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A Useful Strategy To Regulate Emotions For Children And Teens With Autism

What is this research about?

When people manage their emotions, they are trying to influence how they experience those emotions, which helps with social interactions and new situations. Some strategies are maladaptive, such as avoiding or suppressing emotions. Cognitive reappraisal is one adaptive strategy that involves thinking differently about the event in a way that changes the emotional impact. Since emotional problems (e.g. tantrums and “meltdowns”) are common in children and teens with autism, and since that is a period that they are learning how to manage emotions, the researchers wanted to see if helpful strategies could be taught. In this study, the researchers measured the emotional reaction in various scenarios in young people with autism and in those without autism. They examined the types of strategies used to deal with those situations and if cognitive reappraisal was used effectively in both groups.

What did the researcher do?

The researchers gave 21 children and teens with autism (average age = 13) and 22 controls (people without autism that were the same gender and age as the autism group) a task that measured emotional regulation. Participants were given 16 age-appropriate scenarios; for example “You see a bunch of your classmates hanging out and you want to join them; when you come closer you hear them laughing”. They were asked about their initial

What you need to know:

Cognitive reappraisal – thinking differently about what has happened – is an effective strategy to deal with emotional situations for young people with autism.

thoughts and rated their own emotion level (how tense or worried they would feel), and then what they would do to calm down. The researchers taught them to use cognitive reappraisal – thinking differently about what has happened – using explanations and examples. Following that, the scenarios were presented again and rated again. The researchers looked at how many used reappraisal the second time and if that strategy was helpful.

What did the researcher find?

The researchers found that people with autism were equally affected by emotional stimuli as the control group. During the scenarios, those with autism used cognitive reappraisal less (17% of the time vs 37%) and suppression more (6% vs 2%) to deal with their emotions initially.

After the researchers explained how to use cognitive reappraisal, those with autism improved their use of reappraisal, but still used it less in the next set of scenarios compared to the non-autism group. However, if they did use this strategy, they benefitted the same amount as the non-autism group (based on their ratings of their emotions).



How can you use this research?

People with autism benefit the same amount as those without autism, when they are able to use a cognitive reappraisal strategy. This has implications on interventions, as those that had trouble initially were able to learn and use this strategy more to their benefit. Further research needs to examine emotional regulation strategies using scenarios that are more tailored for those with autism (using pictures instead of texts) and having other non-emotion inducing scenarios to ensure the responses were specific to emotion regulation.

About the Researchers

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This research summary was written by Dr. Jonathan Lai for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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