

Section 9.0

SELF-AWARENESS

“The person I was yesterday, introduced me to the person I am today; which makes me very excited about meeting the person I will become tomorrow. ”

— abridged from poem written by Poetic Evolution

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9.01 Introduction

This module continues what began with the Awareness Development and Executive Function module. The ADEF establishes a common ground and a common language with students. It addresses very concrete topics – such as understanding the conditions of their bodies and how this affects them. These concrete subjects are good places to begin with most students on the autism spectrum because they help teachers build rapport very quickly.

By the time students begin work on this module, they should have enough self-awareness to embark on the next two steps of their personal growth:

1. Developing more sophisticated use of newly learned skills
2. Integrating new abilities

Developing a more sophisticated use of acquired skills begins with a searching examination of their inner worlds. Part One of this module, *Understanding of the Self*, contains a process designed to facilitate this.

Education reformist David Perkins defines *understanding* as “... being able to use what you know flexibly in unfamiliar situations or to address new problems.” (Perkins 1998).

Meaningful self-understanding informs our choices and helps us gravitate to people, activities, relationships, professions, passions and environments that we find life-affirming and meaningful.

Part One does not need to be completed before beginning Part Two, *Development of the Self*. Once results from Understanding of the Self (i.e., self-understanding) have appeared, Part Two can be started.

Part Two encourages students to dream about their lives and the kinds of people they would like to be. At this point, many students are able to start making decisions and to set goals that are in harmony with their needs, desires, strengths and challenges. With this context, goals are more fulfilling and successful.

By working on self-understanding through active exploration, students become empowered as they approach adulthood. They become agents of positive change within themselves and for others in many life situations.

The goals of this module are to:

- Deepen self-awareness
- Achieve an understanding that personal growth is an ongoing, dynamic process of trial and error, learning, reflection and self-evaluation.
- Provide tools and coping-mechanisms to manage factors that interfere with positive, meaningful self-awareness – such as self-criticism, self-doubt and low self-esteem
- Provide creative methods for helping individuals maintain self-awareness
- Link self-awareness to interactions and experiences with others.

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- Increase understanding of oneself in a wide variety of contexts: activities, tasks, different environments, situations, choices, decision-making, problem-solving, etc.
- Learn to create goals aligned with one's own needs; how to enhance one's experiences; how to open avenues for change and opportunity (personal, interpersonal, creative, recreational, educational, work and career, independence)
- Learn to use new self-awareness to increase self-advocacy and self-care

As you move through this exploration, you will find a series of personal inventories presented as checklists.

You might wish to print them out and have them handy as you go. You will want to customize this, working at the student's own pace. In Part 2, **Developing the Self**, you should work on the material that feels most attractive and accessible to your student at any given time. It is likely no two students will complete Part 2 in the same order!

9.02 Understanding of Self

Endless opportunities for both facilitated and spontaneous self-reflection appear as students progress through other modules and participate in day and residential activities. The combination of explicit instruction, feedback, reflection, and organic experiences allows students to receive information in the ways most suited to their learning styles. They can experiment with this new self-knowledge in a wide range of contexts, each at his own pace.

The Understanding of Self section is designed to scoop up all the rich insights gained by students through their participation in the program thus far. It then explicitly guides them to:

- Make connections and see patterns in their reactions, relationships, preferences, strengths, challenges through all they have learned about themselves. This is done with compassion and non-judgment
- Fill in gaps, explore, question, reflect, and deepen self-understanding
- Increase body awareness and understanding of how they move through space, how they hold their bodies, and how they interact physically with others, and how all this affects their experiences and our emotions
- Show how self-understanding enables them to draw conclusions, evaluate themselves and their needs, and advocate on their own behalves
- Increase the sense of personal accountability and responsibility in interactions, relationships, choices, and other contexts
- Establish the ways self-understanding is a valuable tool for making choices that fit personal needs, preferences, strengths, and sensitivities
- Explore creative uses for self-understanding to increase success, joy and positive outcomes
- Consider new creative endeavors, relationships, educational pursuits, personal challenges, and career options

All the information and activities in this section can be adapted to fit individual instruction, small group, and large group settings. All elements can be accommodated to match individual learning styles.

9.02.01 Preferences and Affinities

Preferences are the things, environments, foods, people, activities, and situations we gravitate to because they make us feel good. Individuals who are aware of their preferences are empowered to make choices that are well-informed by their own needs. Informed choices increase our level of engagement and ownership in the decision-making process. They increase the likelihood of outcomes containing enjoyment, satisfaction and success.

