinner, 1993)

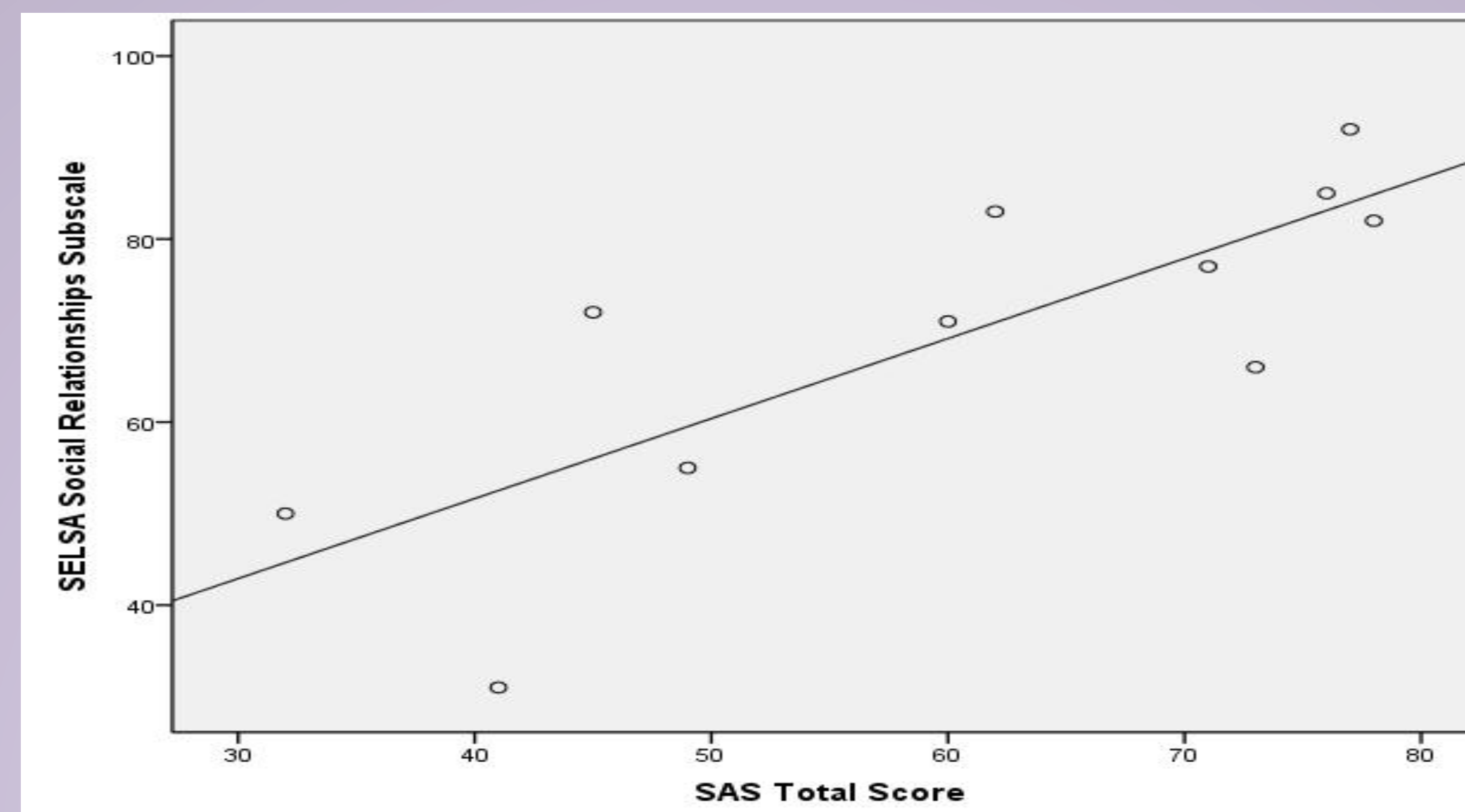
### PROCEDURES

- Baseline data was drawn from participants enrolled in *PEERS for Young Adults*, an evidence-based social skills program for young adults with ASD.
- In order to examine the relationship between social anxiety and subjective loneliness, participants completed the SAS and the SELSA prior to treatment.
- Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the relationship between total and subscale scores on the SAS and SELSA.

