

## **Anxiety and Depression with Students with Learning Differences and ASD**

Years of failure at social interaction can lead to strong feelings of isolation and a lack of self-esteem. The majority of students with learning differences tend to develop some anxiety and other difficulties. Anxiety is two times more prevalent in women than in men. Prolonged states of anxiety can lead to a state of depression. Family problems and complications are often a source of stress for all involved and especially for a student with a learning difference.

In my own case I have spent a lifetime attempting to over-come some of the emotional trauma I experienced in my family of origin. I had a brother with Aspergers, a sister with ADD, and another sister with High Functioning Autism all of whom committed suicide.

Being diagnosed at age 54 has assisted me in understanding and coping with these past events. I have experienced many of the symptoms of anxiety and depression and have had to use most of the prevention strategies that will be outlined later in this paper.

### **Contributory factors:**

There are many factors that can increase anxiety and depression and an understanding of them helps us to be able to implement strategies for prevention. I have experienced empathic attunement--an extreme sensitivity to the suffering of others. When I view any documentaries regarding the Holocaust or cruelty to animals I am very upset and overwhelmed.

Many students become intellectually overloaded from observing and absorbing life's absurdities and tragedies that they perceive that others fail to see. There seems to be no separation from what is occurring in the news and many students seem to be taking on the pain of the world without any filter or defense mechanism. My brother was a social loner, but very convicted about politics and was so upset about the election of George Bush senior that he committed suicide the day after the election.

Perfectionism in all its forms is a root cause of anxiety and depression. This leads to procrastination and an inability to finish projects that are started. Often students have unrealistic thought patterns about the way life is supposed to be and how others live in the world. They can feel

that everyone knows how to be with each other and they are like an android floating in space, unconnected to the planet. An overwhelming sense of separation and disconnection can develop. Often a student's inability to self-regulate emotions and behavior can lead to a sense of failure in relationships and employment. I have a sign over my desk that says "always make new mistakes". This helps me to accept when I am imperfect. Another saying I have is "all relationships are imperfect" to remind myself that there will always be disagreements even between spouses and family members. The world is full of problems, but it is also full of overcoming problems.

Loneliness, that terrible sense of isolation, can push a student inside him or herself. Feelings that they don't belong can well up inside a student. With a sense of intellectual superiority they can believe that they can think their way out of any situation on their own. This coupled with the belief that asking for help is a sign of weakness can be crippling.

The external evidence of their social incompetence accumulates. Without any outlets or perspective, students become caught in "analysis paralysis". This coupled with mental exhaustion can contribute to sensory overload. They can become hyper-focused on the negative. Students shut down and escape into their computer or fantasy. Other contributing factors to these sensory implosions can include: a lack of a proper nutrition; sleep deprivation; lack of a sensory diet; or a lack of a self-care regimen.

Environmental factors also can contribute to melt-downs. A limitation of sunlight can contribute to a lack of vitamin D, just as being in enclosed spaces for long periods of time can contribute to a sense of alienation. Build up of clutter and unfinished tasks from lack of executive function skills can overwhelm students. They feel a profound separation from nature and an inability to see the beauty in the small things around them.

Students can be tormented by their seeming failure to adhere to over-scrupulous, rigid and unattainable religious doctrines and practices. My sister, with high functioning autism, at age 73, could never accept forgiveness for sinning when she was a nun in her 20's).

All of these contributing factors lead a student to a lack of self-acceptance and feelings that they cannot be themselves.

## **Strategies for prevention:**

### Social Strategies:

Building a support network for ourselves.

- Social thinking and relationship development appointments, classes and strategies.
- Get involved in a special interest
- Joining a social group or church group
- Doing community service to help others

### Initiating Strategies:

Solitary self-appraisal does not work as we continue to self-justify our actions or lack of action. The default mode of students on the spectrum is isolation. Students must have the courage and willingness to initiating new strategies.

- Giving oneself permission to ask for help
- Having social mentors and friends that you can share your real thoughts with.
- Seek people, situations and circumstances that are more positive or optimistic and avoid toxic negative people or places that pull you down

### Flexibility Strategies:

Being committed to listening to feedback and having the willingness to implement other's feedback.

- Utilizing the Donkey Rule
- Cognitive Behavior Therapy to erode the underlying erroneous and rigid belief systems based on fallacious reasoning that keep us from trying new strategies

#### Wellness Strategies:

Our emotional well-being is our responsibility. Learning to care for ourselves and our bodies is essential for our mental outlook.

- The importance of learning to self-sooth.
- Using personal resources to help one's self.
- Wellness plan for eating good foods and sleep diet
- Sensory diets with swimming or acceptable physical exercise
- Have students move, listen to music, bounce on a trampoline, walk around the block before sitting down to work
- Commitment to trying new activities, reading other books and materials, and trying new foods, films etc.

#### Gratitude Strategies:

When life crises occur in multiples, anyone can be thrown into a state of anxiety and/or depression. Getting perspective about ALL that is in one's life is an antidote. Don't sweat the small-stuff, its all small-stuff. Being in the present and appreciating all the gifts we have.

- Keeping a daily gratitude journal or box
- Taking stock of your special gifts and contributions

- Reading books like “the power of positive thinking” etc.

#### Physical Strategies:

Create the kind of atmosphere or energy you want to calm yourself.

- Avoiding alcohol and other depressants
- Taking regular vitamins (especially D)
- Create your environment so it naturally lowers anxiety
- Have colors and music that reduce stress

#### Spiritual Strategies:

Uncovering our own spiritual values and finding ways to express them.

- Be in nature
- Nature lowers anxiety – have photo’s of horses or animals, plants are relaxing, fish tank, even a dog if it’s acceptable to lower stress
- Have a pet to care for
- Utilize Equine Therapy
- Meditation and Yoga

Having a toolkit for handling anxiety and depression does not replace the need for therapy. Students may need to process unhealthy relationships or patterns of interacting. When the time comes that they become available for insight therapy, they should utilize a skilled therapist to work on new interaction strategies.