Informed choices also improve one's ability to negotiate, self-advocate and compromise in shared decision-making situations. This section supports students in clarifying their preferences and understanding the role they can play in making healthy and positive choices.

How to know when preference is actually avoidance

Some individuals on the autism spectrum form preferences as a function of or in reaction to avoiding something unpleasant. A clue to detecting avoidance is an individual describing something in terms of it NOT being something else and he is also not able to generate other reasons why he likes it. For example, a student shows a preference for quiet spaces where he can be alone. When asked why he prefers being alone or what feels good about being alone, he says "It's not loud and confusing," and admits, "I get lonely." In this case, his preference reveals a struggle: He does not know how to manage himself and stay regulated in a room full of activity, yet he desires to be around people. Having discovered this, the teacher can now work on improving regulation in social milieus and also help him explore working with other people (in small group work with limited ambient noises) so his real needs can be better met.

Affinities are activities, ideas, people and things that we find innately interesting, exciting or otherwise compelling. They are attraction-based, thus the draw has an emotional charge that fuels the interest. This emotional charge strongly affects how we each express our affinities. Every person's relationship to their affinities is unique, and individuals on the autism spectrum are no different. Some people are private, some share their affinities only with those they are comfortable with and trust, some are very open, some can become obsessed or take their focus on an affinity to an extreme level – to the exclusion of pursuing other interests.

One can have an affinity that is similar to a preference. For example, within the sensory experience an individual might have an affinity for soft objects, everything from clothing to petting a kitten or a blanket. Another person might have an affinity for highly charismatic people and naturally gravitate to expressive folks. Yet another person might have an affinity for activities that involve movement over sedentary activities.

Affinities play a role in influencing what we wish to learn and experience, who we wish to interact with socially, how we express ourselves creatively, what brings us joy, and what work and career paths seem attractive to us. This section supports students in expanding upon their affinities and exploring creative ways to apply them intellectually, socially, recreationally, and vocationally.

The outline below provides teachers with categories to explore with students. Whether done 1:1, small group, large group or a combination of configurations, the approach is intended to be lively, fun, and interactive. Each session should be well supported with visuals and other representations to anchor understanding and assist students to make connections. This section is filled with opportunities for student show-and-tell; a wonderful way for students to work on communication, sharing, and organizing a presentation.

The initial reactions of students to the content below are likely to be emotionally driven, because our emotions guide much of our preferences and affinities. Students may need to work through their emotional reactions and feelings first before they can settle down and apply their cognitive processes to reflect, make connections, and draw meaning.

Additional guidance for this section in particular:

- Discussing preferences and affinities lends itself to personal storytelling, which bolsters learning and creates lively teaching environments. When we have students generate personal examples to highlight their preferences and affinities, we enlist their affect, language, and higher order thinking.
- Small and large group work in this section enables students to exercise their abilities to compare and contrast, while exposing them to new possible interests and encouraging peer bonding over shared preferences and affinities.
- Throughout this module, there are two excellent ways to help students become receptive to new ideas, to become more tolerant of individual differences, and to be more respectful during peer interactions:
 - Create a climate of non-judgment regarding individual variation.
 - Establish an explicit set of group rules about ways to respect others' likes and dislikes.
- Exploration should be as interactive as possible to keep students engaged and learning experientially. Media clips, magazines, demonstrations, taste tests, role-playing and improv, art, music clips and activities all support students in conceptualizing and forming opinions because they not only have discussion to draw upon but actual experience.

The value of self-disclosure

In this section, teacher self-disclosure is a very valuable tool. By self-disclosure, we mean appropriately and purposefully discussing one's own thoughts, feelings, aspirations, goals, failures, successes, fears, dreams as well as one's likes, dislikes, and favorites. This sort of sharing demonstrates to students that having one's own individuality (likes, dislikes, aspirations, fears, etc.) is perfectly normal. It also increases staff-student bonding over shared interests and opening up opportunities for staff to explore shared interests in specially tailored classes, program activities and projects.

9.02.02 Preferences and Affinities: Personal Inventory Checklist

People

- When I like someone, what is it about them that I like? (personality, smells, movements, size, voice quality, etc.)
- When I am around people I like how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I like a person?

