

Stress-Out Students –
Understanding the
Impact of Anxiety on
Motivation and Learning

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In this workshop, we will address:

- What is the difference between stress and anxiety, and what does anxiety look like?
- How does anxiety function and connect with attention and executive function?
- How does anxiety impact motivation?
- What are some general strategies for supporting these needs in students?

Anxiety Stats

- “Ever having been diagnosed with either anxiety or depression” among ages 6-17 years
 - 5.4 % in 2003
 - 8% in 2007
 - 8.4% in 2011-2012
- 31.1% lifetime prevalence
- More prevalent in girls
- Teens today feel more isolated, misunderstood, worried, and dissatisfied, and have lower self-control

Why Increase?

- Reduced amount of free play
- Focus on extrinsic goals, rather than intrinsic
- Rise of testing and evaluation
- Reduced sense of control over life
- Families are more stressed
- Social media and technology access
- Lack of care
 - Only 18% with a diagnosis access treatment



Overscheduling



- Excessive extracurricular activities
- 59% of teens report stress from balancing extracurricular activities (USA Today)
- Ages 6-13 require 10-11 hours of sleep; Teens require 9-10 hours of sleep
 - Most school age kids get 9 hours
 - Most teens get 7 hours, and 25% only get 6 (UC Berkeley-Greater Good Science Center)

Stress vs. Anxiety

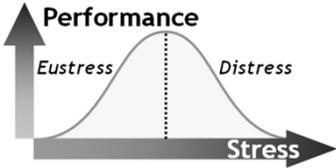
- What’s the difference?

Stress vs. Anxiety

- Stress
 - Eustress vs. Distress
 - Related to present conditions
- Anxiety
 - Related to future conditions – anticipation
 - General sense of arousal



Performance Stress



Function of Anxiety

- The Body's Alarm System
- Enable us to gear up to respond to threat



Responses

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze

Fight

- Argumentative
- Noncompliant
- Oppositional
- Impulsive



Flight

- Avoidant
- Distractible
- Gives up



Freeze

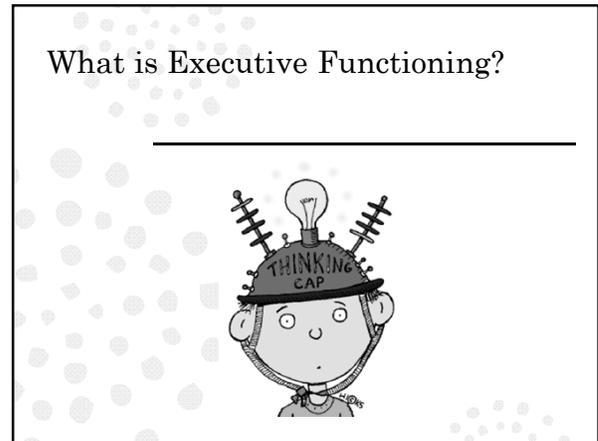
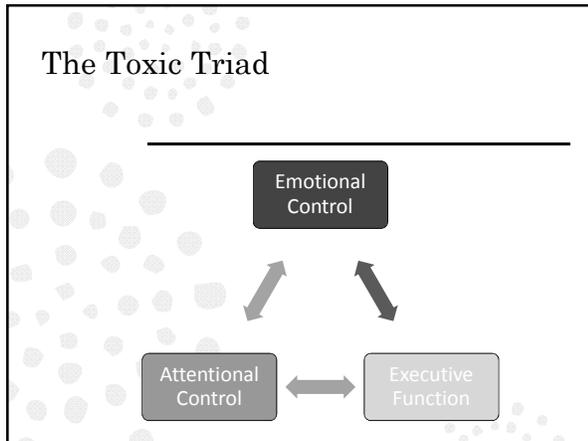
–Problems with:

- Initiation
- Shifting
- Termination



Learned Response to Threat

- Chronic elevations of the stress response interfere with learning
- Anxious people pay more attention to threatening stimuli
- What are they missing?

What is Executive Function?

