

Using the 5-Point Scale and Anxiety Curve Poster

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5-POINT SCALE

The 5-point scale, as described in our book, *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* (2022), was designed for people who have difficulty understanding emotional concepts and abstract social thinking, including those who have autism. Common examples include being confused by concepts involving the degrees of emotion or by language used to define social expectations.

Dr. Simon Baron Cohen (2008) suggests that people with autism are particularly likely to be *systemized thinkers*, or tend to create systems to understand social or emotional concepts. As a result, they might learn better through the use of a system than through a teaching approach that relies heavily on language-based social and emotional concepts. For example, questions such as “How do you think that makes me feel?” or “Why did you do that?” require a person to have a good understanding of social/emotional language and, therefore, are often challenging to a person with autism. That is, language concepts, particularly those that rely on our ability to understand somebody else’s perspective, seem to be difficult and could be viewed as a learning challenge.

On the other hand, a calendar, a visual task list, a TV guide, a subway schedule, a computer, and numbers are all systems and as such seem to be easier for individuals with autism to understand. Consequently, they constitute learning strengths. By using a *system* to teach social and emotional information, then, we are using a *strength-based approach*. This is where respect for neurodiversity and the 5-point come in.

Autistic children often develop significant adult dependencies. This is seen not only in academic work, but also in their attempts to understand and control emotions and interpersonal actions. Teaching a person with autism to identify her internal states, how those states typically make her feel, and what to do to about it should be viewed as one of the most important skills we teach. A very wise parent once told us,

If my child graduates from high school and he cannot read, it would be against the law to discriminate against him. However, if he graduates and is not able to live or work next to other people without hurting or scaring them, society will not tolerate him. As a result, he will most likely lose his freedom to move about his community independently, impacting his long-term quality of life.

It is with these words in mind that we developed the poster check-in system. By increasing active participation, the goal is to increase self-awareness. We offer this product because it has worked well for us in our work. It is designed as a systematic way to teach self-control and insight into one’s own emotional regulation. You can use one of our examples or fill it in yourself to reflect your own situation. This particular design was originally created for Camp Discovery, a summer camp sponsored by the Autism Society of Minnesota; the name clip-tab idea came from our colleague Amy Dvorak.

Best to everyone. Stay positive and keep on teaching!
Kari and Mitzi

References

- Baron-Cohen, S., & Golan, O. (2008). Systemizing emotions: Using interactive multimedia as a teaching tool. In K. D. Buron & P. Wolfberg (Eds.), *Learners on the autism spectrum: Preparing highly qualified educators* (pp. 234-253). Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.
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Scale Examples

Tolerance Scale

This scale may be used in any environment. The person with autism, teachers, or parents can stop and think about how they are feeling and put their personalized clip-tab on the appropriate number.

- 5** = I need to go to a different place. I am ready to EXPLODE!
- 4** = I need to take a serious break. Maybe walk. Maybe talk.
- 3** = I just need some space and some quiet time.
- 2** = OK. Doing so-so. No problems.
- 1** = I am mellow. I am enjoying myself.

Personal Speed Scale

This is a good scale to use with young children who have difficulty keeping track of their speed in school hallways or at home. This check-in may work well right before passing time or coming in from recess to give the child a concrete reminder of what the expectations are for different environments.

- 5** = Running full speed. The Indy 500. Emergency running.
- 4** = Running or jogging. Exercise. Like outside at recess.
- 3** = Fast walking or skipping. Like in gym class.
- 2** = Regular walking. Like in the hallways.
- 1** = Very slow walking. Like a snail.

Asking for Help

This is a good scale to use before activities at school, at home, or in the community. It is helpful for the person who has difficulty engaging in new things or effectively communicating her fears or anxiety.

- 5** = I can't do this! I won't do this! Please don't even talk to me about it. Don't try to convince me to do it.
- 4** = I will need a lot of help to do this. I might not be able to do it by myself. This will make me nervous. I might feel like running away at first.
- 3** = I am not sure about this. I might be able to do it. I might need some help to get started. I might need some more information about the task.
- 2** = I think I can do this. I have done it before and have a pretty good idea about how to do it. Let me take my time.
- 1** = I am really good at this! I don't need any help and I feel happy about doing this.

Words

This is a helpful check-in for the person who has difficulty with swearing or threatening words. This check-in may be used to actively process a past incident. Be sure also to process positive incidents so it is not only a negative activity.