Environments & Environmental Factors

- When I am in a place that I like, what are the qualities that are there? (sounds, smells, amount of people, open spaces, indoor/outdoor, bright, etc.)
- When I am in a place that I like being in, how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I am in a place I like?

Activities (recreational, collecting)

- When I do (xyz) activity, what is it that I like? (sensory, physical, , etc.)
- When I am doing (xyz), how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I am doing (xyz)?

Music

- What do I like about xyz type of music? (sensory, physical, etc.)
- When listen to xyz how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I listen to xyz?

Learning

- What topics do I like to learn about?
- When I am learning about something I like how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I am learning about something I like?

Aesthetics

- What is visually pleasing/beautiful to me?
- When I am surrounding by or looking at something that I like the looks of, how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I look at or am surrounded by something I find pleasing or beautiful?

Clothing/Style

- What style/type of clothes do I like? (on oneself, on others)
- When I am dressed in a way that pleases me, how do I feel? If I see someone dressed in a way I think is cool, how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I dress the way I like/see someone dressed in a way I like?

Food

- What foods do I like? Is there something specific I like about these foods? (senses)
- When I eat food I like how do I feel? (physically, emotionally, sensorily)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when I eat foods I like?

Sensory-based experiences

The sensory sub-section offers great opportunities to incorporate body awareness as it relates to others. Since body awareness is traditionally a challenge many individuals on the spectrum face, it is helpful to weave it into related discussions.

Examples:

- What are my preferences for
 - Being touched by others?
 - Standing close to others?
 - Getting hugs?
 - How does my body feel when it comes into contact with others and objects?
 - How do I prefer to enter a room?
 - How do I prefer to move through a crowd?
- What sensory feelings do I like/enjoy?
- When I am exposed to a sensory experience I like how do I feel? (physically, emotionally)
- What kinds of thoughts do I have when my senses are pleased?

Other topics the student generates

9.02.03 Interests

We define “interest” as a state of curiosity or concern about or attention to something. Personal interests can surround an idea, an activity or an object. While the theme of the previous section, Affinities and Preferences, is best illustrated as *sharing* and *comparing*, the theme of the Interests exploration is best illustrated as *being curious* and *exploring*.

While affinities and interests can and often are related, it is not always the case. For example, an individual may have an affinity for trains. He finds them visually compelling to watch, likes the sounds of the clickety-clack and the whistle. However, if you try to expose him to information about trains he may not lean forward, and in fact, he may even resist - almost as if the information dulls or weighs down his experience of it. He may talk about trains a lot, cycling his information but resistant to other people talking about it. His parents may be befuddled because they do not understand how their child can love trains so much, but when they try to get traction and build on it, the effort goes nowhere.

An example of an interest and an affinity coming together would be an individual who has an affinity for trains but also wants to study train schedules and maps, learn how trains run, talk to a conductor, etc. So, we look for natural affinities and expose students to things we hope they might find an affinity with, and then within that we stretch to see where there is a toehold for interest - the layering on of new information and new experiences to build upon and perhaps leverage it into projects, career exploration, etc.

While affinities can be solo, internal experiences or more external, relational experiences, interests require interaction with the subject in some way, perhaps through a book, or computer research, or a related object. Interests lend themselves to relational dynamics – such as learning, sharing, debating, discussing, co-creating, and meeting experts in a field.

All the approaches and teacher guidance from section **9.02.02 Preferences and Affinities** apply to this section as well.

Additional Guidance:

- Compared to affinities, interests tend to have a stronger language, cognitive and executive function component. Thus when organizing student groups for the activities in this section, group them by developmental level and language capability. This does not mean there should not be cross-group sharing of interests. Rather, grouping in this way allows the initial discussions, presentations, and development to proceed in ways that match the members’ similar learning styles.
- An effective and fun way to share interests program-wide is through holding an Interest Fair. Students and staff create little booths, models or other creative representations of their interests. Have both staff and students leave a ticket in the basket at booths that interest them. This and other sharing activities will help in the formation of clubs, student projects, and staff-student creative collaborations.

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- Exploration of interests is a great vehicle for inviting community collaboration. Members of the community who have skills, expertise or knowledge in an interest can become involved and some may become mentors. Interests are also excellent lead-ins to volunteer, community involvement, and internship possibilities.

! An interest is that sweet spot where natural affinities deepen and expand, and great learning and relational experience can occur.

