Lean Out!
Networking and Working:
A curriculum for women with ASD seeking employment

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Kathy Koenig, MSN
Jane Thierfeld Brown, Ed.D,
Yale Child Study Center
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Background & Mission:

This project addresses a significant problem for adult women with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), that is, finding and maintaining employment. Getting ready to seek employment, with respect to developing the “soft skills” or the interpersonal and personal skills needed to work in today’s world, needs special attention in women with ASDs. Additionally, the need to network and work every connection is mandatory for job hunting. Women are not as good at networking as men; women with ASD have even greater challenges with networking!

The project addresses this gap in job training for women with ASDs by providing a program for learning networking skills in conjunction with other job skills. It is most helpful to require each potential participant to interview with the program leaders/facilitators to determine how suited the woman is for the program. Women who are not interested in working but are being pushed to participate by parents or therapists may attend with a view towards helping them think about the possibility of working in the future. However, expectations should be modified with regard to having these participants develop a “working plan”, in the final classes of the program. It may also be helpful to obtain a copy of intellectual/psychological testing or the participant’s IEP from their last year in school, to understand the participants learning style and previously identified challenges.

The curriculum covers the soft skills and the networking skills needed to get ready to look for work. The curriculum is designed to be delivered in a seminar style format, with presentation of the topic for each session, and with classroom discussion and homework. The Learning Objectives may be written (or rewritten) in a format in which concrete measurement of success is possible. The “Key Concepts” are simply points that the instructor can make in the context of planning the lesson, and then repeat throughout the course.

Objectives:

1. To provide the participant with a framework for thinking about themselves in the context of the work world;
2. To help the participant evaluate their readiness to seek employment through an assessment of soft skills and work skills;
3. To provide a clear road-map for seeking employment that guides the participants through the steps of preparation, networking, applying, interviewing and following up with employers.
4. To help the participant evaluate their performance during interviews, internship opportunities and work opportunities.

Strategies:

- Classroom didactic and discussion/ use of slides for visual
- Participant workbook: The workbook is designed to provide the participants with structure for their learning as the course progresses. Each module of the course has curriculum content and specific tasks for in-class work and homework. The workbook lays out each module in an easy to understand and consistent format to facilitate organization in thinking and in completing work. Using multiple modalities for teaching concepts and skills maximizes learning. Participants should review the first session and complete the homework before the first session occurs.
- Homework; watch some media/ do a worksheet
- Repetition of concepts and themes each session/ looping back
- Practice interviews/ Possible internships

Content:

This guide provides an outline of eight learning modules, including

1. Do I really want to work?
2. What do I know about myself?
3. Learning Independence
4. What is Networking?
5. What is the right job for me?
6. The culture of the workplace
7. My Networking plan
8. Interviewing & Following up.

The modules should be presented at regular intervals, for example, once per week or once per month. We recommend that in addition to classroom sessions, each participant should have 1:1 counseling sessions to assess personal progress and develop strategies to remediate problems. In classroom discussions, some participants over-estimate their competency in particular areas of functioning, and seem unaware of the need to make changes. Direct feedback, in a supportive and private setting, may be necessary to help participants become aware of how they need to change their behavior.
I. Do I really want to work?
   a. Personal responsibility
      1. Self-care (exercise B in Section I of the workbook)
      2. Wardrobe
      3. Phone skills/voicemail/email/texting
      4. Web skills/Facebook/digital media
   b. Money management/supporting myself
      1. Rent
      2. Food
      3. Utilities
      4. Clothing
      5. Transportation – car, bus, train
   c. Accepting general work responsibilities (Use material from exercise A in Section I of the participant workbook for this part of the lesson [c] as well as for [d] and [e].)
      1. Arriving on time; managing work breaks; leaving when you can; Staying longer if needed
      2. Stepping up when extra work is presented
      3. Communicating consistently with co-workers
      4. Communicating with your supervisor regularly and effectively
   d. Demonstrating competence
      1. Making sure you understand the job
      2. Doing the job correctly & consistently
      3. Asking questions
      4. Improving over time
   e. Remaining persistent in the face of obstacles
      1. Accepting feedback from co-workers and supervisor
      2. Remaining calm when things go wrong
      3. Problem-solving in the moment
      4. Decision-making

Learning Objectives:

- Participants will assess their abilities in the areas of personal responsibility and supporting themselves.
- Participants will assess their motivation to work.
- Participants will grasp how competence requires practice and persistence.
- Participants will understand how solving work-related problems is their responsibility.