– EF is not about how smart you are or if you can solve problems, it is about how efficient your process is



Executive Functioning

- Set of cognitive and regulatory skills that are necessary for engaging in goal-directed behavior, such as learning or demonstrating knowledge
- Often considered to have two branches:
 - Metacognition (task management)
 - Behavioral regulation (self management)

Metacognition skills

- Organizing:
 - Ideas
 - Time
 - Materials
- Holding Information in Working Memory
- Appreciating Task Demands
- Making a Plan
- Initiating Work
- Sustaining Effort
- Monitoring Performance
- Thinking Flexibly
- Self-Advocating



Behavioral Regulation

- Ability to control:
 - Arousal, attention, and focus
 - Impulsivity
 - Emotional state

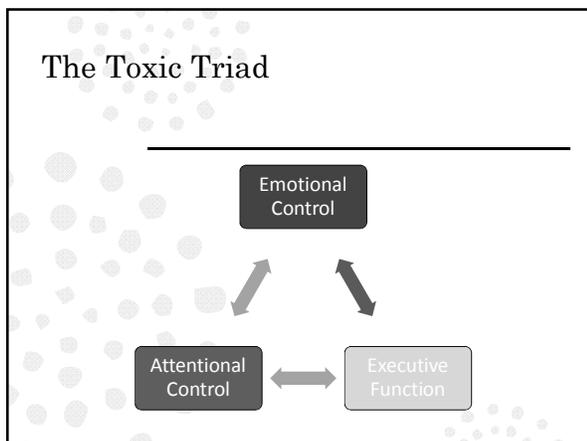


EF in Practice

- At school
 - Transition between subjects
 - Organize desk
 - Get started
 - Understand directions
 - Demonstrate stamina
 - Sustain attention
 - Prevent and recognize errors
 - Ask for help
 - Stay seated
 - Manage emotions

EF in Practice

- At home
 - Maintain a clean room
 - Get ready for school
 - Plan and complete homework
 - Engage in appropriate play
 - Get out of the house on time
 - Keep body under control (e.g. not hit siblings or bump into things)
 - Control reactions to situations (e.g. not meltdown when told no)



Attentional Control

- Choose what you pay attention to
- Ignore distractors
- Maintain focus and concentration
- Shift attention

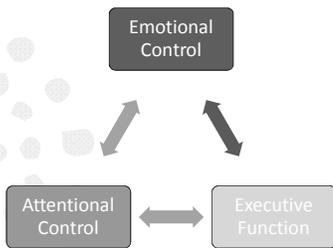
Consistently Inconsistent

- Expected pattern in inconsistency on tasks
- Attentional challenges may not be defined by the inability to pay attention, but more the consistency in attention and response time
- Places kids at risk for looking like behavioral problem

He can focus on video games for hours...

- Why can children with attentional problems focus on desirable things and not non-preferred tasks?

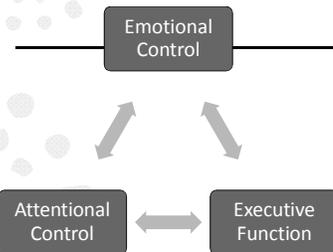
Examining the Triad



Emotional Control

- Ability to:
 - Monitor sensations and thoughts
 - Label feelings
 - Communicate feelings
 - Manage feelings
 - Persist in spite of challenge (frustration tolerance) or boredom
- Includes regulation of mood, and stress/anxiety

Back to the Toxic Triad



Stress/Anxiety may not be observable – but related challenges may be

What might you see?

- Forgetful
- Work slowly
- Trouble learning from mistakes
- Distracted
- Avoidant of schoolwork
- Low self-confidence
- Perfectionism
- Inconsistencies in difficulties
- Social immaturity and difficulty reading cues
- Slow word retrieval
- Difficulty expressing thoughts

And most Importantly...

Unmotivated

The “M Word”

- Motivation is often misunderstood
- We often hear (or say) things like:
 - “Why doesn’t he just do it?”
 - “How many times do I have to ask you?”
 - “Why don’t you care about your work?”
 - “She just does have the drive.”

What does “unmotivated” imply?

- Not exerting effort by choice
- Intrinsic personality flaw
- Personal responsibility
- Blame for lack of success
- Individual is functioning in isolation

Is any of that helpful?

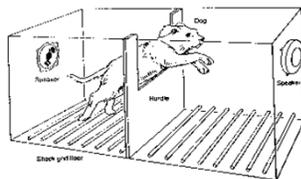
What is Motivation?