9.02.04 Interests: Personal Inventory Checklist

- Topics (favorite topics to discuss)***
 - What about this topic interests me?
 - Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Learning (things I know a lot about and/or want to learn more about)

- What subjects am I interested in learning?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Career Related (careers & jobs that interest me)

- What about this career interests me?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Activities (activities that interest me and/or I would like to try)

- What about this activity interests me?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Pop Culture (movies, TV shows, books, art, celebrities, trends, other media)

- What in pop culture interests me?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Community-based

- What about my community interests me?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Current events/news

- What about the news interests me?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Hobbies

- What about this hobby interests me?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

Other topics the student generates

- What about this topic interests me?
- Do I know anyone who shares the same interest?

9.02.05 Strengths

A strength is something we are good at, either innately or through practice. It may draw upon any of our systems – sensory, emotional, social, cognitive, or physical. Strengths can be singular in nature, such as an excellent sense of smell, strong attention to detail, an affectionate personality, or capability at spelling. Or, they can arise from a combination of skills, such as a martial art (motor coordination, anticipation, memory of moves and their sequences, body awareness), art (color selection, visual-spatial ordering, hand dexterity, visualization, etc.), empathy (compassion, perspective-taking, social awareness) or reading comprehension (decoding, analysis working memory, vocabulary, attention, etc.). Each Student Individual Profile will contain information about strengths, and staff can incorporate it into discussions and activities.

Many of the teaching approaches suggested in sections **9.02.01 Preferences and Affinities**, and **9.02.03 Interests** apply in this section. In particular, we emphasize the importance of experiential learning and establishing a climate of supportiveness and non-judgment among peers.

An examination of strengths can lend itself to feelings of competition and negative comparison. Thus, teachers are encouraged to set the climate for this work so students approach this topic in a collegial and celebratory manner.

Students will benefit from critical thinking games and discussions that highlight the connections between their strengths and:

- Self-esteem
- Activities they already engage in (why they are drawn to them or do them recreational activities that may align with their strengths)
- Ways their strength can be used to increase learning
- Ways their strengths can be of benefit to others (fellow students, school program, local community, etc.)
- Creative ways to apply their strengths in the community through projects and collaborations with local community members.

About Body Awareness

A strong sense of body awareness can be capitalized on in many contexts. Body awareness ties physical, spatial and sensory processing skills together and enables an individual to:

- Know where he is in physical space
- Be aware of his body positioning (in isolation and in relation to others)
- Be aware of his body movements and be able to manage/adjust them either independently or when attention is drawn to them (posture, gait, reaching for objects, using objects, etc.)
- Be aware of the effect his body on himself, on others, and on the physical space he occupies
- Navigate physical spaces with ease.

Signs that a student struggles with body awareness (addressed below in Section **9.02.07 Challenges**) include but are not limited to:

- Difficulty navigating spaces (with or without surrounding objects or people)
- Awkward posturing (sitting or standing) and movements (gait, reaching for things, tool use)
- Low awareness to how body is positioned and the effect it has on themselves, others, and their environment
- Anxiety navigating spaces

In addition to creating an opportunity to raise the student's body awareness, work in this area allows teachers to address the associated emotional reactions that can accompany body awareness difficulties (Example: anxiety, panic, overwhelm, disorientation, irritability)

In addition to consulting with an Occupational Therapist, many rich and engaging OT resources are available and helpful when working with students to address low body awareness challenges.

9.02.06 Strengths: Personal Inventory Checklist

Physical skills

- What are my physical strengths?
- What are the ways they benefit:
 - me
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise when I am doing something physical that I am good at?
- Other observations related to my physical strengths

This area opens the door not just for additional insight but creative thinking, self-esteem building and fun. For example, ask students: “If your strength were a super power, what could you do with it?”

You can also ask students to represent their strength non-verbally and/or through an artistic representation.

Sensory capabilities

- What are my sensory strengths?
- What are the ways they benefit:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise when my senses help me out
- Other observations about my sensory strengths

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above)

Body Awareness

Students will need both verbal explanations and experiential activities to anchor the meaning of body awareness.

- In what ways is my body aware?
- How does this awareness benefit:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun

- What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise when I am benefitting from having good body awareness?
- Other observations related to my body awareness skills

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above)

Emotional skills (empathy, kindness, cooperation, etc.)

What are my emotional strengths?

