Autism and happiness

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Outcome studies in autism

• Try to assess if and how people with autism succeed in adult life

Outcome studies in autism

• Outcomes in adults are highly variable
• Diagnosis is generally stable, although autism symptoms and adaptive skills often improve
• Outcomes in social integration and independence: poor in +50%
What are the criteria?

• Employment, cognitive functioning, living situation etc,
  → rather objective criteria, reflecting societal norms,
  But what about personal goals?

• Too much focus on societal norms
  (Henninger, N. A., & Taylor, J. L. (2013). Outcomes in adults
  with autism spectrum disorders: a historical perspective.
  Autism, 17(1), 103-116).

• Different picture when Quality of Life is used as outcome
  (Billstedt, E., Gillberg, I. C., & Gillberg, C. (2011). Aspects of
  quality of life in adults diagnosed with autism in childhood A
  population-based study. Autism, 15(1), 7-20.)

Subjective Quality of Life in ASD

Satisfaction about:
• Living arrangements: ASD < contr
• Work / education: ASD < contr
• Physical condition: ASD > contr
• Social relationships: ASD < contr
• Future perspective: ASD < contr
  Control group = adults with other child psychiatric disorders, e.g. ADHD

  high-functioning adults with autism spectrum disorders with adults with other psychiatric

Quality of life (Robert Shalock)

Independence
  Personal development
  Self-determination

Social participation
  Interpersonal relationships
  Social inclusion
  Rights

Well-being
  Physical
  Material
  Emotional
Well-being

- Health, wealth and happiness are interrelated
- Importance of health:
  - Healthy food
  - Sleep
  - Exercise
- Physical activities lower cortisol level and anxiety in people with autism
  (Hillier e.a., 2010, Hillier e.a., 2011, Carraro & Gobi, 2012)
- Sport as efficient as antidepressants and psychotherapy (Cooney, G.M. et al. (2013) Exercise for depression)

Happiness: life satisfaction

Life satisfaction: a matter of balance between positive and negative feelings
- Positive = negative: happy
- Positive < negative: little life satisfaction
- Positive << negative: very unhappy
- Positive <<< negative: mental health problems:
  - Stress
  - Anxiety
  - Depression

Mental health problems in autism

Computerized psychiatric disorders in children with autism: interview development and rates of disorders

BMC Psychiatry

Psychiatric and psychosocial problems in adults with neurodevelopmental conditions: a questionnaire

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We focus mainly on negative feelings

A more positive approach

- Having positive and negative feelings balanced is not good enough
- There should be more positive than negative feelings: 2 reasons
  -- Increased resilience
  -- It triggers better cognitive functioning and upwards spiral toward more well-being
Why focus on positive feelings?

- Link between negative feelings and detail focus + rigidity in thinking
- Positive feelings increase
  - Cognitive functioning
  - Flexibility
  - Adaptability

Fredrickson & Joner (2002)

Fostering positive feelings

- Link between negative feelings and detail focus + rigidity in thinking
- Positive feelings increase
  - Cognitive functioning
  - Flexibility
  - Adaptability

Fredrickson & Joner (2002)

Strategies for promoting happiness

- Assessment of well-being
- Balance between support and challenge
- Positive self-esteem
- Happiness as goal of treatment
Supermarket of treatments

- There’s a lot of treatments and methods to increase well-being (psychotherapy, mindfulness, relaxation, medication etc.)
- But these will not have the expected result, if there’s no **foundation**
- Foundation = a safe environment
- Safety in autism is the consequence of autism friendliness

Autism treatment protocol

- **1st stage strategy** - Adapted learning & living climate
  - 1st stage strategy
- **2nd stage strategy** - Specific treatments
  - 2nd stage strategy
- **3rd stage strategy** - Individual adaptations
  - 3rd stage strategy

- Vermeulen (2007) (for adults)

Foundation

**Autism friendly environment**

An environment adapted to the autistic style of information processing

- Clear & understandable
- Predictable
- Meaningful
emotional well-being

autism friendliness
90% clarity – 10% normal friendliness