

Challenging Emotions: Anxiety and Worry

Examples

Anxiety might show itself as problems concentrating, feeling tense and fidgety, struggling to fall and stay asleep, anger outbursts, irritability, worrying, and negative thoughts.

Goal

To teach Charlie use mindfulness tools to reduce their anxiety.

Requirements before this training can be started

Charlie must be able to understand language and for some of these activities they must also be able to speak.

Links

(This file is an example of our work. Our actual files are bundled with all relevant information. This section typically includes links to other files that are vital for the topic at hand)

- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Guided Meditation for Kids

Our assessment indicates that Charlie displays some signs of anxiety and worry. Although anxiety is not a core feature of autism, approximately 40% of people with ASD have at least one type of anxiety disorder including obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Still, Charlie does not have to be diagnosed with anxiety to benefit from the instructions presented here.

These mindfulness activities aim to help Charlie focus on calming sensory stimuli and their body instead of anxious thoughts or stimuli that they find irritating or scary such as loud sounds. These exercises aren't limited to reducing anxiety alone as they will likely help Charlie with potential issues with anger.

Charlie may not be able to express that they are feeling anxious so you should pay close attention to how they typically respond when they're feeling anxious as well as to the kind of settings that are anxiety provoking for them. One way to tell that Charlie is feeling anxious is increased stimming behavior (such as rocking their body). This isn't always the case, however, since some individuals also stim when they are excited and happy. Charlie may also become irritable and have more anger outbursts when they get anxious. Perhaps Charlie has problems sleeping, shows signs of OCD, or has compulsive behaviors such as needing to check time and again that the doors are locked. Changes in routine as well as crowded or noisy settings may cause anxiety for Charlie as well.

Below, you'll find a long list of methods that have been scientifically proven to help reduce anxiety. Don't attempt to try them all at once, however. Choose one or two techniques that you think Charlie might enjoy and see if they help. If you've tried one technique for a couple months and it

doesn't seem to help, try a different method. If the method brings some results but Charlie continues to experience anxiety, continue using the method but try incorporating additional strategies. For best results, repeat these exercises daily with Charlie.

The best time to introduce these activities to Charlie is when they are relaxed and calm. Once Charlie knows these exercises well, you can start doing them with Charlie when they're anxious.

Body Awareness Activities

Teach Charlie to become more aware of their body and their movements so that they can begin to recognize symptoms of anxiety through their body.

Walking on Thin Ice

Ask Charlie to pretend that they're walking on thin ice. This should make them move slowly and carefully around the room.

Describe Your Movements

Help Charlie to pay attention to their movements and how their muscles feel by asking them to pretend that they're a radio announcer. Ask Charlie to describe every movement that they make. Tell them to say things like, "I'm picking my leg up slowly and carefully and putting it back down." After they describe a movement, ask them to describe how it feels. For example, ask them to describe how their leg felt like when they picked it up when compared to when they put it back down. The idea is to make them aware of differences in how their muscles feel like when they are relaxed vs tense.

Egg Balloon

Toss a balloon in the air and tell Charlie that the balloon is a fragile egg. Ask Charlie to do their best to keep the balloon in the air and only touch it very softly so that it won't break. The idea is to use soft, slow movements instead of running around. If Charlie begins to run around, ask them to slow down or they'll break the egg.

Mindful Body

This is a great exercise to do every night at bedtime to calm the mind and make it easier for Charlie to fall asleep. Your goal is to teach Charlie to turn their awareness from one part of their body to another. Start by asking Charlie to close their eyes while they're lying in bed. Ask them to focus first on their feet. Ask them if they can feel how the sheets feel against their feet. Do their feet feel warm or cold? Light or heavy? Then, ask them to bring their attention focus to their legs. Ask them where they feel heaviest and press against the bed the most. Do they feel warm or cold? Is there pain or aches somewhere in their legs? Move from one area of the body to another until you cover each area in this way. Many people typically experience anxiety as heaviness in their chest so pay attention if Charlie mentions heaviness or pain in their chest.

Soles of the Feet

Teach Charlie to focus on the sensations that they get from their feet. You might ask them to first stand still and then move their weight slowly from their heels to their toes and back again. Once

Charlie has learned to do this well when they are calm, you can start asking them to redirect their attention and awareness to their feet when they're feeling anxious or angry.

Breathing Exercises

Just like the "soles of the feet" exercises, breathing exercises are a great way to bring Charlie's awareness and focus back to their body when they're feeling anxious.