What are the ways they benefit:

- me in general
- my interactions with others
- my learning
- my fun

What thoughts and body sensations arise when I am using my emotional strengths?

Other observations related to my emotional strengths

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above)

Cognitive skills

What are my cognitive skills?

What are the ways they affect:

- me in general
- my interactions with others
- my learning
- my fun

What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise when I am using my strong thinking skills?

Other observations related to my cognitive strengths

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above)

Relationship skills

What are my relationship strengths?

What are the ways they benefit:

- me in general
- my interactions with others
- my learning
- my fun

What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise when I am relating well with others?

Other observations related to my relationship strengths

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above)

Creative Expression

What are my creative strengths?

What are the ways they benefit:

- me in general
- my interactions with others
- my learning
- my fun

What emotions, thoughts and sensations arise when I am in my creative zone/being creative?

Other observations related to my creative strengths

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above)

Self-Care, Self-advocacy and Self-regulation

What are my strengths in taking care of my needs, speaking up and asking for help, and staying regulated?

What are the ways they benefit:

- me in general
- my interactions with others
- my learning
- my fun

What emotions, thoughts and sensations arise when I am

- taking care of my needs
- asking for what I need from others
- staying regulated

Other observations related to my self-care, self-advocacy and self-regulation strengths

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above).

Managing my responsibilities

What are my strengths in managing my responsibilities?

What are the ways they benefit:

- me in general
- my interactions with others
- my learning

- my fun

What emotions, thoughts and sensations arise when I am taking care of my responsibilities well?

Other observations related to my responsibility strengths

(Same suggestions as a. Physical skills, Other observations, above)

Other student generated strengths

Teachers can apply steps a through d from the sections above if students come up with additional strengths.

9.02.07 Challenges

Personal challenges are difficult to address. They often bring up strong feelings and a sense of vulnerability, especially when we share them with others. Individuals on the autism spectrum can experience lifelong stress regarding their personal challenges, felt especially keenly during school years.

Often, an individual's challenges become the focus as parents, teachers and professionals work in earnest to facilitate education and help make goals for the future. If equal time is not spent expanding strengths and experiencing joy, young adults on the spectrum may emerge from their school years overly focused on personal difficulties. They may end up underestimating themselves and remain quite unaware of their strengths. This makes it critical to address this constructively in the context of transition learning.

The goal of this section is to support individuals in recognizing their challenges in a non-judgmental manner. Instead of being daunted by the recognition of personal difficulties, they can come to understand how understanding their challenges will enable them to make good decisions for themselves.

Staff should model for students how to approach personal challenges with humor, flexibility and compassion. This will provide great help to students in developing healthier, more functional and more positive relationships with the more difficult aspects of themselves.

Neutralizing the emotional reactivity surrounding challenges opens opportunities for students to understand themselves better. It becomes easier for them to establish personal goals and become creative in working with personal obstacles.

Much of the teaching methodology suggested in Preferences and Affinities, Interests, Strengths, above, also applies in this section.

Guidance on self-disclosure and modeling as teaching tools

Self-disclosure is a particularly effective teaching tool when discussing challenges with students.

Example: Teacher admits she cannot spell well. She shares the frustration it caused in school and sometimes when texting or sending emails. Students and teacher then share anecdotes of funny outcomes to misspellings. Teacher continues that although being a poor speller is frustrating, it did not stop her from pursuing the dream of being a teacher.

She can go on to show the strategies she has adopted to manage the problem – having someone else check her work before submitting it, using spell checker, using code words like LOL in texts to cut down on spelling out full words, etc.

By modeling positive ways to frame and manage challenges in an open, compassionate manner, staff can show that we all have challenges and that they can be addressed in positive, productive ways.

Guidance on the emotional component to challenges

Students facing long lists of personal challenges can become discouraged. To prevent a student from feeling overwhelmed by this exploration, the **Challenges** section can be addressed over time. Pacing is very important here.

In this module, each challenge is addressed with a series of reflection steps. They are designed to move the student from identifying and understanding a challenge to brainstorming and generating solutions. In this way, a road map to improvement begins to emerge. This flow also helps students realize some challenges have dynamic and mutable aspects, which offers the hope of improvement.

When we address challenges that are more fixed in nature, we guide the students to have compassion for themselves and help create bypass strategies and generate positive coping mechanisms.

Some students will prefer to discuss their challenges privately. This desire should be respected by allowing the student to start the work in 1:1 sessions. