

How to change most areas of your life when you are diagnosed with Autism.

Getting Unstuck

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About Me

- I am a creative problem solver that enjoys seeing others pivot their lives towards a more authentic, unique and satisfying journey through the challenges that the world presents.
- 30,000+ sessions over 19 years. MA from Pepperdine in Marriage and Family Therapy, 2005
- Specialized in treating Autism and ADHD since 2005.
- I evolve with research, and am always open to changing my mind.
- I started Uram Family Therapy in 2018, which has now grown to 10 employees; 9 therapists offering 600 sessions per month. Instead of just focusing on one diagnosis, we have a specialist for the most common concerns and diagnoses.
- We also specialize in Anxiety, Depression, Trauma, OCD, Parenting, Dissociative Disorder, Substance Addictions, Self-Esteem, Launching from Home, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder, Social Pragmatic Communication Disorder, Gaming addiction and Porn addiction.

**Instead of giving
background info, I
am only going to list
solutions tonight.**

With research articles to support my ideas. I am guided by these theories:

Theories that guide my practice

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Positive Psychology
- Collaborative Problem Solving
- Cognitive Load Theory - Less Fluff, more useful content
- Autism Cluster Theory - Better Explanatory Power than the Autism Spectrum Theory

**“Kids Do Well if
They Can”**

**Ross Greene, “The Explosive
Child” - The Book that reminds
parents to not be controlling.**

The Most Common Responses to “Why I am Stuck?”

- I’m too burned out to try
- I’m too depressed to care
- This is your goal, not mine
- There are too many unknowns to prepare myself for
- It is too sensory unfriendly
- It is not accommodating my needs
- I will fail anyway

“To Get Unstuck, you must first understand what you are stuck in!”

Ask Clarifying questions.

Summarize it.

Chart it visually.

Do not rush through this step. Caregivers should not take the lead.

Autonomy-Based Approaches are the only approach that respects everyone's boundaries and also lead to long term success.

The Three Major Musts of REBT (CBT)

- I must do well and win the approval of others or I am worthless
- Other people must do the right thing or else they are deserving of punishment
- Life shouldn't be that difficult.
- If these three musts are present. There is a demand that is inflexible and leads people to feel stuck. These are core beliefs that I include in every treatment plan.

Without heavy theory, here are some potential solutions for the ASD person trying to get unstuck.

- Respect everyone's boundaries, it leads to learned optimism
 - Figure out who is in charge of going beyond your comfort zone, me, others or both?
 - Know the Pillars of Motivation (Knowledge, Energy and Support)
 - Address Sensory Issues, medical conditions, making appropriate accommodations and adaptations when necessary
 - Regularly show support and seek accountability
 - For caregivers, Don't use Escape Extinction (ABA) or force someone to change. It leads to learned helplessness.
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If you are thinking...

- I don't want to
- I don't need to
- I don't have the energy to
- I shouldn't need to mask that much
- I will just fail anyway
- You can't force me or creating a fight so the discussion does not continue.
- I have no interest in it
- It is too tough

THEN IT MAY HELP TO TRY OUT SOME OF THESE FIRST STEP IDEAS TO FEEL UNSTUCK

“I don’t want to” (know)

- It is okay to not want to.
- It isn’t okay to not know why.
- Ask yourself, “Is this a social rule (construct)?”
- Am I avoiding it out of fear?
- Is it a preference?
- Is it really necessary?
- Is it potentially embarrassing or socially awkward?
- If these answers aren’t helping, we then have to explore depression, burnout and anxiety.

Depression

- ASD Depression is both an identity depression and a state depression that often includes burnout
- Identity Depression - related to your core self, not just behaviors. Examples are: “I am rejectable, hopeless, worthless. I hate myself.” This is more likely to be diagnosed as
- Episodic Depression - related to recent events, not reflective of your identity. Examples are “I can’t get out of bed,” “It is too hard to do anything.” “I don’t want to die, but I am okay not living.”
- Burnout Depression - The ideas sound good, but I have failed so many times with ideas that have sounded good that I am just going to exist and not try anymore. Please stop trying to get me to have hope.

Burnout

- Many adults with Autism experience Burnout regularly.
- Autistic Burnout often results from consistently having to think of what to say and do. There is rarely a moment where you can be your authentic self when around others.
- Masking is exhausting. Figuring out whether someone is being sarcastic is frustrating. Trying to hear someone speak when the din of the noise around you drowns out their voice is stressful.
- When you have Autism, you often have to put forth a significant amount of effort beyond what the neurotypical person exerts in life.
- A link to the Burnout Assessment Tool for Adults is included at the end of the slides.
- My #1 Treatment is be aware your “spoons” and unapologetically respect your own limits despite the pressure from outside, so you can consistently experience life without having “recovery days.”

Alternative Explanations for Feeling Stuck

- Aversion or Active Avoidance - Sometimes if you do nothing for long enough, the avoidance stops becoming a daily choice and becomes a way of life. Learned Helplessness eventually develops.
- Apathy - When you have such strong emotions and a sense of justice and fairness, sometimes learned helplessness takes over when you see that society rejects your pursuit of what is right.
- Anxiety - There is a relentless flow of unknown factors that you must think through and make a decision about on a daily basis. There is rarely an all or nothing option. Compromises are everywhere. Having Autism leads you to continue to seek an ideal solution or perfectionism which does not exist.
- Burnout - When you have no energy left to continue to try and put in less and less effort, you are experiencing burnout.
- Specific Learning Disorders - 7.5-10% of Autistic Individuals have a Specific Learning Disability. The majority of them are not assessed or treated for it.

