A photograph of two men walking away from the camera on a paved path in a park. The man on the left is younger, wearing a blue t-shirt. The man on the right is older, wearing a grey jacket. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset, with trees and foliage in the background. The path leads towards a bright horizon where the sun is setting.

Navigating Challenging Times Tips from Psychology and OT

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DISCLAIMER

This information is provided for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as a substitute for a medical, psychiatric, mental health, or behavioral evaluation, diagnosis, or treatment plan by a qualified professional.

PRESENTERS



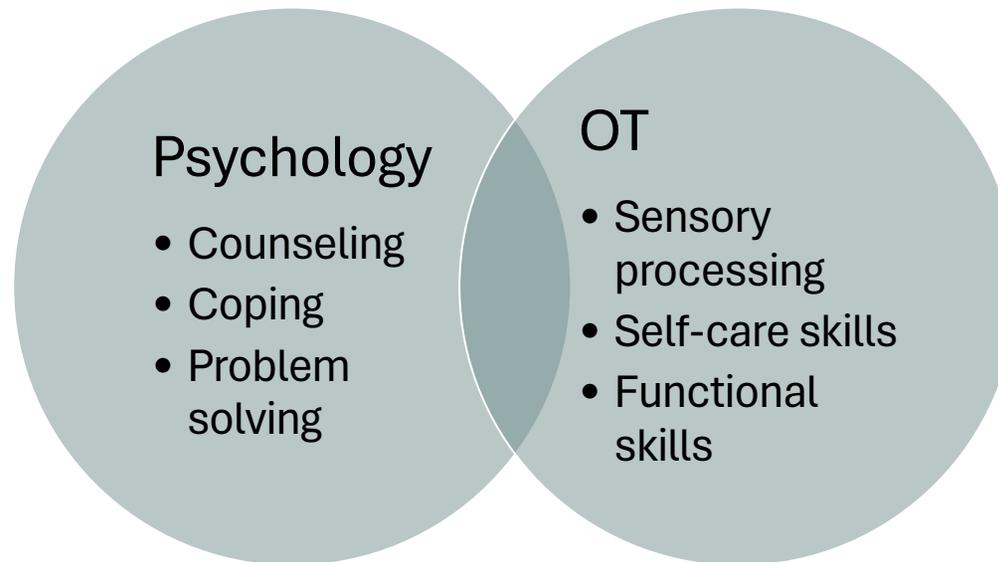
WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?

- The study of how people think, feel, and behave
- What Psychologist Do:
 - Training: Doctoral degree (PhD or PsyD) with supervised clinical experience
 - Assess cognitive strengths and support needs
 - Identify and treat co-occurring mental health conditions
 - Help individuals process emotions during difficult transitions
 - Support caregivers in understanding and responding to behavioral changes

WHAT IS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY?

- Health profession concerned with how people function in their respective roles and how they perform meaningful activities.
- “Occupation” is any activity in which one engages throughout the day.
- OTs work in a variety of settings and across the lifespan.
- Counseling is outside the scope of practice for OTs.

OVERLAP BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND OT



Examples of challenging times

Transitions

- Graduating
- Moving

Grief

- Family member, friend, pet passing away
- Friend moving away
- Sibling moving out

Natural Disasters/Current Event

Illness, Injury, Medical Interventions

Abuse, Neglect, Exploitation



General tips

Visual learners and do well learning from someone that looks like them.

- Pair pictures with spoken word.

Require simple directions.

- Say what to do instead of what not to do.

Are not as strong with auditory memory and auditory processing and have difficulty retaining directions or information that is only presented verbally.

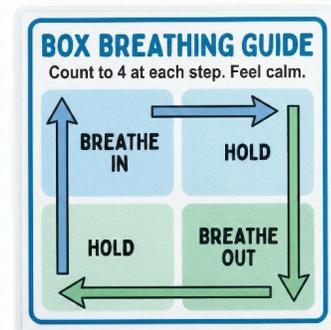
- Allow adequate response time.

Have fewer short-term memory channels.

- Break down directions into smaller steps.

Need to have a regulated sensory system

- Provide sensory input



It depends on the individual's...

