A Strength-Based Approach to Autism

“Building Bridges”
1 May 2015, La Salle University
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Strength-Based Partnership

- Theatre, improvisation, music as voice, social skills coaching, dino dig crew
- Mindfulness courses for educators, mindfulness in schools, mindfulness in private practice with teens
- Our collaborative process in writing the book

Why this? Why now?

The autism playbook for teens

A Strength-Based Approach

- Imitators and actors
- Learn about social behaviors by observing others, particularly in movies and TV
- Strong ability to focus in their own areas of interest
- Strongly motivated to have friends

DSM-V Severity Levels

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Severity Level for ASD</th>
<th>Social Communication</th>
<th>Restricted interests &amp; repetitive behaviors</th>
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| Level 3 | Severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication and deficits in social overtures; minimal or no interest in peer interaction. | Repetitive, ritualistic or stereotyped behaviors marked by unvarying eye contact and repetitive or restricted speech.
| Level 2 | Marked deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication and deficits in social overtures; social interaction and speech are markedly impaired. | Repetitive, ritualistic or stereotyped behaviors marked by restricted eye contact and limited speech.
| Level 1 | Marked deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication and deficits in social overtures; speech is markedly impaired. | Repetitive, ritualistic or stereotyped behaviors marked by minimal or no eye contact and minimal speech.

Why Mindfulness?

Provides a ground to access and use one’s strengths. For teens “on the spectrum” (ASD), mindfulness can be used:

- For self-calming and reducing anxiety
- To build a sense of self and independence
- To open awareness and connect with others

Research suggests that mindfulness is an effective intervention for reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, distress, and aggression for people with ASD.
Mindfulness practice increases:
- RESILIENCE - Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, 2003
- POSITIVE MOOD - Davidson et al, 2004
- EMPATHY - Lazar, 2005
- GRAY MATTER for learning & memory – Holzel et al, 2011
- OTHER-CENTERED, objective processing – Farb et al, 2003
- SUSTAINED & SELECTIVE ATTENTION - Chiesa et al, 2011

Just Breathe

Light the Stage: choose the best focus

Spotlight attention:
- Zoom in on details
- Often a strength for ASD

Floodlight attention:
- Zoom out on big picture for more information

CHOOSE what is best for the task.

Mind as scientist

- Observe inner and outer landscapes
- Observe with curiosity
- Observe without judgment and reactivity

Your Body is the Actor

- Notice what’s going on in your body.
- Try on different feelings.
- Use natural curiosity.

MAD, SAD, GLAD
Create a Pause Button

Breathe in: “Pause”
Breathe out: “Relax”

While sitting, standing, walking anytime, anywhere.

Meltdown Prevention

Identify triggers
1. Watch for warning signs
2. Decide not to meltdown:
   - just breathe;
   - the power of not speaking
   - walk away from the situation
3. Choose a distracting activity

Grounding Your Soles

Evidence-based activity:
Choosing where to place your attention.
Using gravity and physical sensation.
Grounding yourself in the soles of your feet.

Translating Anger

Translating the language of anger toward the goal of managing anger.
Let’s practice!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column 1: Anger</th>
<th>Column 2: Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I hate you!”</td>
<td>“I feel angry right now.”</td>
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</table>

WHAT DO YOU BLURT?
HOW CAN YOU TRANSLATE?

Research in Positive Psychology

   - Increase in happiness; decrease in depression (M. Seligman)
2. Keep a gratitude journal
   - Improved physical and psychological wellbeing, enhanced life satisfaction, school satisfaction, enhanced self-esteem (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, Emmons, 2008)
3. Switch to the positive channel

Channel Tuning

The Positive Channel
The “Everything Wrong” Channel
Practicing Kindness

- Be kind to yourself by setting a friendly intention –
  “May I be calm.” “I wish to be calm.”

- Be kind to others by thinking a friendly wish –
  “I hope you feel comfortable with others.”

- Be kind to others by giving compliments –
  Notice what you admire; be specific; notice the right time to give the compliment. Give it as a gift.

- Imagine kindness and change your brain!