

How to Treat Affective Disorders in Children and Adolescents with Asperger's

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Current research indicates that around 65% of adolescents with Asperger's Disorder have an affective disorder that includes anxiety disorders and depression. Research conducted on the family histories of children with autism and Asperger's Disorder identified a higher than expected incidence of mood disorders in family members, supporting a potential genetic linking for mood disorders. However, the person with Asperger's Disorder also encounters difficulties with social reasoning, empathy, verbal communication, planning and organization and sensory perception. These symptoms alone clearly lead to considerable stress as the person attempts social inclusion. Thus, there may be both genetic and experiential factors that explain the higher incidence of secondary affective disorders in the Asperger's Disorder population. Research with subjects with Autism using new neuro-imaging technology has also identified structural and functional abnormalities of the amygdala, the area of the brain known to regulate a range of emotions including anger, fear and sadness. Thus, in addition to genetics and life experiences, there is also neuro-anatomical evidence suggesting problems with the perception and regulation of the emotions.

Many intervention strategies designed to treat, or prevent, the development of affective disorders in people with Asperger's Disorder include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT begins by assessing the person's coping mechanisms and vocabulary of emotional expression. From this, intervention strategies are designed in the areas of affective education, cognitive restructuring and self-reflection.

Affective education is an essential component of CBT for people with Asperger's Disorder. The main goal is to learn why we have emotions, their use and misuse and the identification of different levels of expression. Some people with Asperger's Disorder can use extreme statements in situations that would seem relatively benign to others. Affective education will increase the client's vocabulary of emotional expression to ensure precision and accuracy.

Cognitive restructuring includes activities that are designed to improve the person's range of emotional repair mechanisms. This can include use of a "tool box" to "fix the feeling". The person with Asperger's Disorder knows that a toolbox usually includes a variety of tools to repair a machine—thus discussion and activities are employed to identify different types of "tools" for specific problems associated with affect and emotions.

A person with Asperger's Disorder is also encouraged to self-reflect to improve insight into their thoughts and feelings, promoting a realistic and positive self-image as well as enhancing the ability to self-talk for greater self-control.

Modifications that can be used to increase self-reflection include a greater use of visual material and resources such as drawings, role-play and metaphor and less reliance on spoken responses. It is interesting that many clients find it easier to develop and explain their thoughts and emotions using other expressive media, such as typed communication in the form of an e-mail or diary, music, art or a pictorial dictionary of feelings. People with Asperger's Disorder are then encouraged to apply this new knowledge to real situations.

Further research is necessary to establish whether Cognitive Behavior Therapy is universally appropriate for treating and/or preventing affective disorders in the Asperger's Disorder population, and to confirm the modifications to accommodate the unusual characteristics and profile of abilities associated with Asperger's Disorder.

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