Preferences

Abilities

Motivating factors/goals

Living situation

Learning style



WHAT WORKS FOR MOST

- Visuals and videos
- Modeling
- Repetition
- Practice
- Social support
- Being as concrete as possible
- Establishing a routine

CASE 1- JOE

Joe is a 20-year-old in a transition program. He has an older sibling who went away to college. Joe is thinking about his options once he finishes his transition program. His parents keep asking him what he wants to do...go to college, get a job etc. He begins to feel stressed. He does not know what he wants to do. Because of this, he begins to shut down. He wants to spend time in his room when he is at home.



QUESTIONS FOR THE AUDIENCE

- How many of you have supported someone through a big transition like this?
- What do you notice about Joe's reaction?
- What have you tried in similar situations?

OT STRATEGIES



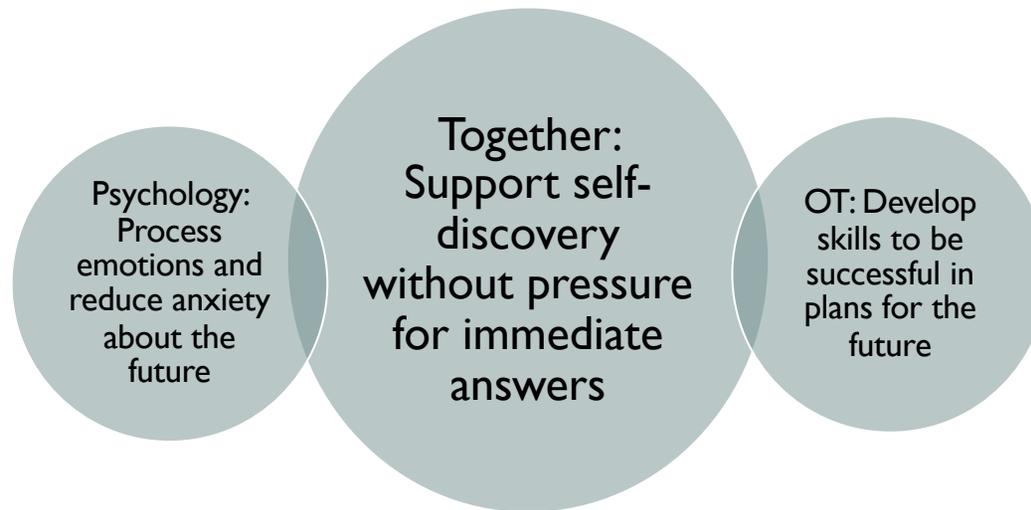
- Identify coping strategies.
- Utilize sensory input to help with strong emotions.
- Create a plan with Joe to help him consider options for his future.
 - Perhaps a pros and cons list for various future options
 - Consider alternative options
 - Help Joe develop necessary skills to achieve future goals

PSYCHOLOGY STRATEGIES



- Explore feelings about sibling leaving and his own future
- Normalize uncertainty—it's okay not to know yet
- Identify and label emotions (stress, confusion, pressure)
- Build self-advocacy skills: "I need more time to decide"
- Address negative self-comparisons to sibling

WORKING TOGETHER: OT + PSYCHOLOGY



CAREGIVER ROLE

- Reduce pressure
 - Limit frequent questions about future
- Reinforce small steps and engagement in exploration/decision making
 - (not just big decisions)
- Avoid comparisons to siblings
- Support generalization of new skills at home
- Offer choices or suggestions rather than open-ended questions

CASE 2 - MARIA

Maria is 34 years old and lives at home with her mom and dad. 5 years ago, her mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Maria watched her mom power through treatment. One year ago, her mom passed away. Maria did not seem to be bothered by her mom's passing at first. She continued at her day program. Her sleep was uninterrupted. She didn't seem to cry. However, now, she seems to be very upset by her mom not being there. She cries all the time, refuses to go to her day program, and sleeps all day and stays up all night.



QUESTIONS FOR THE AUDIENCE

- Has anyone experienced a delayed reaction like this, where things seemed okay at first?
- What surprised you about Maria's timeline?

OT STRATEGIES

- Share visual supports on death, dying, and grief.
- Identify alternative preferred activities to support the individual while grieving.
- Establish predictable routines and structure.
- Help the individual create tangible supports like a collage or memory box.



