

Anxiety, Learning/Developmental Disabilities, and the IEP

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My Background

- ▶ Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Suffolk University 2009
- ▶ Post-doctoral fellowship in the Developmental Medicine Center at Boston Children's Hospital 2009-2011
- ▶ Joined NESCA in 2011
- ▶ Neuropsychological evaluations with students aged 0-22

What is Anxiety?

- ▶ Includes various disorders/diagnoses ranging from mild to severe
 - ▶ Generalized Anxiety Disorder
 - ▶ Panic Disorder
 - ▶ Agoraphobia
 - ▶ Specific Phobias
 - ▶ Social Anxiety Disorder
 - ▶ Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
 - ▶ Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
 - ▶ Separation Anxiety Disorder

Prevalence Rates

- ▶ An estimated 19% of adults (18 and older) in the U.S. had an anxiety disorder in the past year (NIMH)
- ▶ Prevalence rates are higher for women (23.4%) than men (14.3%)
- ▶ Among adolescents aged 13-18, an estimated 31.9% had an anxiety disorder
 - ▶ 8.3% had a severe disorder
 - ▶ Higher for girls than boys

Anxiety and Learning/Developmental Disabilities

- ▶ Individuals with learning or developmental disabilities show significantly higher rates of anxiety than the general population

My Recent Cases

- ▶ Ages ranged from 3-18
- ▶ 15 students with ASD; 7 had co-existing anxiety
- ▶ 9 students with language-based learning disabilities; 7 had anxiety
- ▶ 5 students with ADHD; 3 had anxiety
- ▶ 1 student with NLD and anxiety
- ▶ 2 students with intellectual disabilities; 1 had anxiety
- ▶ 2 students with primary anxiety disorder diagnoses (ages 4 and 7)

Stress vs. Anxiety – What's the Difference?

