# Supporting Autistic Students in the Classroom with Anxiety and other Mental Health Challenges: Your Questions Answered

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DISCLAIMER

The views, opinions, and content expressed in this presentation do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The Southeast MHTTC is located at Emory University in the Rollins School of Public Health.

Our Mission: To promote the implementation and sustainability of evidence-based mental health services in the Southeastern United States.

Our Vision: Widespread access to evidence-based mental health services for those in need.

Our Services: We use a public health approach to build leadership capacity and to provide mental health trainings and resources to providers, agencies, and communities across the Southeast.

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Research and Clinical Interests

- Translating best practice interventions for autism into community settings.

- Extensive work within early intervention and public school systems.
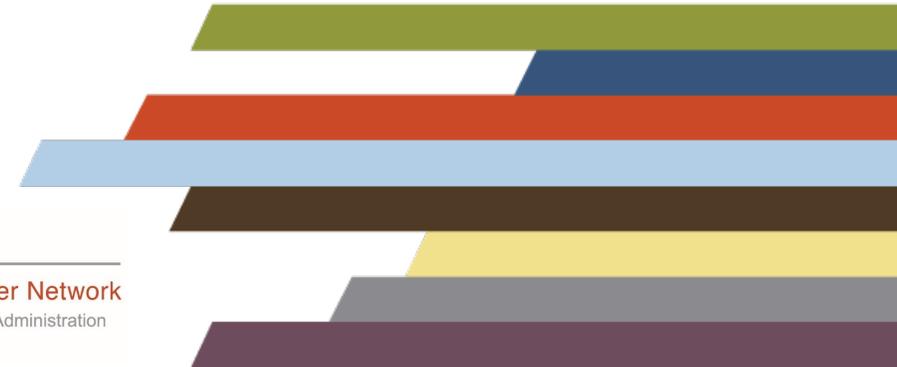
A Note on Identity First Language Use

Within our products on autism, we use *identity first* language.

We have made this decision:

- In response to the neurodiversity movement.

- Based on the preference of many autistic adults.

- In order to avoid the use ableist language.

However, we recognize that this is not the preference of every individual or family and that many people continue to use person-first language.

Bottema-Beutel, K., Kapp, S. K., Lester, J. N., Sasson, N. J., & Hand, B. N. (2021). Avoiding ableist language: Suggestions for autism researchers. *Autism in Adulthood*, *3*(1), 18-29. Link: https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/aut.2020.0014

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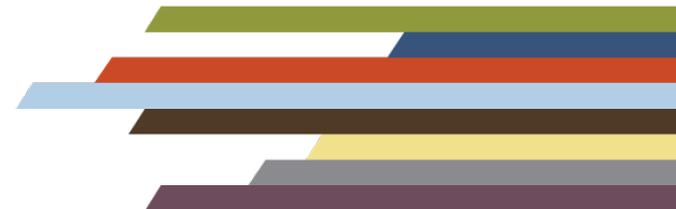
Learning Session 2 Objectives

This learning session will center on evidence-based approaches and practices that can be used within schools to support the anxiety in autistic students.

By the end of the learning session, participants will be able to:

1. Describe evidence-based approaches to support anxiety in autistic students.

2. Understand different ways that mental health programming can be delivered to autistic students in schools

3. Identify strategies that may support an autistic student with anxiety as described within a case example.
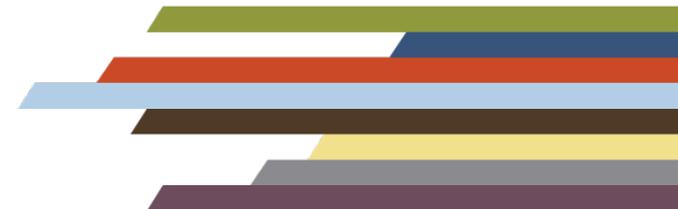
Polling Questions

1. What is your professional role?

2. How much of your professional time do you spend working with students with autistic students?

3. How much of your professional time do you spend supporting the behavior and/or mental health of autistic students?

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)

Treatment of choice for anxiety disorders in youth within the general population

AND

for treating anxiety and other mental health challenges in autistic youth.