Key concepts for emphasis and repetition throughout the course:
- Responsibility
- Motivation
- Working is challenging
- Working is rewarding

Participants should have completed the homework regarding whether they want to work and the self-care profile for this session prior to coming to class. If not, they can do the checklist in class and then use this as a jumping off point for discussion. Homework does not include the “Media Moments” in the workbook; these are for fun and education. Prior to the next class, ask Participants to review Section II in their Workbook and complete homework A.
II. What do I know about myself?

a. How does having an autism spectrum disorder impact me?
   1. Do I have trouble talking to people?
   2. Do I struggle to “read” people?
   3. Is it hard for me to know how to behave?
   4. What else?

b. Do I have learning challenges/organizational challenges?
   1. Issues with understanding spoken language or writing?
   2. Trouble with time management; organizing my work tasks; getting started; finishing a task; following through.

c. What about anxiety? *This section requires a good deal of discussion and teaching, as well as helping participants think the issues through personally. This may require more than one classroom session.*
   2. Review anxiety reactions, internalizing & externalizing symptoms, page 4-5
   3. Complete and review the results of the anxiety sections of the *Anxiety Self Assessment* from the Participant Workbook, scoring instructions below.
   4. Strategies to reduce anxiety; how aggressively do I have to attack this?
      a. Therapy/ Cognitive strategies
      b. exercise/diet
      c. yoga/meditation
      d. medication

d. Coping skills: Review Classwork: Self Assessment of Coping Skills and ask participants if they want to share. Discuss the questions that follow the table of emotions in the Workbook. Offer concrete suggestions and guidelines about coping, with regard to what is required in the workplace. Coping skills will be discussed in more detail next week.

Learning Objectives:
- Participants will appreciate the need to understand themselves in order to improve social functioning.
- Participants will evaluate their level of anxiety, and consider whether it will impact their job search and employment possibilities.
- Participants will delineate their learning and organizational challenges.
- Participants will identify strategies they can learn and practice to address the issues that have been identified.

Key concepts:
- Self awareness
- Personal responsibility
- Anxiety as an obstacle

Complete Homework B at the end of Section II in Workbook for next week.

Anxiety Self Assessment: If you indicated a score of 3 and 4 to 5 or 6 questions, your anxiety level is significant and you should consider different strategies such as better health practices, purchasing a relaxation technique or adding physical exercises to your daily routine. If globally you indicated a score of 3 and 4, your level of anxiety is critical and you should consult your doctor. Source: Anxiety, Mental Illness Foundation. Other Resources: The Anxiety Workbook for Teens, by Lisa M. Schab, LCSW. Instant Help Books/Harbinger Publications, 2008.
III. Learning Independence: Adaptive Skills & Coping Skills

a. An honest assessment of adaptive skills: Review homework related to the personal and community skills previously covered and discuss with the group. Talk through each question. It is important that via classroom discussion and 1:1 counseling sessions, the participant identify what skills they need to improve or adjust. Hygiene and appropriate dress are critical skills. If these aren’t in place, the rest won’t matter!

b. Coping skills curriculum

There are a number of curricula available that are designed to help people develop increased coping skills. Some are focused on a specific clinical population and some are more general. For the most part, coping skills curricula have similar general content and use cognitive and behavioral strategies to modify thinking and behavior. If the curriculum you choose is widely applicable it will likely be fine, even if the reasons that participants have poor coping skills is different from the reasons of the population for whom the curriculum was designed. Conversely, if strategies for learning coping have been designed based on a particular set of very unique personality issues and problem profiles, the curricula may not apply.

For many persons with an ASD, poor emotional regulation is the source of poor coping skills. If a participant reports poor coping in social or stressful situations, it is worthwhile to consider that difficulty managing anger, frustration, or feelings of overwhelmed by the situation or by sensory stimulation.

Within this program, we used Dialectical Behavioral Training (DBT), a curriculum based on a model of cognitive behavioral therapy that worked for one population of psychiatric patients with challenges with emotional regulation. While autism is a developmental disorder, not a psychiatric disorder, the challenges with emotional regulation are similar, and most importantly, the theory and strategies seem applicable. The issue here is to choose a curriculum that fits well with the group you are working with. Other coping skills curricula are likely to be just as useful.

