Why might mindfulness training alleviate anxiety in Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Sebastian B Gaigg

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

A lifelong developmental disorder defined by:
- Abnormal development of social communication skills
- Sensory processing abnormalities
- Repetitive / Stereotyped behaviours and/or restricted interests

ASD develops within the first 2 years of life
Later in life it is frequently associated with additional mental health difficulties...particularly Anxiety Disorders

Fear and Anxiety Disorders

Fear = response to immediate threat
Anxiety = response to anticipated threat

When do we talk about a ‘disorder’?
When the feeling is excessive, uncontrollable and persistent
When it interferes with a person's ability to function

There are many types of Fear/Anxiety Disorders

Specific Phobias (e.g., spiders, heights, people, open spaces, etc...)
Separation Anxiety Disorder (primarily in children)
Panic Attacks / Panic Disorder
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
Generalised Anxiety Disorder
How common are Anxiety Disorders?

Around 10 - 15% of people in the general population have an anxiety disorder at some point in their life - most commonly a specific phobia.

The prevalence in ASD is 40 – 50%, with Generalised Anxiety amongst the most common types.

Diagnosis and Treatment of Anxiety in ASD?

Symptoms of anxiety are often overlooked in ASD and inappropriately attributed to the ASD diagnosis.

Anxiety is therefore often not a specific treatment target but thought to improve through interventions that target ASD (e.g., symptoms of social phobia or OCD).

When anxiety is a specific treatment targeted, there is little research to inform what treatments might work best.

Why do we think that Mindfulness based therapies might be most effective?

Around 40% of ASD adults have difficulties identifying and describing their own emotions – 'Alexithymia'.

We know that Alexithymia is associated with Anxiety in the general population...

...and Alexithymia can be considered an opposite to mindfulness, at least in the domain of emotions.

The nature of Alexithymia in ASD

Primarily a difficulty in identifying what emotion is experienced
What role does Alexithymia and Mindfulness play in Anxiety in ASD?

By promoting greater awareness of inner experiences, mindfulness based therapies may reduce Alexithymia.

This may yield both direct and indirect benefits for dealing with Anxiety in ASD

Direct: Greater acceptance of ‘unknown’ feelings
Indirect: Fewer ‘unknown’ feelings to trigger anxiety

What are the implications for treatment?

Thank you for listening!!

Dr. Geoff Bird (Institute of Psychiatry)
Dr. Mkle South (Bigham Young University)
All my colleagues and students in our Lab
All children, adults, families, teachers and schools who support our work