Treating ASD Depression

- The way to get unstuck from ASD depression is to approach it rationally and realistically. Essentially, if treatment goes well, you will use CBT to realize that we feel more stuck than we truly are; or will realize that you truly are stuck as things are and use ACT to tolerate the discomfort of unpleasantness.
 - (ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder, CBT= Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, ACT= Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)
- An Example of CBT is having you ask yourself, “Is this really as bad as it feels?,” “If I had to ask myself one week from today about it, would it feel as intense?” “If I had a friend with the same diagnosis give me advice, what would be different than the way that I am thinking now?”
- An Example of ACT is accepting the diagnosis of Autism’s global affect on your social interactions, and instead of fighting it, accepting that NT’s will misunderstand you, or worse, which is predictably awful. When it is predictable and unchangeable, the depressive feelings are less intense than they were the first time that you were unfairly treated.
- Learned Optimism then arises where you then seek out the creative solutions rather than give up due to the negative mental filter.

The Hexaflex ACT Approach to ASD Depression

- Psychological Inflexibility is a key Hallmark of Autism. Here is how to treat it using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy:
- Cognitive Delusion
- Experiential Acceptance
- Present Moment Awareness
- Seeing yourself as Context
- Living Through your values
- Committed Action towards your goals

Getting Unstuck Requires Creative Thinking

- Creative Reasoning Involves Clearly defining the end result and then developing a plan to get there.
- When stuck, view it as a roadblock, that with enough effort or skill, can be worked through.
- Exists outside of traditional hierarchies, you may disrespect people to get your needs met.
- Even in Math, there are always more than one way to solve a problem.

What happens in therapy?

- I give you a safe space to dispute these long held beliefs.
- I am actively engaged in the problem solving rather than a disconnected guide.
- Bring a notebook, your phone or laptop. We actively solve problems in the moment. We make calls, complete applications, assignments and projects together. It helps me understand you and I can help in the moment that it is most needed.
- Learned Helplessness is talked about. I help parents realize why consequences are not motivating and actually achieve the opposite of their goal.
- We complete worksheets that help you understand low self esteem, stuck points and cognitive distortions and logical fallacies.

Contact Us

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Articles

- Jonathan Tarbox “What is Escape Extinction” (Please never use this) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/escape-extinction>
- Jennifer Lerner “Emotion and Decision Making” <https://scholar.harvard.edu/sites/scholar.harvard.edu/files/jenniferlerner/files/emotion-and-decision-making.pdf?m=1450899163>
- Bernard J. Crespi “The Hallmarks of Autism” <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2022.937163/full>
- John Pruett, Jr.: Autism Spectrum Disorder: Spectrum or Cluster?: <https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5215660/>
- The Three Major Musts: <https://www.rebtnetwork.org/library/musts.html>
- Build H, Life should be healthier: <https://www.buildingh.org/>

Screeners and Assessments:

Please note that all of these screeners are best used in a clinical setting and can be easily misinterpreted.

- If you would like to screen yourself for Depression:
 - Adult Scale: <https://www.mdapp.co/zung-self-rating-depression-scale-calculator-294/>
 - Child Scale: https://www.brandeis.edu/roybal/docs/CESD-R_Website_PDF.pdf
- Screener for Autism: [https://depts.washington.edu/dbpeds/Screening%20Tools/DSM-5\(ASD.Guidelines\)Feb2013.pdf](https://depts.washington.edu/dbpeds/Screening%20Tools/DSM-5(ASD.Guidelines)Feb2013.pdf)
- Screener for Burnout: <https://burnoutassessmenttool.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/BAT-English.pdf>
- Screener for ADHD: <https://add.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/adhd-questionnaire-ASRS111.pdf>
- More info on what a Specific Learning Disorder is: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6345134/>

Videos

- Russ Harris “The Struggle Switch:” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCp1I16GCXI>
- Matthew Confer “Challenge the Constraints” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7Jnmi2BkS8>
- Overcoming Learned Helplessness: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7AiZu3KP9U>
- Albert Ellis and REBT: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JEnshsEdic>
- Michelle Charfen “Unconditional Positive Regard (For your Kids)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tkkL9w2pw8>
- The Hexaflex Model: <https://neshnikolic.com/hexaflex>
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Research

- Mindfulness Based Therapy for Autism (MBT-AS) reduces depression and anxiety: https://www.autismandmindfulness.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/L_termijn-effect-mindfulness-032014.pdf
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for ASD Addresses Cognitive Restructuring and Cognitive Distortions to decrease anxiety: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25246292/>
- Autism and Depression: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4518704/>
- Cognitive Load Theory: <https://www.educationcorner.com/cognitive-load-theory/>
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Activities

- CBT activity that uses the REBT ABCDE framework to dispute irrational beliefs: Live Worksheets: <https://www.rebtnetwork.org/library.html>
- Mt. SAC Math Handout: https://www.mtsac.edu/marcs/worksheet/general_topics/2five_step_word_problems.pdf
- The Fallacy Detective to Identify Bad Reasoning: <https://www.amazon.com/fallacy-detective-thirty-eight-recognize-reasoning/dp/097453157x>
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Support Groups

- Helping the Behaviorally Challenging Child in Tustin: <https://www.hbcc.us/>
- Orange County Aspergers Support Group: <https://ocaspergers.org/>
- Autism Resource Mom: <https://autismresourcemom.org/>
- AANE, Asperger/Autism Network: <https://www.aane.org/>
- Autism Society San Diego: <https://www.autismsocietysandiego.org/>