(Blakeley-Smith et al., 2020; Lake et al., 2020)
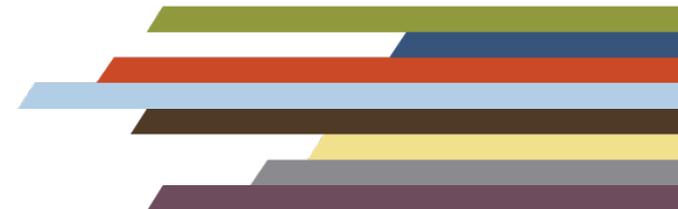
Examples of CBT Curriculums that have been Studied in Autistic Youth

Coping Cat
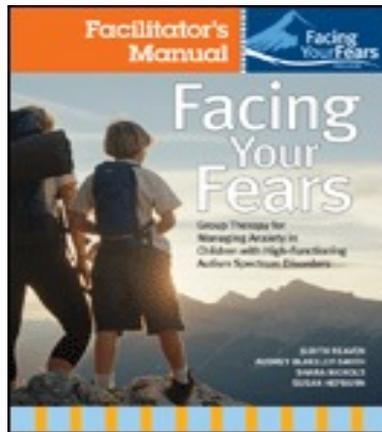
BrainWise

Facing Your Fears
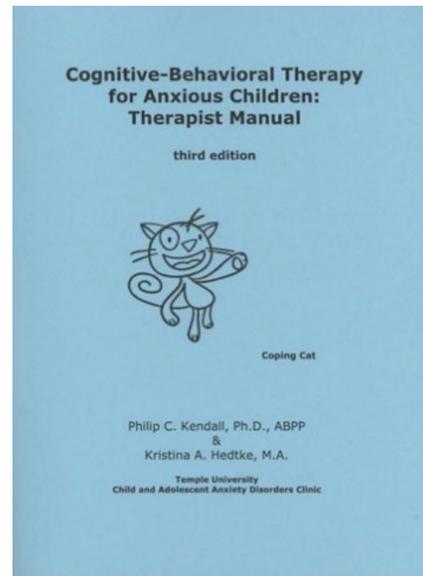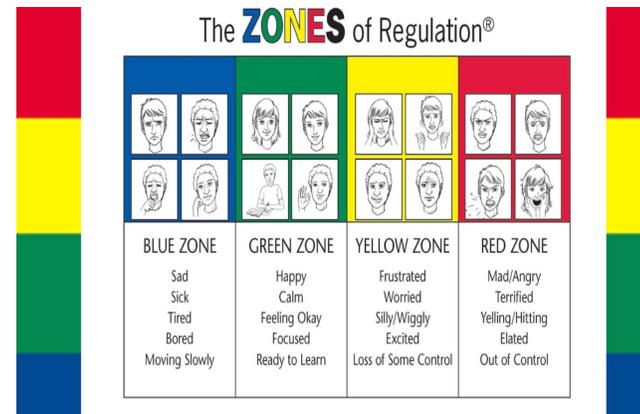
Zones of Regulation

How does CBT Work?

Physiological:

- Rapid heart rate
- Shaking/restlessness
- Anxious facial expression
- Crying/screaming
- Sleep disturbance
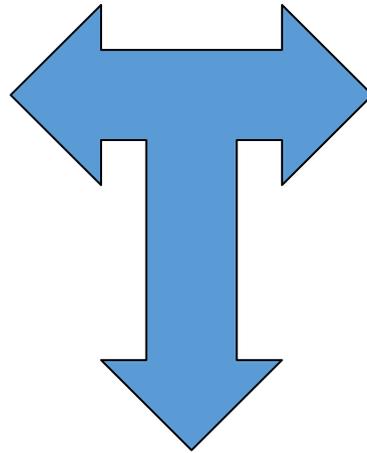
Cognitive:

- Cognitive distortions
- Negative self talk
- Rumination
- Worry
- Self-doubt

Behavioral:

