

The Impact of internally and externally generated Soothing Images on those with High Functioning Autistic Spectrum Condition

Bsc Undergraduate: Rachel Pierce

Supervisors: Dr Fiona Ashworth, Dr Jonathan Totman, Dr Flavia Cardini

Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom

Keywords: Autism, Project Soothe, Compassion, Images

Abstract

Imagery has been identified as being a contributing factor to many psychopathologies, but only recently it has begun to be used in some psychotherapies to improve outcomes. Soothing imagery is used successfully as part of Compassionate Mind Training in Compassion Focused Therapy. However, not all individuals have the ability to generate mental imagery. As a result 'Project Soothe' (ProjectSoothe.com) was created to develop a database of soothing photographic images that may have the potential to be used in psychotherapy to scaffold mental imagery abilities. No studies to our knowledge have used soothing images from Project Soothe in a clinical population. Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) is a debilitating neurological condition that is conservatively estimated to effect at least 1 in 100 people. Individuals with ASC can often struggle to access mental imagery. In addition to this, those with ASC are at risk of experiencing mental health difficulties. Little is known about the impact of Mentally Generated Soothing Imagery (MGSI) and Externally Presented Soothing Imagery (EPSI) on those with ASC. This study aims to investigate (a) whether EPSI from Project Soothe are found to be soothing in an ASC sample, and (b) whether EPSI in comparison with MGSI is more likely to decrease negative affect and increase positive affect. Participants (n = 35) between the ages of 18-65, with a diagnosis of ASC, were randomly split into two groups MGSI (n = 15) and EPSI (n = 20). Participants in the EPSI group were asked to report how soothed, anxious and excited they found the images. Participants in both groups provided pre and post self-report measures of positive and negative affect. In line with non-clinical population studies, results showed that people with ASC experience EPSI as soothing. In addition, people with ASD reported being significantly more soothed than anxious and more soothed than excited. Participants from both groups reported finding the MGSI and EPSI equally soothing. Furthermore a reduction in negative affect was observed in both sets of participants. This study demonstrates that the used of internally and externally generated soothing images may benefit psychological interventions with those with ASC. Future research would benefit from assessing its potential to reduce anxiety, which is particularly debilitating for those with autism.