

## Why might mindfulness training alleviate anxiety in Autism Spectrum Disorder?

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## 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?**

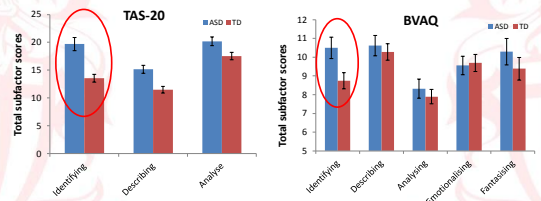
Around 40% of ASD adults have difficulties identifying and describing their own emotions – ‘Alexithymia’.

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

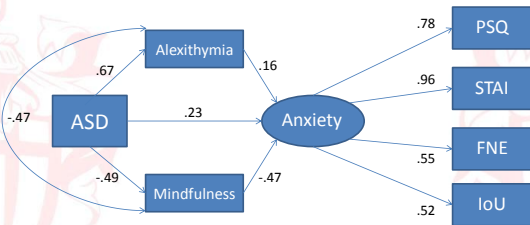
...and Alexithymia can be considered an opposite to mindfulness, at least in the domain of emotions.

**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?**



**What are the implications for treatment?**

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

**Thank you for listening!!**

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