- Avoidance
- Withdrawal
- Reassurance seeking
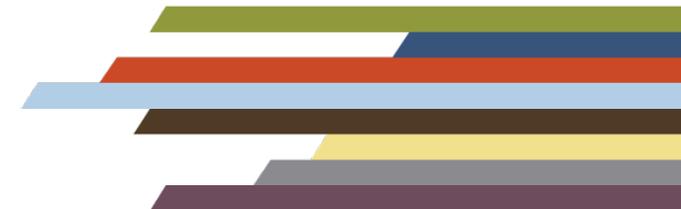
Breaking CBT Down: Separation Anxiety

Physical feelings

Sweating
Rapid heart rate
Dry mouth
Headache

Trigger

Parent goes to another floor of the house

Thoughts

Fear of harm, "I need my parents so I can be ok"

Behavior

Refusal
Crying
Clinging
Following parent
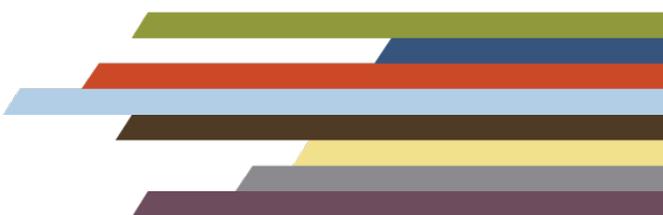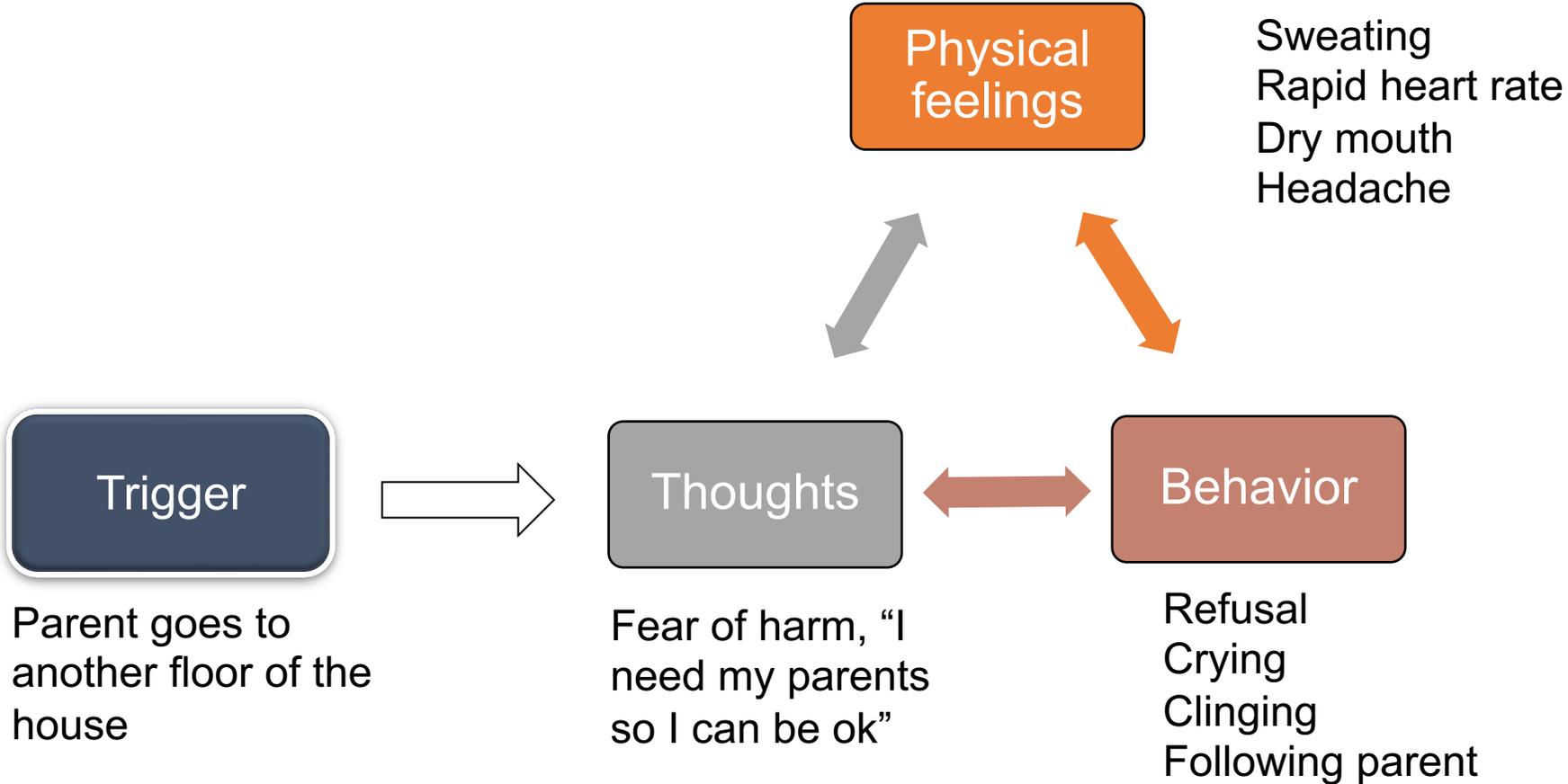
What Does CBT Involve?