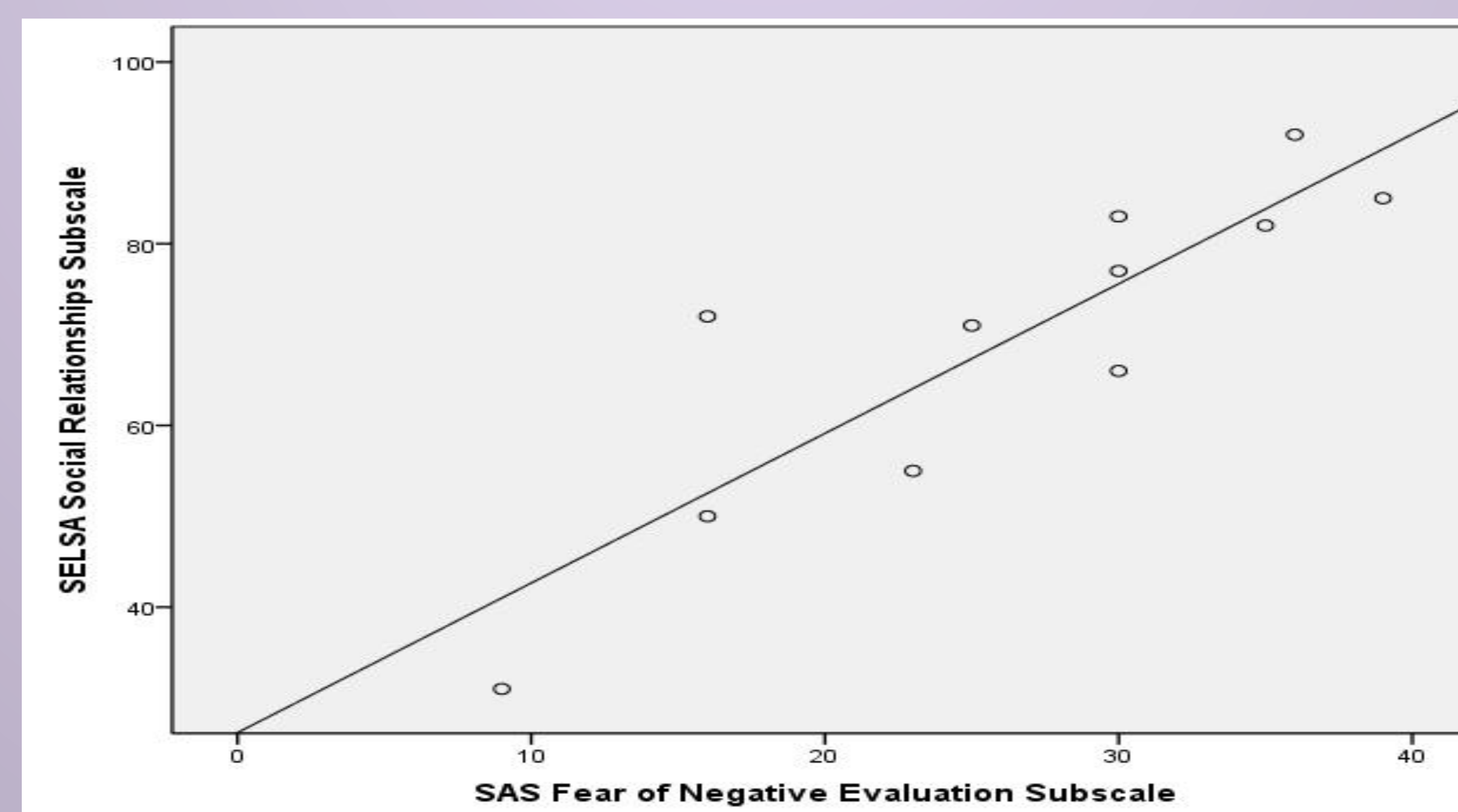
For additional information please contact:  
Kathryn Fitzpatrick at [peersclinic@ucla.edu](mailto:peersclinic@ucla.edu) or (310) 26-PEERS [www.semel.ucla.edu/peers](http://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers)