- 5** = These words are scary to other people. They might think you want to hurt them.
- 4** = These words make other people feel concerned. They probably think you are angry.
- 3** = These words are hard to understand. They might not mean harm, but they might seem strange to other people.
- 2** = These words feel good. They have a positive effect on other people. They are friendly words.
- 1** = No words. This usually has very little impact on other people. Sometimes it is good to say nothing.

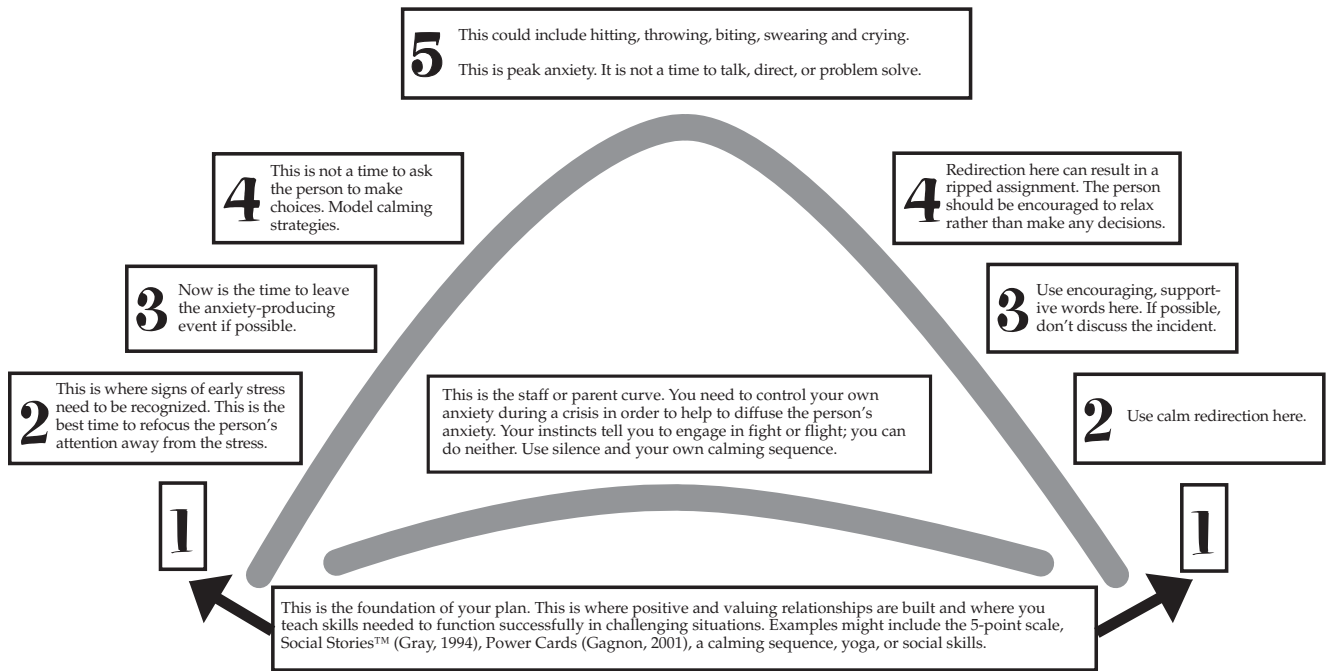
Energy Level

This is a great scale to use to help children check in throughout their day at school or at home. Using the scale is a great way to communicate prior to an unfortunate event.

- 5** = Too high. Too anxious to work or play. I might be yelling.
- 4** = High energy. Great level for a party or playing outside
- 3** = Average energy. Good for group time. I can sit at a desk.
- 2** = Calm energy. Great for library time or quiet work time.
- 1** = Almost no energy. Too low for school. Sleeping, head down. Maybe sick.

THE ANXIETY CURVE

The anxiety curve is designed to be used as a part of a teaming process, as a visual for caregiver training, or as a guide for collaborating with a person who struggles with anxiety issues. The poster offers a simple system for visually categorizing the various levels of anxiety and accompanying behaviors. When completed, the curve illustrates critical information needed to create effective and proactive teaching plans.



How to Use the Anxiety Curve

On the left side of the curve, the numbers go from 1-5. When completed, each box should describe what the person's behavior looks like at each level, some thoughts about what the person could do at that point, and how a caregiver can respond positively and supportively at each level.