Here are processes for developing emotional regulation as conceptualized by Marsha Linehan, Ph.D, the founder of DBT. * If you choose to use this method of CBT for your Lean Out program, you will need to review Dr. Linehan’s works in more detail.
1. Emotion regulation skills
   i. Identify and label emotions and secondary emotions (emotions that arise in response to the first emotion)
   ii. Identify obstacles to changing emotions/rigidity (Fear?)
   iii. Reduce vulnerability to your emotional mind (self-observe when your emotional mind is driving your behavior)
   iv. Increase positive emotion events (requires a strategy and energy)
   v. Increase mindfulness to current emotions (describe mindfulness & help participants understand)
   vi. Take opposite action (act in a way that is consistent with an emotion that is the opposite of the emotion you are struggling with)
   vii. Apply distress tolerance techniques (see next section)

2. Distress tolerance skills
   i. Acceptance of reality is not the same as approval of reality
   ii. Willingness vs. willfulness: do you accept what comes to you and cope with it flexibly and adaptively or do you resist and insist. You must develop skills in the moment for dealing with a crisis and dealing with life as it is.
   iii. Learn that emotions can be distracting: events and emotions cannot always be processed in the moment nor should they be.
   iv. Self-soothing- identify strategies
   v. Improving the moment –identify realistic strategies
   vi. Thinking of pros and cons.

c. What behaviors do I have to change?
   Leaders should develop a format for helping participants document the behaviors that they need to address, and then understand the reasons these behaviors occur using a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) model. Help participants identify antecedents, behavior, consequences in as much detail as possible. Consulting a BCBA to assist the young women to do this may be very helpful, since each of these steps in an FBA has many components. This does not mean having the BCBA create FBAs for participants, but having some guidance for the women in understanding themselves and knowing when they will need to pull in coping skills to manage a complex situation/interaction.

d. How? What is my plan for doing this?
   Participants write out a concrete plan for this process. Role-playing can be very effective in helping participants practice the skill. Encourage participants to observe themselves in the upcoming week and report back to the group.

*Taken from work on emotion regulation by Marsha Linehan, Ph.D. http://www.linehaninstitute.org

Homework for next week includes A. Mapping your Connections.
IV. What is networking and why is networking important for a job?

a. What is networking?
   Provide a very simple and straightforward definition that will help everyone understand this particular strategy. Make this explanation concrete and related to how they need to implement it in their lives.

b. Why is networking important for a job?
   1. Mapping out your network – who do you know?
   2. Thinking about and practicing how you would talk to a contact about work
   3. What would you say about yourself?

c. First exercise: Introductions:
   1. Why introducing yourself is networking; letting people know who you are
   2. Participants can practice a very short introduction
   3. Participants can comment and critique each other’s introduction

d. Second exercise: Elevator speech or 30 second commercial*
   1. Review the instructions for this exercise and see how it may be possible to adapt it for those on the spectrum who cannot think on their feet but may need to adjust their “speech” depending on where they are, who they are speaking to.
   2. Have young women practice in dyads or in small groups until they get comfortable.

e. Check in – Do these types of exercises make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

f. Job vs. Career? Vocation vs. Avocation. What are the distinctions? What’s the difference between a short term employment objective and a more long term objective?

g. Discuss jobs participants have had: Internships, placements, volunteering, etc.
   1. what worked and what was stressful/hard?
   2. How can this guide me in terms of what jobs I should consider?

h. A realistic job & salary for me. Create an exercise in which participants identify their skills set and the personal characteristics they must consider when thinking about realistic employment.

i. On line networking: LinkedIn. Prepare information about the pros and cons of enrolling in this network, with an emphasis on digital safety. Offer support for helping participants create a profile, etc. on LinkedIn if they so desire.

Learning Objectives:
- Participants will understand the concept of networking;
- Participants will create a visual representation of their network;
- Participants will learn who in their “network” it would be appropriate to approach for job connections;
- Participants will identify key points they could communicate to a job contact
- Participants will identify strategies for refining their networking skills

Key concepts:
- Networking is key
- Taking responsibility for job seeking
- Persistence is important

Complete homework at the end of the Networking Chapter, for the module on work environment.
V. What is the right work environment for me? What is the right job for me?