PSYCHOLOGY STRATEGIES

- Recognize delayed grief as normal and valid
- Help name and express feelings in accessible ways
- Use concrete supports (photos, memory box, rituals and customs)
- Screen for depression
- Gradual re-engagement with meaningful activities



WORKING TOGETHER: OT + PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology:
Process grief
and monitor for
depression

Together: Create
meaningful rituals
to honor mom
while supporting
return to valued
activities

OT: Identify
preferred
pleasurable
activities and
support grieving
process

CAREGIVER ROLE

- Validating grief even though it's delayed. There is no "right" timeline
- Provide a space and time to talk openly about feelings or memories
 - It is easier to re-direct if they know that will have a chance to talk about it soon.
- Share your own grief – model that it is okay to be sad
- Avoid minimizing ("You seemed fine before") or rushing recovery
- Gently support routines without forcing
- Reinforce small steps toward engagement



CASE 3- JORDAN

Every night at dinner, Jordan's parents have the news on in the background. They notice that Jordan has been shutting down lately and doesn't want to come eat at the table. Jordan has been checking the locks repeatedly, closing the blinds, and hiding food in their room.



QUESTIONS TO THE AUDIENCE?

- Why might Jordan be doing this?
- Have you experienced something similar?
- What helped?

OT STRATEGIES

- Provide sensory strategies that may help with anxiety.
- Utilize visual supports to process and understand confusing information.
- Create a safety plan in a format that is understandable and easy to follow.
- Support Jordan identify limits for screen time, social media etc.

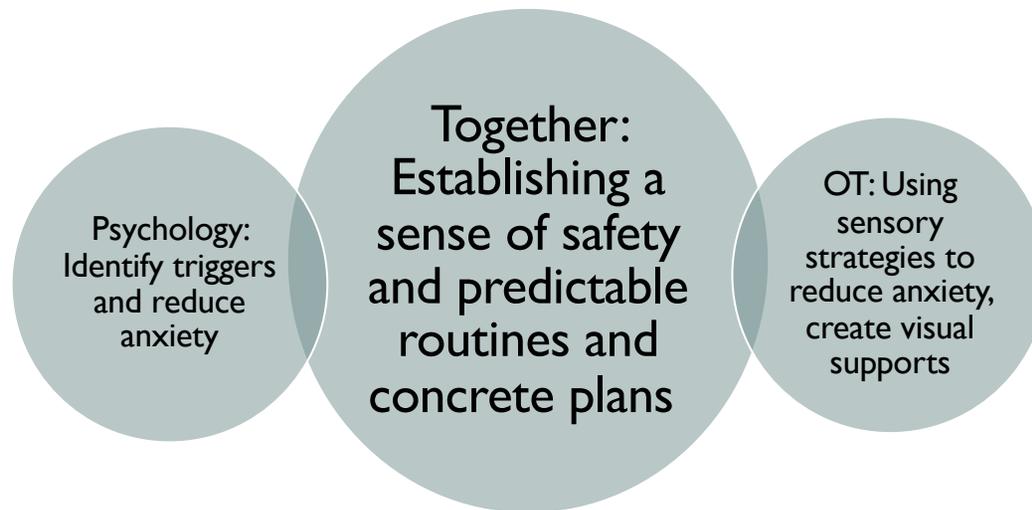


PSYCHOLOGY STRATEGIES

- Connect thoughts and behaviors to the underlying fears
- Explore with Jordan how they feel when watching the news
- Provide reassurance where possible
- Teach coping skills and grounding techniques for coping with uncertainty
- Encourage them to share their fears with their parents
- Assess for escalating or generalizing fears, phobias, or obsessive-compulsive behaviors



WORKING TOGETHER: OT + PSYCHOLOGY



CAREGIVER ROLE

- Be aware that they may pick up on more than they appear
 - What's on TV, social media, conversations around the house
- Normalizing fears and concerns about events
- Sharing their own strategies for coping
- Consider turning off news during dinner
- Collaboratively set limits on screen time, social media, apps
 - Have discussion and set a designated time together. Let them decide when and agree upon a strategy
- Identify safety features or make a safety plan and reviewing together
- Modeling calm behavior around safety planning current events



HOW TO FIND PSYCHOLOGIST IN YOUR AREA

- Call your local Down syndrome association or clinic in your area for recommendations.
- Check with your insurance.
- Finding psychologist can be difficult
 - Very few psychologists have specialized training in Down syndrome or other intellectual or developmental disabilities.
 - Many view intellectual disability as “out of scope of practice”
 - Search for “neurodiversity affirming” therapists
 - Look for cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), positive behavioral supports (PBS), and parent management training.