Psychoeducation

Somatic Management

Cognitive Restructuring

Problem Solving

Graded Exposure

Relapse Prevention
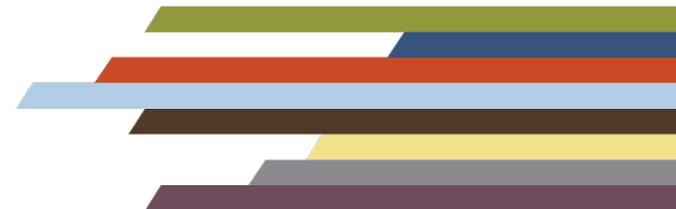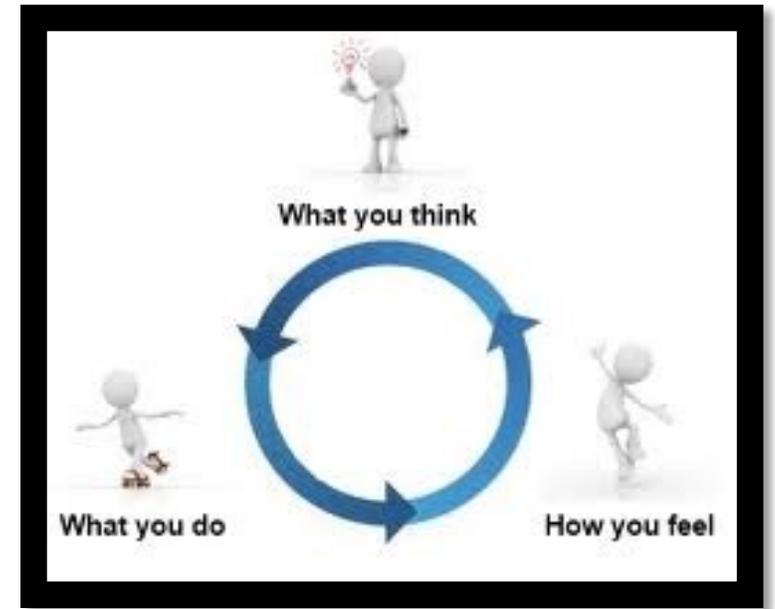
Psychoeducation

Definition: Building foundational emotion knowledge

Identifying common emotions

Identifying the situations that cause us to feel those emotions

Identifying how our body feels and what our mind does.

