

Emotion awareness and cognitive behavioural therapy in young people with autism spectrum disorder

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Young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have high levels of anxiety and depression. Evidence suggests that Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can be helpful for young people with ASD if it is adapted for their needs. Recommended adaptations include changing the way CBT sessions are delivered (e.g. taking breaks, using visual materials) and including educational content about emotions. Research has not explored emotional awareness (i.e. thinking and feeling about feelings) in young people with ASD who have engaged with CBT. In this study, we wanted to get a better understanding of any differences in emotional awareness between (1) young people with and without ASD, and (2) young people with ASD with and without experience of CBT. Of the young people (aged 11-20 years) who took part, 33 had an ASD diagnosis and had attended CBT, 23 had an ASD diagnosis and had not attended CBT, and 56 did not have an ASD diagnosis and had not attended CBT. These 112 young people completed the 'Emotion Awareness Questionnaire' (EAQ) which asks about a number of areas important in emotional awareness. We found that young people with ASD scored lower on the EAQ in several areas including 'differentiating emotions' and 'analysis of own emotions'. The young people with ASD who had attended CBT scored lower on 'differentiating emotions' and higher on 'attending to others emotions', when compared to the group with ASD who had not attended CBT. These findings suggest that including education about emotions as part of CBT for young people with ASD is a helpful and necessary adaptation.