## RESULTS

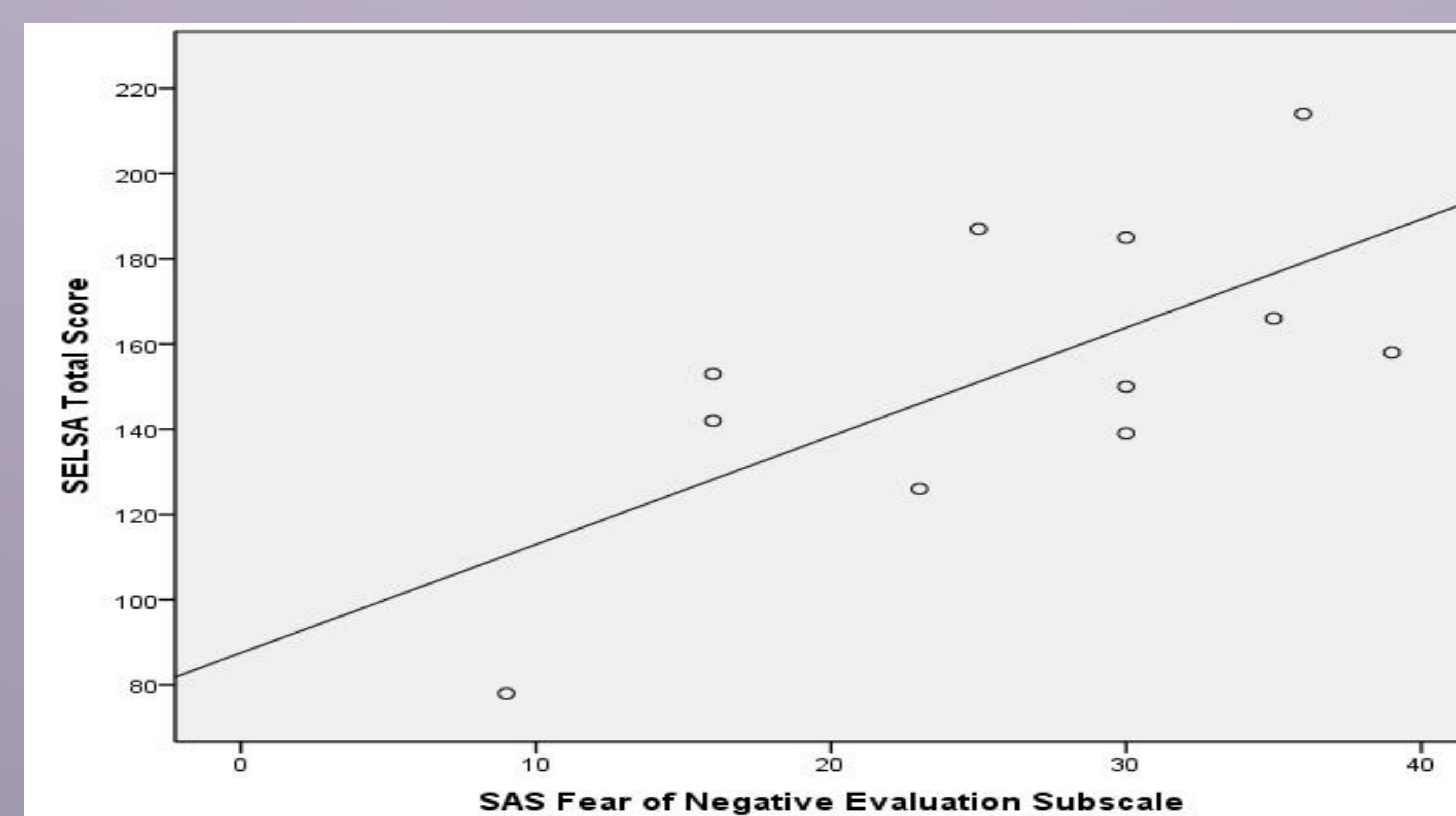
### Relationship between Social Anxiety and Loneliness within Friendships ( $p < .04$ )



### Relationship between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Loneliness within Friendships ( $p < .001$ )



### Relationship between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Overall Loneliness ( $p < .03$ )



## RESULTS

- Results reveal that elevation on the SAS total score, which assesses overall degree of self-perceived social anxiety, is correlated with higher scores on the SELSA Social Relationships subscale ( $p < .04$ ), which measures the degree of self-reported loneliness in friendships.
- Higher scores on the SAS Fear of Negative Evaluation subscale, which assesses the level of concern regarding negative appraisals by peers, is correlated with the SELSA Social Relationships subscale ( $p < .001$ ).
- Additionally, higher scores on the SAS Fear of Negative Evaluation subscale are correlated with elevations of the SELSA total score ( $p < .03$ ), which measures overall self-perceived loneliness in relation to family, romantic relationships, and friendships.
- No other statistically significant correlations were observed between the SAS and the SELSA.

## DISCUSSION

- Results suggest that young adults experiencing greater self-perceived overall social anxiety may also experience greater loneliness in relation to their friendships.
- Furthermore, young adults who endorse greater fear of negative evaluations from their peers may be more likely to experience greater overall loneliness in relation to family, romantic relationships, and friendships.
- This research represents the first study to investigate the relationship between social anxiety and self-perceived loneliness in young adults with ASD without intellectual disabilities.
- This research suggests the need for more targeted interventions to decrease social anxiety in this population.

## REFERENCES

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