

Understanding the Contribution of Anxiety to School Functioning in Transition-Age Youth with High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder

Gael Orsmond, Ellen Cohn, Wendy Coster
Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

Rationale: Co-occurring mental health conditions are prevalent in youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Researchers have described how anxiety is experienced by youth with ASD and their parents, but little is known about how anxiety impacts student functioning at the time of transition to adulthood.

Objective: The objective of this analysis is to describe how school personnel perceive and address anxiety in high school students with ASD.

Method: We conducted 5 focus groups with 23 school personnel to understand how they prepare high school students with ASD for life after school. We focused on students with ASD who are receiving a high school diploma; described students had average to above intellectual ability. In this analysis, we extracted all mentions of anxiety, and conducted content analysis to further understand the impact of anxiety on student functioning.

Results: School personnel described anxiety in youth with ASD as both a mental health condition and as a general experience in relation to the increased anticipated demands associated with adult roles. Anxiety interfered with students' ability to learn and also led to problematic behaviors in school. School personnel described the need to help youth develop self-regulation, coping strategies, and self-determination skills to address anxiety; they also expressed appreciation for families who sought out psychological resources outside of the school setting.

Conclusion: There is an important potential role for occupational therapists to develop programs and supports for students with ASD and co-occurring anxiety to learn self-regulation, coping, and self-advocacy skills in preparation for life after school.