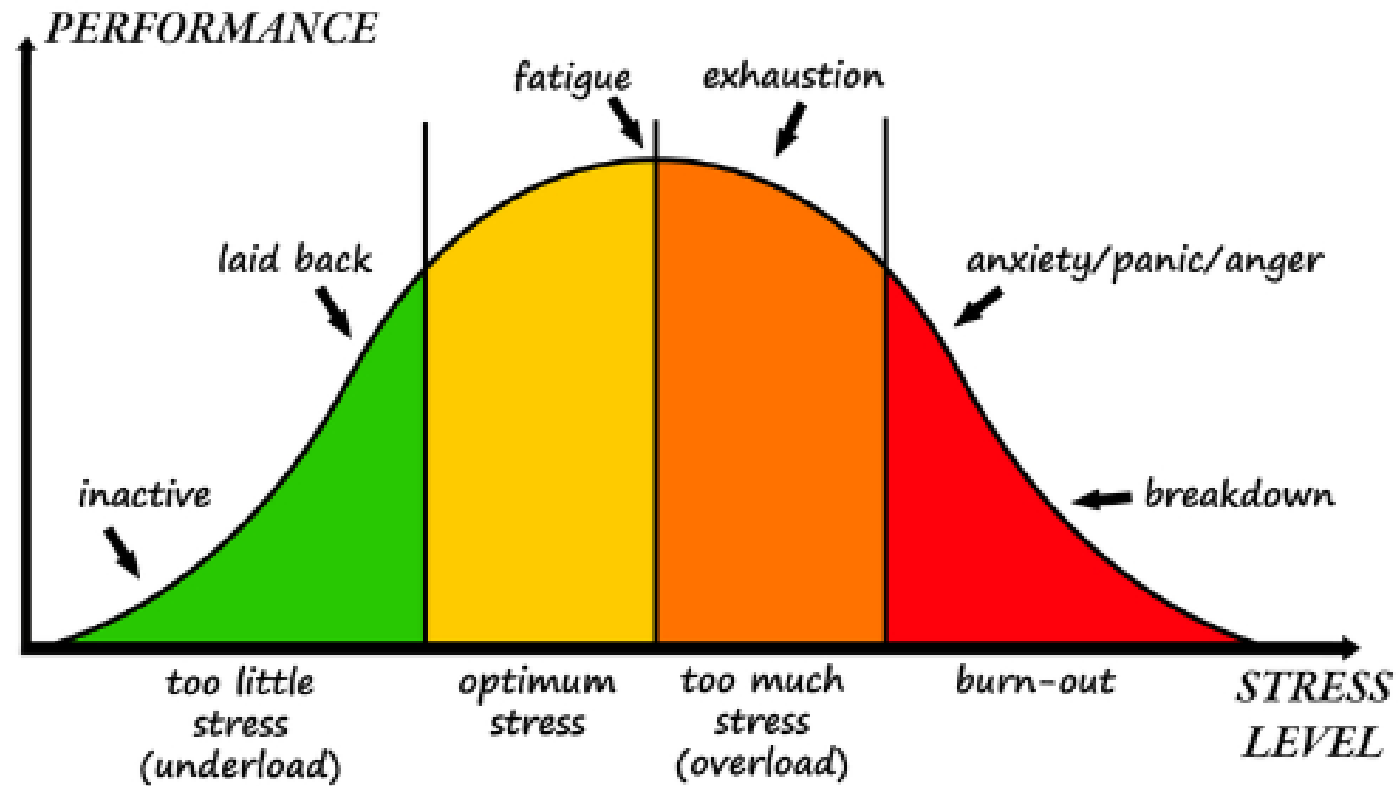
▶ Stress

- ▶ Physical reaction to imminent harm
- ▶ Our body's way of protecting us from harm
- ▶ Good stress vs. bad stress

▶ Anxiety

- ▶ Worrying about what might be as opposed to what is

STRESS CURVE



Taken from Dreamstime.com

Anxiety and Learning

- ▶ Chicken or egg phenomenon
- ▶ Interconnectedness between anxiety/emotions, attention, and learning
- ▶ Heightened anxiety interferes with executive functioning

What is Executive Functioning?

Self-Regulation



- Attention
- Behaviors
- Emotions

Metacognition



- Planning/Organization
- Time Management
- Initiation
- Working Memory
- Sustaining Effort
- Self-monitoring
- Cognitive Flexibility

Executive Functioning at School

- ▶ Organizing materials
- ▶ Getting started
- ▶ Managing transitions
- ▶ Maintaining attention
- ▶ Staying seated
- ▶ Asking for help
- ▶ Recognizing errors
- ▶ Regulating emotions

Executive Functioning at Home

- ▶ Maintaining a clean bedroom
- ▶ Waking up and getting ready for school
- ▶ Packing school bag – homework, sports gear, instrument, etc.
- ▶ Finishing homework
- ▶ Following household rules
- ▶ Controlling emotional reactions/managing frustration

What Does Anxiety Look Like?

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Fight

- ▶ Irritable
- ▶ Defensive
- ▶ Quick tempered
- ▶ Argumentative
- ▶ Impulsive
- ▶ Oppositional
- ▶ Defiant

Flight

- ▶ Avoidance
 - ▶ Leaving the classroom
 - ▶ Failing to turn in assignments
 - ▶ Not participating in discussions
 - ▶ Being the “class clown”
- ▶ Distractibility
 - ▶ Daydreaming
 - ▶ Sleepiness

Freeze

- ▶ Trouble getting started on tasks
- ▶ Refusal to answer
- ▶ “Deer in headlights”
- ▶ Looking blank/numb

Anxiety in the Classroom

Learning

- Attention/focus
- Getting started
- Remembering instructions
- Thinking flexibly
- Engaging in class