- Complex executive function process
- Coordination of:
 - Inhibition of desirable, easier things
 - Execution of difficult, complex, or possibly anxiety-provoking things
- Few kids are intrinsically unmotivated
- If they could do it, they would



Learned Response

- Repeated challenge over time – learned helplessness
- May be contending with deeply ingrained behavioral pattern
- Important to intervene early



Set Them up for Success

- Avoid over-scheduling
- Eating and sleeping
- Exercise
- Balance immediate and future goals
- Have follow-through and be consistent!
- Use the triad in their favor

Create an Environment of Awareness and Acceptance

- Regular discourse around stressors and emotions
- Do not be dismissive of emotional reactions
- Model appropriate emotional management

Important to Remember

- High rate of negative feedback
- At risk for low self-esteem
- Require positivity and support
- Perception is reality
- "Whack-a-mole Effect"



Early Identification

- Awareness of various behavioral presentations
- Recognize patterns
- Be a detective
- Remember:
 - Few kids are intrinsically unmotivated
 - If they could do it, they would
 - Where exactly do they struggle?

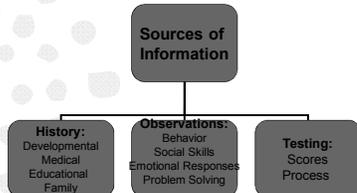
When motivation is a problem – be a detective

- Remember:
 - Few kids are intrinsically unmotivated
 - If they could do it, they would

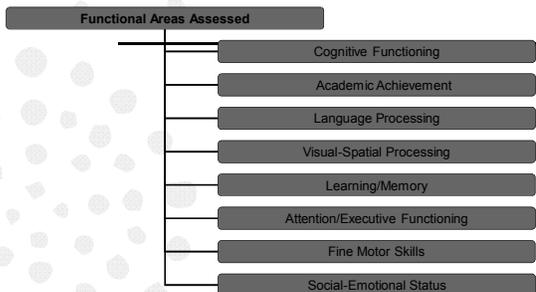


How to Understand the Triad

- When is there a need for formal testing??
- Neuropsychological Assessment



Neuropsychological Assessment



Spelling It All Out

- Explicitly discuss how the child's EF, attention, and anxiety interact with each other
- Identify other elements of his/her profile
- Make recommendations for educational and treatment needs

Environmental Support

- Executive function strategies as anxiety management strategies
 - Structure and predictability within the environment
 - Schedules, checklists, etc.
 - Ideally these will be internalize over time
- Manageable, predictable challenges with scaffolding and support
- Meet child where they currently function
- Increased pressure – decreased outcomes
- Perception is reality
- Collaboration

(Some) School Supports

- Assistance around transitions
- Previewing
- Practice sessions for presentations
- Pair with preferred student for partner work
- Access to self-calming tools
- Pair non-preferred activities with preferred ones
- Provide alternative formats
- Reduced workload

Keys to Developing Effective Strategies

- Consideration of age and developmental level
- Knowledge of learning profile and underlying challenges
- Direct approach to stress response
- Teach skills that are lacking – anxiety and non-anxiety
- Combination of school and outside services

Individual Therapy Services

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
 - Gold standard for anxiety
 - Emotion awareness, monitoring of triggers, reduction/management of anxious thoughts and feelings
- Mindfulness and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
 - Focus on the present moment
 - Intentional and non-judgmental awareness of emotions, thoughts, and sensations
 - Acceptance of unpleasant thoughts, reduce avoidance
 - Increase willingness and psychological flexibility

To Address EF Barriers:

- Reduced language in treatment
- Multisensory instruction
- Use of strengths and interests
- Increased frequency
- Consultation with home and school

Family-Based Interventions

- Parent training
 - Behavior management strategies
 - Consistency in expectations / schedule
 - Emotion coaching strategies
- Family therapy
 - Identify and process sources of family-wide stress
 - Improve communication within the family



Alternative Approaches to Self-Regulation

- Yoga-based therapy
 - Improve body awareness, self-monitoring, relaxation, regulation
- Acupuncture
- Equine therapy or expressive arts therapy
- Psychopharmacology
- All work best in conjunction with therapy

Thank you!

- Questions?
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