OTHER MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

- **Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)** Therapy + connecting families to community resources and services
- **Marriage & Family Therapist (MFT)** Focuses on relationships and family dynamics
- **Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)** Talk therapy for emotional and behavioral concerns
- **Rehabilitation Counselor** Helps individuals with disabilities achieve independence and employment goals

HOW TO A FIND AN OT IN YOUR AREA

- Call your local Down syndrome association or clinic in your area for recommendations.
- Check with your insurance.
- Finding an OT can be difficult
 - Very few OTs who work with adults have specialized training in Down syndrome or other intellectual or developmental disabilities.
 - Consider an OT in private practice who may have experience seeing patients across the lifespan.
 - See if a private pediatric practice may have more flexibility with age limitations.

WHAT WE LEARNED TODAY

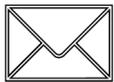
- Challenging times are inevitable
 - Changes can be more stressful for people with Down syndrome than we might think
- Caregivers are the first line of defense
 - Normalizing emotions can be powerful
- Both OTs and Psychology can be beneficial across the lifespan
- Might be hard to find a provider for adults, if you can only find one
 - If a psychologist is not available, an OT may be able to help adapt and make sensory or visual supports
- Private pediatric clinics may be more flexible around age cutoffs than larger hospitals

Resources

Adult Down Syndrome Center



[Resource Library](#)



[Email List](#)



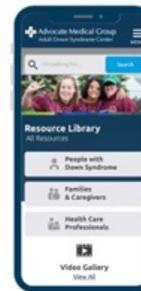
[Facebook](#)



[Instagram](#)

FREE HEALTH RESOURCES

for people with Down syndrome, families and caregivers, and professionals



Resource Library



Find information on aging, puberty, mental health, self-talk, weight management, Alzheimer's disease, social skills, and more.

adsresources.advocatehealth.com

Facebook & Instagram



@adultdownsyndromecenter

Email List



www.eepurl.com/c7uV1v

 Advocate Medical Group
Adult Down Syndrome Center



<https://hope.lab.vcu.edu>



VCU VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY WE ARE THE COMMON. One

HOPE Lab

HOPE Lab Blog and Newsletter | About The Team | Our Research | Resources | Thriving - Trauma Informed Care

Printables

- Blues Busters Workbook
- Emotion Flashcards
- Wellness Tips
- Emotion Coaching
- Books and Other Resources
- Support Organizations
- Video Resources

Home / Resources / Printables

Blues Busters

A free workbook for caregivers to help adolescents or adults with Down syndrome, or other mild to moderate intellectual disability, cope with mild feelings of stress, depression, and anxiety.

Learn more [here!](#)

Emotion Flashcards

Emotion Flashcards are a great tool for teaching basic emotion skills.

Read more for suggestions on how to use Emotion Flashcards to teach emotion skills. And print your own set of Emotion Flashcards featuring youth and adults with Down syndrome!

Emotion Coaching

Fun ways to make wellness and self-care part of your daily routine!

Find printable activities [here!](#)

Emotion Coaching Process

VCUHealth.

Improve emotion regulation and behavior management with emotion coaching.

Find the overview and handouts [here!](#)

VCU HOPE Lab's Mental Health Minutes

by HOPE

Playlist - 6 videos - 9 views

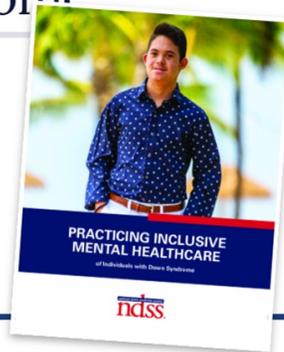
Mental wellness is essential for everyone, and this series provides vital, accessible resources designed for p...more

Play all

NDSS Guide for Inclusive Mental Health Services

Practicing Inclusive Mental Healthcare of Individuals with Down Syndrome

This resource is provided to equip mental health professionals with tools, resources, and strategies to better serve individuals with Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities, taking into consideration their unique mental health needs.



Guide to help families and providers advocate for inclusive mental health services.

<https://ndss.org/resources/practicing-inclusive-mental-healthcare-individuals-down-syndrome>

CARE DOWN SYNDROME



A FREE resource for primary care providers (and other healthcare providers) that shares the knowledge and resources to deliver informed, respectful, and individualized care for individuals with Down syndrome.

<https://careds.org/about/>