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

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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 Profs.
  • 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/initiate 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 (Alarma)

• 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


Citations


Monahan, Jessica; Ackles, Laurie; Edwards, Amy D.; Freedman, Brian; Withers Lubbers, Pamela; Sanders Gardner, Sara; Fishbaugh, Cherie A.; and Thierfeld 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/a318-fd3a


• https://autismspectrumnews.org/the-journey-to-self-determination/
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Thank you for attending!