1. How do I work best? (Chapter 2, Bissonnette, 2013)
   a. What we do and who we are-SELF-ACCEPTANCE
   b. How/Can I work at something I love and make enough money to live?
   c. How can I understand how my personal limitations might impinge upon my work choices? (e.g. anxiety, poor math skills)

2. Identify your talents and skills
   a. Perform a SWOT analysis (in workbook) and discuss

3. The best work environment and important job criteria/Why is the environment important? How realistic is it?
   a. Working alone vs working in groups,
   b. Working with people vs working with machines or technology.
   c. What time of the day do I work best? Is there a better shift during the day for me?
   d. How do other workers contribute to the environment I have to work in?

**SWOT ANALYSIS EXAMPLE**

**Learning Objectives:**
- Participants will understand the value of learning their strengths and weaknesses;
- Participants will discuss how some of their personal qualities or limitations may restrict what they can do for work;
- Participants will think through their SWOT analysis and discuss openly;
- Participants will consider their optimum work environment and consider how this may/may not be attainable.

**Key concepts:**
- Self awareness
- Anxiety as an obstacle
- Personal responsibility

Participants should review the homework outlined in the workbook on p. 27 as a way to prepare for discussion in next week’s class on the culture of the workplace.
VI. The culture of the workplace

1. What is home culture and what is workplace culture?
   a. How is it determined and does it change?
      i. What are specific things to notice? For example: physical layout, décor, physical space between co-workers, noise level, tolerance for conversation during work hours, dress of employees, respect for rules and property, respect for authority (how to manage this if the atmosphere is destructive)
      ii. What can I ask people about? (Breaks, calling in when ill, personal days, using a cell phone, texting during the workday, etc.)
   b. Do I need to adjust my behavior based on the culture? Is this stable or does it change day to day? Reach pages 30-85 in Bissonnette book referenced below, and cover the issues with discussion
      i. Conformity vs. networking – How do I fit in and maintain individuality?
      ii. Thinking about co-workers, about the work to be done, and what is important.
   c. How to be part of a team – why I need to learn how to do this effectively.
   d. How to consider whether there might be a problem, who to ask and when; Who to ask for help and when.


Learning Objectives:
• Participants will understand what workplace culture is and why it matters
• Participants will identify clues for learning workplace culture
• Participants will describe why they need to work cooperatively as part of team
• Participants will describe what changes they may need to make in their behavior to integrate effectively into the workplace
• Participants will understand how to seek help when the workplace environment does not seem supportive.

Key concepts:
• Self-Awareness
• Anxiety as an obstacle
• Motivation to understand the work culture
• Personal responsibility
VII. My Networking and Working Plan
In this regard the question is: where does the student plan to apply for work and what is the student’s plan going forward?

a. Volunteer; unpaid internship; paid internship; part-time/full-time
b. How many hours a week will I be able to handle?
c. Am I qualified for the job I would like to have?
d. How will I get to my work? (really critical!!)
e. Do I need a resume?
   1. what kinds of jobs require a resume?
   2. using a template/ how to customize a template
   3. what information is important to include?
f. Would being on LinkedIn help?
g. Are there other ways to use the internet to search?
   1. www.monster.com
   2. www.indeed.com
h. Do I fill out an application?
   1. If this is an online application, is it to a national company (Staples) or is it local, and how/can I follow up by phone?
   2. Could I walk in to follow up? Discuss the options.
i. How much do I disclose about my personal struggles?
   1. What is the law in this regard? Disclosure does not have to happen until after one is hired. How and why should disclosure be done? (Chapter 8, Bissonnette*)
j. Designing a strategic plan for networking and job-seeking
   1. Review the questions in the Homework section of My Networking & Working Plan.
   2. Complete the worksheet in the Workbook entitled: My Strategic Work Plan.


Homework: Complete Homework A & B for next week in the workbook
VIII. References, Phone calls/Emails, Interviewing and Follow up
   a. Why do employers ask for references?
   b. Who is appropriate to provide a reference?
   c. Initial contact with prospective employer
      1. Decide on email/letter/phone call
      2. Decide on follow up method
   d. The interview*
      1. dress
      2. behavior
      3. providing a resume
      4. volunteering information and answering questions
      5. asking questions re: work etc.
      6. what not to say and ask
   e. Consider role playing exercises.

Resources:


