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Coping with university life using mindfulness and sensory strategies

Starting university can be a very stressful time for anyone. However, the learning and teaching methods used by many universities can be demanding for autistic students and some may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety than other students. Mental health difficulties amongst such students can be exacerbated by limited coping strategies, low self-esteem, and vulnerability to stressful events. They may have difficulty coping with the social aspects of university life.

Additionally, autistic students often experience heightened sensory input that they may have difficulty processing. Most students can self-regulate by filtering out competing stimuli but some, especially those with Asperger syndrome (AS), may struggle with sensory regulation. They react negatively to sensory bombardment and their learning, behaviour, and social experiences can be impeded.

Universities can help by making reasonable adjustments to provide a sensory-friendly environment by integrating sensory-based strategies into the curriculum to provide a foundation for successful learning.

When sensory needs are met, students will be at optimal internal states of feeling calm, focused, and ready for learning. However, many university staff are unaware that sensory processing difficulties are even an issue.

How our project began

In 2014, we were awarded funding from Ulster University for a widening access project to run workshops for young autistic men. The project was aimed at easing transition into higher education and developing strategies to reduce stress and promote positive coping skills. Social participation with occupational therapy students in a mentorship role aimed to provide opportunities for peer group interaction and support.

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With support from the Centre for Flexible and Continuing Education, we developed a new module: Coping with University Life Using Mindfulness¹ and Sensory Strategies.

With support from AutismNI, we contacted interested parents and held an information evening for them and their sons. We emphasised that this would be a collaborative venture: students would be partners with us in deciding how we develop the workshops and their ideas and suggestions would be valued by us.

Aims

- Understanding the demands of university life
- Experiencing online learning
- Developing mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques
- Understanding individual sensory preferences to develop coping strategies
- Improving confidence and emotional resilience
- Raising aspirations and participation

How it worked

Four workshops, using mindfulness techniques and sensory strategies, were delivered over an eight-week period. They drew on two decades of substantial research evidence supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions. Activities included:

- group work
- meditation practice
- contemplative inquiry to test out techniques and develop competencies.

Students studied the theory and practice of mindfulness and sensory processing and discussed these together in group work sessions. We introduced our own unique approach to mindfulness from our perspective as occupational therapists – ‘occupation-based mindfulness’. Young autistic people may find it easier to engage in mindfulness based on an occupation that holds personal meaning for them. This may also help them to focus on specific tasks.

Outcomes

Outcomes from participation in workshops were mostly positive. Students reported using mindfulness techniques and sensory strategies to deal with stress and anxiety in their everyday lives. There was a noticeable increase in social interaction and decrease in both social anxiety and sensory issues. Twelve students successfully completed the first module and have gone on to study at university.

In June 2016, we won the Ulster University Students Union Learning and Teaching Team Award for our work on this project. In November 2016, we were Highly Commended for the Ulster University Distinguished Teaching Fellowship (Team Award). In March 2017, we were honoured

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to win the [National Autistic Society Autism Professionals Award for Inspirational Education Provision – Secondary Schools and post-16 provision.](#)

Future areas of potential development

In 2015, with funding from the Garfield Weston Trust, we expanded our cohort to include a wider student profile, including young women, and students with enduring mental illness. The module followed more or less the same format as the previous year except we chose to hold half-day workshops on Wednesday afternoons only to make them more accessible for mentors.

We have plans to collaborate with the Foundation Art programme at the School of Art and Design in Ulster University to develop a personalised sensory kit that students will be able to design and make themselves.

We also plan to collaborate with Student Support to incorporate our module into a residential summer school for young autistic people to provide a much better transition experience into university life.

Notes

¹ “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” (Jon Kabat-Zinn)