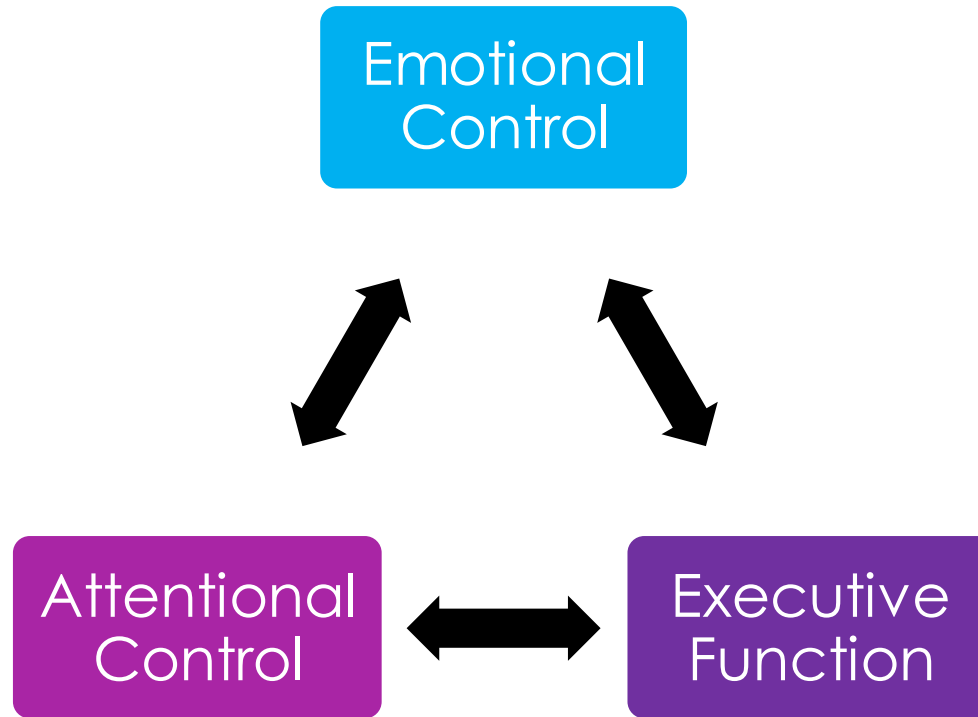
Emotional well-being

- Self-esteem
- Constant worrying
- Low frustration tolerance
- Staying motivated

Behavior

- Acting out
- Defiance
- Skipping class

The “Toxic Triad”



The “Flight” or “Freeze” Response Students

- ▶ Symptoms might go unnoticed at school
 - ▶ Distracted, sleepy, frequent trips to the bathroom
 - ▶ Little classroom participation
 - ▶ Quiet, reserved with peers
 - ▶ Generally able to “hold it together”
- ▶ These students often have meltdowns as soon as they get in the car/home
- ▶ Parents have lots of concerns but school has few or none

The “Fight” Response Students

- ▶ Tend to be misunderstood as “behavior problems”
- ▶ Parents might have fewer concerns than school
- ▶ Traditional behavioral approaches are unlikely to be effective
 - ▶ Anxiety trumps delayed gratification



Anxiety and the IEP

Eligibility

- ▶ IEP flow chart
- ▶ One student can have multiple disability areas in IEP
- ▶ If anxiety is having an impact – need to document in IEP
 - ▶ Add “Emotional” disability if needed

What is “Effective Progress”?

- ▶ Not just academic progress
- ▶ Student must be shown to make effective progress in all areas:
 - ▶ Academics
 - ▶ Social
 - ▶ Emotional
 - ▶ Behavioral
 - ▶ Motor/Physical



Levels of Support at School

Classroom Supports

- ▶ General education teacher can provide social-emotional supports to all students
 - ▶ Warnings about transitions
 - ▶ Create a predictable routine and consistent expectations
- ▶ Specific programs
 - ▶ Zones of Regulation or How Does My Engine Run? for younger students
 - ▶ Social Thinking
- ▶ Have a “calm down” space in the classroom
- ▶ Provide frequent movement breaks, gentle stretching, etc.
- ▶ Consult with therapists, school psychologists, etc.

Addressing Anxiety Through the IEP

- ▶ Goals and benchmarks
- ▶ Need benchmarks to be measurable
- ▶ Frequency/intensity of services is driven by the impact of the anxiety

What Supports are Available?

- ▶ Accommodations
 - ▶ Classroom accommodations
 - ▶ Testing accommodations
- ▶ Services
 - ▶ Consultation
 - ▶ School psychologist works with classroom teacher
 - ▶ School staff consult with private therapists

Supports continued

- ▶ Services
 - ▶ Push-in services (within the classroom)
 - ▶ Aide support
 - ▶ Pull-out services (in a separate setting)
 - ▶ Counseling sessions
 - ▶ Social Skills groups
- ▶ Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) still applies

Specialized Programs Within the District

- ▶ May be necessary for students with more severe disabilities or those not making effective progress within the mainstream
 - ▶ Partial inclusion
 - ▶ Substantially separate
- ▶ Franklin has specialized programs for:
 - ▶ Intensive needs (intellectual & developmental disabilities)
 - ▶ Emotional/behavioral needs
 - ▶ Language-based instruction

Out-of-district Placements

- ▶ When programming within the district has become increasingly restrictive and student is still not making effective progress
- ▶ Specific placement is driven by student's individual needs
 - ▶ e.g., ABA program or therapeutic school?

Questions?

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