Exploring the Current and Long-Term Impacts of Pandemic on Executive Functioning in Autistic Students

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Conference Civility Statement
We ask you to join us in creating a culture that reflects…
   Access and Inclusion
   and
   Civility and Respect
…this week and in all aspects of our organization.

Disclaimers
• We are not autistic and therefore not experts on autism
• Autistic-led content and feedback from autistic students
Presentation Overview

- Pre-Pandemic Context
- Pandemic-Specific Impacts
- Support Strategies
- Hot Tips for Self-Care

Our Institutional Contexts

- The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
  - 4-year institution
  - Specialized program for degree-seeking autistic students
- Chattanooga State Community College
  - 2-year community college
  - No specialized program for autistic students

Pre-Pandemic: Establishing a Baseline
Brain Stuff

- Autonomic Nervous System
- Executive Functioning
- Autistic Inertia
- Increased Rates of Co-Occurring Diagnoses

Autistic Inertia

- Difficulty starting, stopping, and changing activities not within their conscious control.
- An inability to act due to fear of unknown or undesirable outcome
- Mental health difficulties and stress exacerbate difficulties.

Social Stuff

- Living in a world not built for them
- Autistic Burnout
  - Camouflaging
Academic Stuff

- Having to focus on subjects that don’t interest them
- Professors who don’t understand their impacts
- Different systems and teaching styles
- High School Vs. College

Pandemic-Specific Impacts

Overall Impacts

- Constant State of Chaos
- Changes in Recommendations
- Politically Charged
- Fear of Getting Covid
- Steep Learning Curves All Around
- Reset of Social Expectations
- Parent Panic
- Emphasis on Retention
- At Times Force Fitting Online Learning & Engagement
Return to “Normal”

- Centering Neurotypical “Normal”
- Quick to Move Back to In-Person

Academic Impacts

- College readiness gaps from high school to college
  - Lack of support capacity to help with transitional needs
  - Not having an authentic first year(s) college experience
  - Positive: Coming in knowing how to utilize online platforms
- Potential knowledge gaps that occurred b/c of online format
  - Easy to lose focus during virtual lectures
  - Asynchronous courses
  - Flexibility = Lack of Structure at Times
  - Going from open book/open note to not having that

Academic Impacts

- Loss of Passion for Academics
  - Inconsistent Quality of Online Learning
  - Burnt Out Pros.
  - Not Understanding the Value of College Degree
- Role of trauma on acquisition of new information
Faculty Impacts

- Burnout
- Trying to grasp at any aspects they can control
- Not wanting to shift back to in-person
- The Great Resignation
  - Stress, mental health, underpaid, overworked

Mental Health Impacts

- Increase in both anxiety and depression symptoms
  - Prolonged exposure to stress
  - Loss of a sense of control
  - Shifting back to the social expectations of in-person

Other Impacts

- Burnout for Days
  - Frustration Tolerance Lowered
- Loss of Resiliency
  - Going from 0 to 100 More Quickly
  - Parental Involvement
  - More Urgent in Requests
- Isolation
  - Difficult to start/initialize tasks, especially going places
  - Safety Anxiety Compounding....
Discussion
What are things you are seeing from students on your campuses?

Support Strategies

Building Resiliency
• Self-Determination
  • Understanding one’s own attitude, abilities, and limitations, all of which are essential in decision making and problem-solving.
  • Educating parents on value of autonomy
  • Cultivating protective factors against autistic burnout
  • Mapping out scenarios and responses to build confidence
PERMA
- Positive Emotions
- Engagement
- Relationships/Social Connections
- Meaning and Purpose
- Accomplishment
- Shifting focus from what's problematic to what's going well or what works
- Perception of control or self-control leads to increased wellbeing

General Strategies
- Prioritizing self-care/wellness/wellbeing
- Offering different types of meetings and being flexible (virtual & in person)
- More direct communication
- Helping them create structure by actually engaging with the online platforms
- Building resiliency… mapping out different scenarios and responses
- Work smarter not harder (group stuff)
- Don’t force a fit… if a student needs a break encourage it (retention be darned to heck)

Support Strategies
- Offer empathic feedback
- Give gentle advice remembering the onus is on self-efficacy.
- Allow them to come up with their own plans or goals
- Act as a supportive guide to help keep them on track with daily/weekly reminders
Tricking the Brain

- Automate whatever can be automated
  - iPhone Automations
  - Creating alerts (Remember the Milk)
  - Waking up (Alarmy)
- Use decompression tools
  - Deep breathing
  - Headspace

Peer-to-Peer Support

- No one understands like someone else going through the same thing
- Judgment free, low pressure

Campus Collaboration

- Wellbeing Offices
- Rec Centers
- Counseling Centers
- Health Services
- Academic Departments (OT, etc.)
- Tutoring, Writing Centers, Math Centers
Programming

• Wellbeing
• Workshops
• Study Parties

Staff/Faculty Trainings

• Educating on “minds of all kinds”
• Autism specific resources

Self-Care
Staff Impacts

- Shift towards prioritizing self-care
- Working hard to move out of trauma response to student requests
- Difficulty transitioning back from remote work
- Difficult time getting back to the equity work instead of success oriented work.
- Turnover, Burnout, and Demoralization

Hot Tips for Self-Care

- Self-care isn’t just bubble baths and incense and chanting monks….
- Therapy, Therapy, Therapy, More Therapy, Etc
- First and Secondary Trauma Responses
- Build Your Community
- Prioritize the Things That Matter

More Hot Tips for Self-Care

- Know Your Lane
  - Cultivate Collaborative Care
- Know Your Metaphorical and Literal Worth
  - If this is consuming x amount of time, this is the cost
- Know When to Hold Em’ and When to Fold Em’
  - Self-Advocacy
Even More Hot Tips for Self-Care

• Don’t Own It. Just Stop. Stop It.
• Know Your Why
• Leaders- Get the Right People On/Off the Bus
  • Think of Retention in Terms of Staff Too

Resources

• Smart but Scattered--and Stalled: 10 Steps to Help Young Adults Use Their Executive Skills to Set Goals, Make a Plan, and Successfully Leave the Nest
• The Neurodivergent Friendly Workbook of DBT Skills
• Navigating College: A Handbook on Self Advocacy Written for Autistic Students from Autistic Adults

Citations


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Monahan, Jessica; Ackles, Laurie; Edwards, Amy D.; Freedman, Brian; Withers Lubbers, Pamela; Sanders Ogot, Traci; Friedman, Cherie A.; and Herkel Brown, Jane (2021) “Autistic College Students and COVID-19: Anxiety, Support Needs and Responses by Specialized Programs,” Developmental Disabilities Network Journal: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26077/9318-83a


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