In the box at the bottom, list the strategies the team plans to use to teach relaxation and social understanding. Finally, the shallow curve near the bottom is the adult anxiety curve. This is where the team can list strategies they can use to help lower their own anxiety in challenging situations.

- 1** Being at "1" describes someone who is not exhibiting any signs of anxiety. When someone is at "1," she is ready to learn. This is where teaching should take place. At the bottom of the curve is a long rectangle. This area is to be filled with ideas for how to teach relaxation or social understanding skills that can support the person and help meet long-term goals.
- 2** When someone is at "2," she might be described as being a little anxious. It is essential for caregivers to recognize the early signs of stress and anxiety because this is the level at which the person is still able to make a good decision. Her brain is still functioning fairly well, and she is probably somewhat flexible in her thinking. She is more able to accept direction, and her body is still within her control.
- 3** When someone is at "3," he might be described as being upset. His voice might be getting louder or he might be getting up from his desk or group. When a person is at this level, he is still able to take direction but might not be able to make a good decision.
- 4** When someone reaches "4," she is really angry. Her brain is no longer working efficiently, and she may exhibit what Ross Greene refers to as the "human bark" or swearing behavior (Greene, 2008). She may throw things, and her behavior might begin to look aggressive. This is not a time to give directives or to ask the person to make a good choice. She can no longer utilize the parts of her brain needed to think clearly about actions and consequences. This is when highly risky behavior is likely to take place. Silence is the caregiver's best defense when the person reaches a "4." Assess the surroundings to make sure everybody is safe and try to calm yourself.

5 A “5” can be defined as aggressive and hurtful behavior. This behavior is against the law for adults (Buron, 2007). Caregivers can safely assume that the person is at optimal anxiety at this stage. This is a horribly uncomfortable position for everyone. “5” behavior is scary to watch and exhausting to be engaged in. The number-one recommendation is to never get to a “5.” If your student or child is there, do your best to remain strong, silent, calm and protective. There is no pretty or pleasant outcome of level “5” behavior. It is an emotional event and a complete loss of control. *This is why the core of any good program is focused on teaching at #1 and refocusing or prompting at #2 or #3.*

Recovery

Once someone loses control, has a tantrum, or exhibits other signs of severe anxiety, he will need time to regroup before being able to logically process what has happened. The right side of the curve is dedicated to the recovery period. Each number should be defined clearly, including symptoms or indicators suggesting that the person is at a given level. Each number should also include ideas for what the caregiver can do to support the person and protect him from escalating again. It is a good idea to hold off on making any demands until the person has fully recovered.

References

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Examples of Using the Anxiety Curve

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

This is one of the most common reasons for using the curve poster. In this situation, the educational, home or residential team meets to discuss an individual’s challenging behavior and identify any signs of stress and anxiety that might be contributing to that behavior. By addressing the issue of stress, the team can become more effective in proactive teaching as well as more responsive to and supportive of to the person’s needs. If stress and anxiety are indicated in an FBA, it is recommended that relaxation be addressed in the box at the base of the curve and consequently, on the IEP as a goal area.

Caregiver Training

Using the curve poster during staff training can increase understanding and visually illustrate the concepts involved with explosive behavior. Challenging behavior is very personal, so caregivers tend to be subjective in their responses to it. For example, a child might become aggressive when asked to stop a preferred activity. A caregiver might interpret this behavior to be “willful” or “mean-spirited,” assuming the child had complete control of the situation. Such thinking is erroneous and can become an obstacle to analyzing the problem objectively. By using the curve in training, caregivers can better understand the nature and natural consequences of stress and anxiety. It is a very simple but effective way of breaking down the anxiety cycle so that caregivers are aware of and can attend to the early signs.

1:1 Problem Solving

If your child or student is able, using the curve to work through difficult situations can be very effective. Have the person focus on what his 2’s and 3’s feel like and when they are most likely to happen. Stress compassionately the idea that becoming aware of his 2’s and 3’s can increase his chances of living a more independent and successful life. For example, if a student currently has a 1:1 support person at school due to challenging behavior, use the curve to visually illustrate that other people can not predict his behavior and, therefore, feel that level of support is necessary. When a student swears at a teacher, the teacher will likely think that the student is at a “4” (almost dangerous). However, the student might think that everyone has overreacted to his swearing because he thinks he is only at a “3.” The curve can help to teach perspective taking in a very systematic way and help resolve such counterproductive misunderstandings and misperceptions.