Learning how emotions can get in the way.
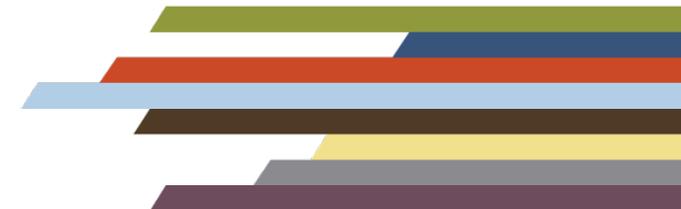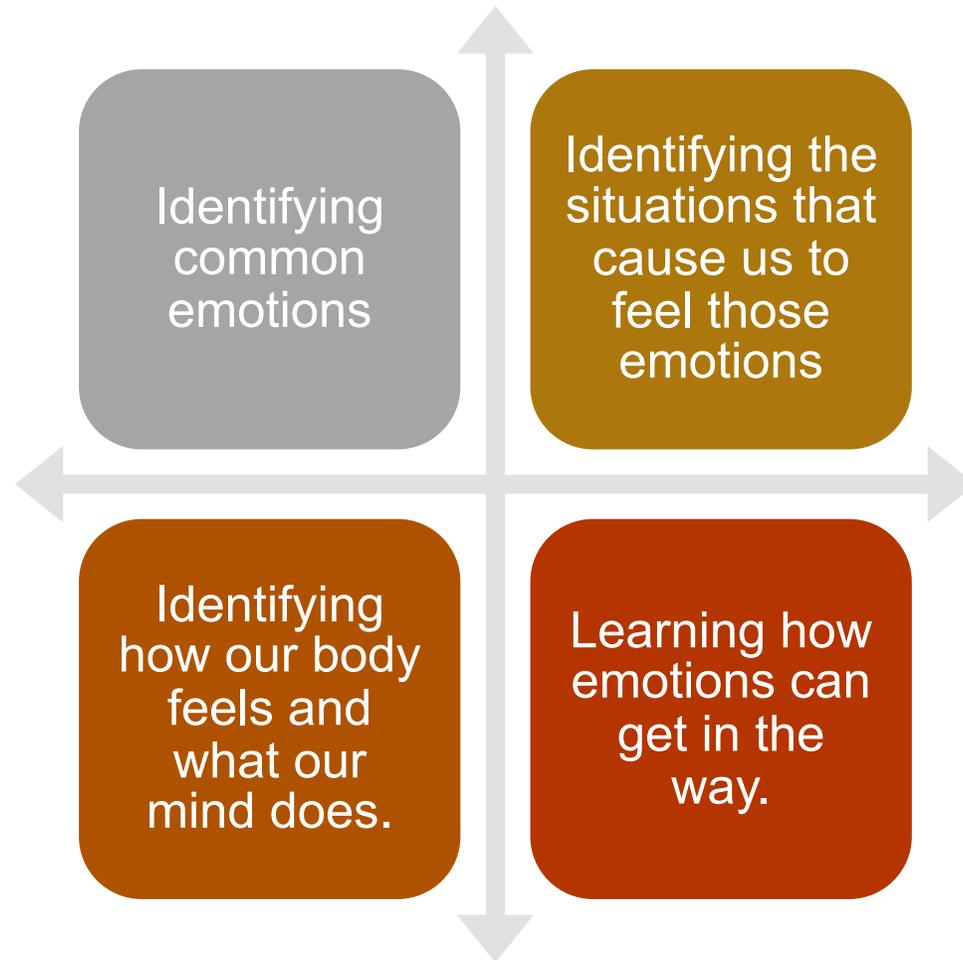
Somatic Management

Definition: Relaxation strategies that help reduce the physiological symptoms of anxiety (i.e., they help to calm our bodies)

Many students rely on adults to soothe them or being told to "take a break" when anxious.

Provide a range of relaxation techniques through a visual menu, emphasizing deep breathing

Embed and practice within daily routines
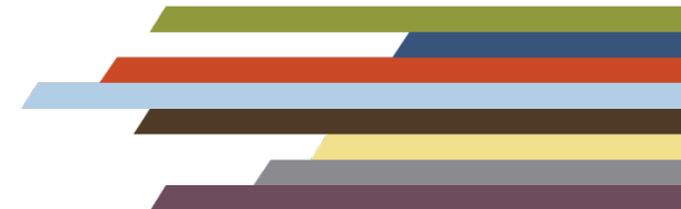
Cognitive Restructuring

Definition: Strategies that help to manage negative or worrisome thoughts

Pay attention to negative self talk, perseverative questions, and reassurance seeking

Focus on replacement not identification and challenge of negative cognitions

Use repetitive helpful thoughts designed to reinforce self competence:
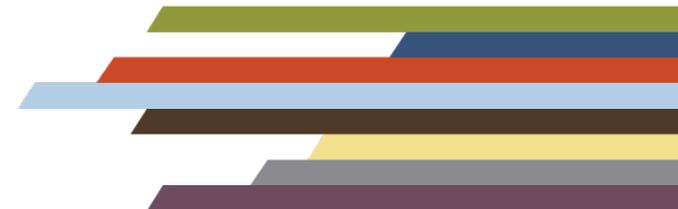
Graded Exposure

Definition: Facing fears a little bit at a time

Helps children to apply skills

Where we see the heart of change in CBT!