Smell the Flower, Blow out the Candle

Tell Charlie to imagine that there's a beautiful flower in their left hand and a lit candle in their right hand. Ask them to take a deep breath through their nose as if they were smelling the flower. Next, ask them to breathe out through their mouth to blow out the candle. Repeat this a few times.

The Snake Breath

Ask Charlie to pretend that they're a snake. Tell them to take a deep breath in through their nose and then breathe out through their mouth with a low hissing sound.

Mindful Breathing

Ask Charlie to close their eyes and turn their attention towards their breathing. Ask them to put one hand on their stomach and another one on their chest. Ask them if they can feel their chest or stomach rise and fall with each breath. You can even put Charlie's favorite stuffed animal on their stomach and ask them to take this toy "for a ride." After they've done this a few times, see if they can feel the air coming in through their nose. Does the air feel cool or warm? Can they feel the air coming out of their nose? Tell them to focus on their breathing instead of thinking. Every time they find themselves thinking, Charlie should just label it as a thought and bring their focus back to their breathing. Do this for a minute or two. If Charlie enjoys this exercise, you can prolong the time to 5 minutes or even longer. This is a great practice to do at bedtime.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

You may be aware that a common way to relax the body is called progressive muscle relaxation. This technique aims to relax us by first tightening and then relaxing the whole body one muscle group at a time. Charlie may not have the patience to go over the whole body like this, and they may even find it a bit boring so here are some fun exercises that aim to accomplish the same but in a more engaging manner.

Picking and Squeezing Lemons

Tell Charlie that there's a lemon tree in front of them. Ask them to stretch out their hands in the air and grab imaginary lemons. Next, tell them to squeeze all the juice out of the lemons by making a tight fist. After this, ask Charlie to throw the lemons on the ground and relax their hands. You can do this a few times until their hands and arms feel relaxed.

Giants and Turtles

Get Charlie to stand. Ask them to become a giant by standing on tippy-toes and extending their arms in the air as high as they can. Ask them to reach for the ceiling. After a few seconds, ask Charlie to become a turtle. Ask Charlie to go on their knees and then sit on their feet. Then, have

them bend forward so that their back is arched, and they're curled up. Have them relax for a few moments before repeating this exercise.

A teen or an adult might enjoy our full-length progressive meditation video that can be found in your video library.

Sensory Activities

5-4-3-2-1

Ask Charlie to sit beside you next to a desk or other location where there are objects to touch or smell. You might even put some of Charlie's favorite things out there to smell or taste. Don't always prepare a single environment or have the same objects present since you want Charlie to be able to do this activity in any environment where they tend to get anxious such as a doctor's office.

First tell Charlie to look carefully around them and choose 5 things they can see that they would like to name. Some people, especially young children, tend to try to do this as fast as possible, but that isn't the point of this exercises. If Charlie does this, ask them to look around first and spend some time before choosing the objects they want to name.

Next, tell them to choose 4 things close to them to touch. If Charlie tries to stand up, tell them to only choose objects that are close enough for them touch while they're sitting. Ask Charlie to really focus on how these objects feel. Is one softer than the other? Is one of them cold and the others warm?

Then, ask Charlie to name 3 things that they can hear. Does one of them come from somewhere nearby and the others from outside?

Next, ask Charlie to name two things that they can smell. For this task, you may take Charlie to another room such as the kitchen. Are there some spices there that Charlie could sniff? Can they recognize some spices by smell even when their eyes are closed?

Finally, ask Charlie to name one thing around them that they could taste.

Mindful Eating

Next time you have dinner or a snack with Charlie, teach them to eat mindfully. Tell them to fully focus on their meal. Before they even take a bite, tell them to admire their meal. Ask them to notice the different colors, textures, and the aroma of the food. Ask them to eat slowly while they're eating, and to focus not only on taste but also on texture. What are the sounds that they hear as they bite into their food? How hot or cold is their food? Notice that if your child is a picky eater or has sensory issues related to food this may not be a good exercise for them.

Common Mistakes

Don't start these exercises when Charlie is feeling anxious. They should learn the exercise when they are calm. Only after they've fully mastered an activity can you start using it as a way of making Charlie relax when they're feeling anxious.

Q&A

Should I see a medical doctor or a psychologist if Charlie shows signs of anxiety?

It's always a good idea to consult a medical doctor if Charlie seems to suffer from anxiety. Charlie's doctor might recommend medication for anxiety or refer them to see a psychologist or psychotherapist.