Mindfulness based Stress Reduction and Autism Spectrum Disorders

By Jed Baker, PhD

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) have a much higher rate of anxiety, depression, and mood issues than the general population. Over 80% of those with “high functioning” ASD are estimated to also have an anxiety disorder. Those with excellent intellectual functioning may be especially vulnerable to anxiety issues as they are more aware of their challenges and related negative judgments from others.

Mindfulness based stress reduction could be an antidote to the constant and understandable worry about how well one is performing or being accepted by others. The goal of mindfulness based strategies is to train one’s attention to focus on the present moment without harsh self-judgment rather than ruminating about the past or anxiously anticipating the future.

The Paradox of Mindfulness in ASD Treatment

So much of treatment for those with ASD focuses on increasing awareness of social behavior and the impact it has on others. Social skill training efforts to increase an individual’s perspective taking ability can inadvertently increase self-consciousness and associated social anxiety. When we teach individuals to be careful about perseverating about their interests, interrupting others, watching their personal space, editing sensitive remarks, or stressing the importance of showing interest with non-verbal body language and by asking pertinent questions, we can unintentionally increase their anxiety about judgments from others. How then do we work towards increasing social awareness without increasing social anxiety?

Being, Flowing, and Doing

A mindfulness-based approach such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction is widely available in the west because of the excellent work of Jon Kabat-Zinn who teaches mindfulness in a very systematic and practical way. Mindfulness based strategies can offer a break from constant efforts to alter behavior to please others. It can be considered a mode of “just being” rather than “doing.” In the doing mode, we try to solve problems where in the being mode we simply observe our experience without trying to change anything. Traditional mindfulness based meditation focuses on observing one’s own inner experience as it unfolds without trying to steer it, change it, or judge it in any way. A related mode of being is when we are fully immersed in an
activity, not necessarily observing it as in meditation, but also not judging it self-consciously. Sometimes these moments are referred to as “flow,” a state of full attention and joy in an activity. In many ways, some of the perseverative interests of those with ASD can serve as way of having flow. Hobbies, special interests, and even video games can offer a moment to simply enjoy an activity rather than struggling to change oneself or please others. Of course, if hobbies become a way to evaluate oneself, then they stop being a mindfulness based activity and become a source of self-scrutiny. The key is to be in the moment with an accepting attitude, refraining from negative judgments.

Finding a balance between being and doing is crucial to staying emotionally regulated. Activities that offer contentment as well as practicing traditional mindfulness based meditative practices can be balanced with efforts to do, grow, and reach desired goals. However, is there a way to be goal driven without the burden of overwhelming social anxiety and negative self-judgment?

**Growth Mindset: A Way of Doing without Negative Judgment**

Mindfulness does not need to be simply a break from the doing mode, but rather it can serve as a more accepting way to strive for positive change. Though mindfulness is often described as a strategy, it is also a general attitude for living, one in which we observe our own behavior without harsh judgment. We can become aware of our social functioning, even plan to make improvements, without feeling bad about ourselves.

The excellent research by Carol Dweck (2006) on what she terms a growth mindset reflects this mindful and accepting way to think about growth. Carol Dweck (2006) has shown that getting individuals to understand that abilities change over time and that we are not supposed to know things immediately helps us to cope better with difficult tasks, accept mistakes as part of learning and be open to accepting help. Dweck distinguishes between two contrasting theories that individuals have about their abilities: a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset.

A fixed mindset refers to the belief that qualities, like intelligence or sociability, are fixed traits. You are born with a certain amount of that quality, and it does not change much. Events like taking a test or going out on a date become either a confirmation or refutation of one’s personality. Since making a mistake may indicate one is not good enough, people with a fixed mindset prefer to do tasks they know they can do. They do not want to make a mistake or get help, which might imply that they are somehow inadequate.

A growth mindset refers to the belief that abilities, like intelligence or sociability, can be developed through effort and hard work—talent is only a starting point. Those with a growth mindset enjoy trying tasks that are a challenge. They welcome mistakes and assistance to learn more. Not surprisingly, Dweck (2006) shows that people with a growth mindset have better learning outcomes as they continue to seek out challenges, stay motivated in the face of mistakes, and accept help to learn more. Here is a summary of Dweck’s two mindsets and its effects on learning.
The point of this important work is that it is possible to strive to improve (to be in a doing mode) without the kind of self-criticism that increases social anxiety. It is a way of accepting just “being who we are at the moment” while also “doing” something to improve.

Practical Applications

First of all, those of us who work with autistic individuals can learn to respect their perseverative interests. It is these very interests that may allow them to keep emotionally regulated and content. Happy people function better than those deprived of their joys. Scheduling time for these activities is important.

For those with good intellectual functioning, adding mindfulness meditations to their daily routine would also be quite helpful. In addition to courses available in most communities, there are excellent websites and APPS that offer free mindfulness meditation guides. Many of my clients experiment with these guided meditations to identify the ones they find calming. The largest gain I have seen is in my client’s ability to fall asleep better at night rather than ruminating about the days social challenges.

One consideration for some of my ASD clients is to find meditation guides that are more concrete in their language. Words that describe specific actions like breathing in and out, tensing and relaxing certain muscles may be better than words that describe metaphorical actions like “breathing out through your toes.”

When it comes to socializing, preparing clients with a growth mindset is most useful. This means approaching a social situation with the attitude of “What can one learn?” rather than “How will I perform?” It helps when we surround ourselves with those who also have a growth mindset and will not judge us harshly, but rather understand that we, like all humans, are a work in progress. When we can free ourselves from anxious self-consciousness, we can actually attend better to the other person. For example, when my clients go out on dates, I often ask them to diminish the importance of the outcome of the date (will the other person like them) and instead immerse themselves in learning about the other person almost like a biographer learning about their subject’s story, likes, dislikes, upbringing, hopes, and dreams. If the attitude is less about “how am I doing” and more about “what can I learn about this person,” the bonus is that the date often flows much better. And if there are social mishaps during the date, embracing them with humor, with an openness to grow is received much better than an angry or defensive response. Saying
something like, “Oops, sorry I said that, I am trying to learn to edit better” will be better received than “So what if I called you ____, I should be able to say whatever I want.” The message here is, it’s okay to make a mistake, it’s part of growing, especially if we take responsibility to learn from it.

In the end, perhaps the most compelling message mindfulness has to teach us is to accept ourselves without negative judgment. This does not need to preclude efforts to improve, but informs us to do so with the understanding that we are valuable, and like all humans, ever changing works in progress.

References


For more information on mindfulness and ASD, see:


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