Providers are often least familiar with this aspect of CBT
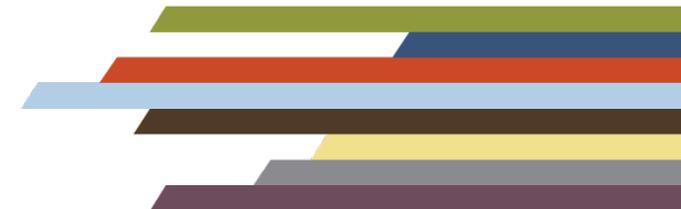
Case Study

Darnell is in the fifth grade. He received a diagnosis of autism when he was three and received an IEP at that time. His social skills have improved significantly, however, he still qualified for an IEP under the identification of ASD. He has one friend who shares his interest in cars and videogames (e.g., Minecraft). Darnell participates in General Education. He does well, but he does not like group work, and is quick to correct others if they don't follow the rules of the project. Peers are starting to make fun of him and call him the "rules police." When there is a group project, he is now saying "I don't want to do it" or goes to the nurse with complaints of a stomachache. This is happening daily. He has a huge problem at PE and recess; he has shared that he hates losing, not getting picked for a team, or having people watch him do a sport that he's not good at. He is protesting going to both activities and asks to go to the library instead to read about cars. His school team is wondering if anxiety is at play and if treatment is needed.
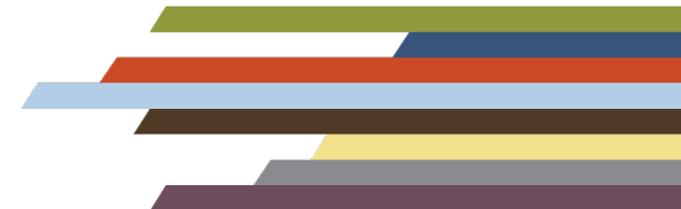
Question 1

What strategies might you use to support Darnell in learning to identify his anxious symptoms?
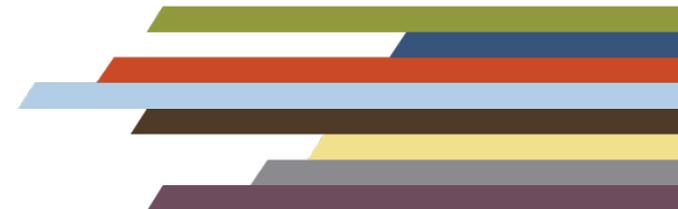
Question 2

What strategies might you use to teach Darnell ways to calm his body?
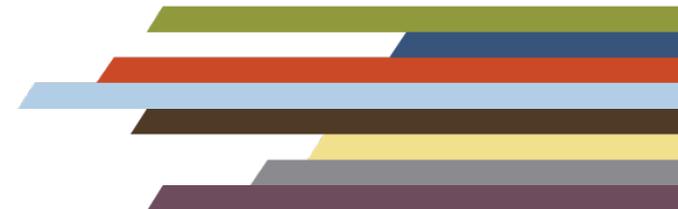
Question 3

What about helping Darnell to use more helpful thoughts? What are mantras or phrases you would want him to have in his back pocket?
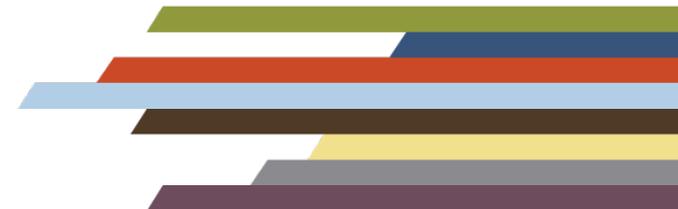
Question 4

