

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Sexual Offenders With Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The vast majority of individuals with autism do not commit sexual offenses. While there has been some suggestion of a tendency towards anti-social or offending behaviors, a propensity for breaking the law by those with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder has not been found in the research literature. However, the small number of individuals with autism spectrum disorder who do commit crimes appear to cover the full spectrum of offenses committed by offenders without autism spectrum disorder, including sexual offences, arson, violence, theft, terrorism, and manslaughter, although large scale studies suggest they tend to commit proportionately fewer property, driving, and drug offences. The purpose of this case study is to present the use of cognitive behavior therapy to therapeutically address the problem sexual behaviors of a young man with ASD.

INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) do not commit criminal offenses. While there has been some suggestion of a tendency towards anti-social or offending behaviors (Howlin, 2004; Silva et al., 2004), a propensity for breaking the law by those with a diagnosis of ASD has not been found in the research literature. For example, Hippler et al. (2009) found no increased rate of criminal conviction among an Asperger's cohort of patients in comparison to the general population, and a systematic review by King and Murphy (2014) concluded that individuals with ASD are not disproportionately over-represented in the criminal justice system.

However, the small number of individuals with ASD who do commit crimes appear to cover the full spectrum of offenses committed by offenders without ASD, including sexual offenses (Griffin-Shelley, 2010), arson (Radley & Shaherbano, 2011), violence (Baron-Cohen, 1988), theft (Chen et al., 2003), terrorism (Faccini, 2010) and manslaughter (Murphy, 2010), although large scale studies suggest they tend to commit proportionately fewer property, driving, and drug offenses (King & Murphy, 2014).

Questions are often raised regarding the possible role that a diagnosis of ASD might play in the development or manifestation of offending behaviors, for instance in relation to a "special interests" or social naivety (Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2003; Dein & Woodbury Smith, 2010; Howlin, 1997). In particular, there has been much discussion regarding the potential for the features of ASD to leave an individual vulnerable to committing a sexual offense due to low empathy, social communication and interaction difficulties, cognitive inflexibility, and special interests/obsessions that are sexual or deviant in nature (Griffin-Shelley, 2010; Higgs & Carter, 2015; Sutton et al., 2012). The purpose of this chapter is to present a case study on using cognitive behavioral therapy to address problematic sexual behaviors for a young man with ASD.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has also been suggested that ASD symptomatology might potentially impact the achievement of positive outcomes following treatment for difficulties thought to underlie offending, including sexual offending (Melvin et al., 2017). Poor treatment outcomes for individuals with ASD who sexually offend have been identified in a number of case studies (Chan & Saluja, 2011; Kohen et al., 1998; Milton et al., 2002). Additionally, men with an ASD diagnosis who had completed the SOTSEC-ID program (an adapted sexual offender treatment programme for individuals with

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