J. Reaven, A. Bleakes-Smith, S. Nichols and S. Hepburn: Facing Your Fears: Group Therapy for Managing Anxiety in Children with High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorders (Facilitator Manual and Parent/Child Workbooks)

Paul H. Brookes, Baltimore, 2011, xiii, 169 pp. ISBN 978-1598571783 (paper)

Eli R. Lebowitz

Published online: 4 September 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

A young woman, mother of 2 sons diagnosed with autism, was recently discussing with me her boys' problems. Her older child, aged 11, was experiencing tremendous separation anxiety that was having a pronounced negative impact on his own functioning, as well as on her ability to maintain her regular work schedule. She had read that anxiety was a common phenomenon among children with autism and assumed that there was abundant data on the most effective approaches for treating it in this population. Although, this young mother can easily be excused for making such an assumption the facts are disconcertingly different. Despite the fact that anxiety among children with autism can justifiably be seen as more the rule than the exception, material pertinent to its treatment is surprisingly sparse.

The "Facing Your Fears" program, complete with therapist manual, child and parent workbooks and accompanying DVD is an important step toward correcting this. The authors state the problem in their introduction to the manual: "We realize that although many professionals have experience in one field or the other, very few professionals have experience in both arenas". In fact, it is quite likely that many of the clinicians most skilled in the treatment of anxiety steer shy of applying their skills with the ASD population due to a sense of insufficient specialized experience or a lack of confidence in these children's ability to benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). By supplying the clinician with a detailed session-by-session manual, much of this apprehension can be overcome.

The program includes the basic elements shared by most CBT protocols for anxiety disorders. To wit: psycho

education, cognitive restructuring, relaxations training and the creation and completion of a hierarchy of behavioral exposures to previously avoided situations. The novelty of the contribution is in the painstaking efforts made by the authors to present all these in formats that recognize the special challenges of children with autism. For example, while identifying calming behaviors that can be useful in stressful situations is common to many anxiety treatments, the authors are careful to recognize the natural tendency of developmentally challenged children to have a very constrained repertoire of such soothing behaviors and they direct the therapist to identify diverse behaviors that can be appropriate for a variety of settings. The consistently clear and precise language, the usage of many visual cues in the child's workbook and the practice of preceding tasks with clear examples that a child can mimic to be successful also exhibit the author's experience in creating content that will be easily adopted by children with autism.

The choice to focus on group rather than individual treatment is a daring one when targeting children with autism. The benefits, such as presenting the children with opportunities for social skills learning and creating an ad hoc support group for additional non-anxiety related difficulties, possibly balanced by the need to overcome significant social challenges in order to address the anxiety disorder. Future research will hopefully address the issue but there appears not to be any significant barrier to implementing the program in an individual setting if necessary.

Another remaining question is the suitability or adaptability of the program for children with lower functioning autism. As many of these children also experience significant anxiety it is my hope that the authors will turn their attention to them as well and continue their work of bringing children with autism within the fold of those who may profit from the advances we have made in CBT for pediatric anxiety.

E. R. Lebowitz (✉)
Yale Child Study Center, 230 South Frontage Rd,
New Haven, CT 06520, USA
e-mail: eli.lebowitz@yale.edu