Before practicing his new anxiety strategies in social situations, what other skills would you want to support Darnell with?
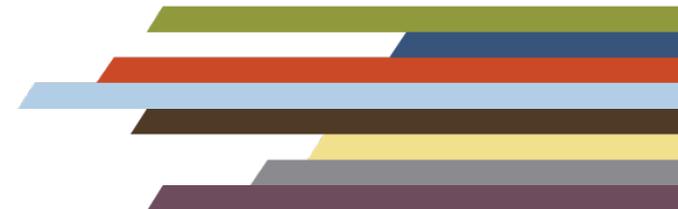
Question 5

What situations could you establish to help Darnell apply the skills he has learned to face his fears a little bit at a time?
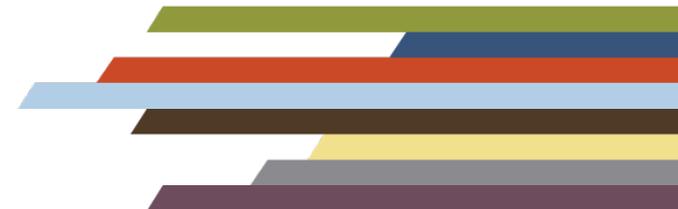
Questions & Answers
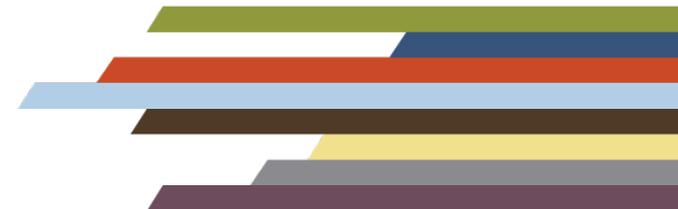
Additional Resources

- American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD): https://www.aaidd.org/
- Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD): https://www.aucd.org//template/index.cfm
- JFK Partners, University of Colorado School of Medicine: https://medschool.cuanschutz.edu/jfk-partners
- Mental Health Technology Transfer Center: https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/mhttc-network-coordinating-office/national-school-mental-health-implementation-guidance
- National Center for School Mental Health: http://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/
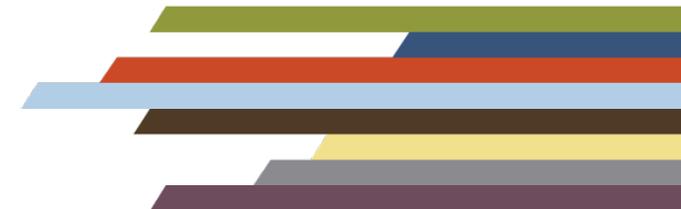
Let us know in the chat ….

1. What are mental health topics that you would like more information on?
2. For the topics you identify, how would you want information presented?
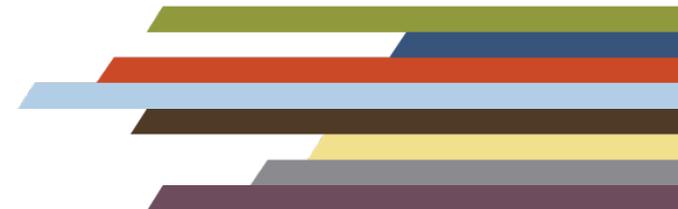
Thank you!

Southeast MHTTC: https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/southeast-mhttc/home

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Website:

https://www.marcus.org/autism-research/autism-research-team/katherine-pickard

Region IV Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center
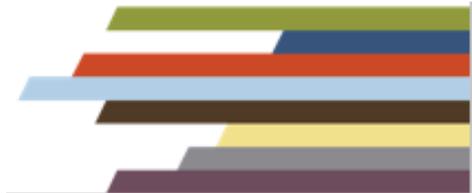
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Evaluation

Please complete the following survey:
https://ttc-gpra.org/P?s=288525

If you have additional questions or suggestions please email us at

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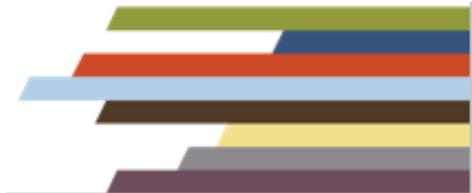
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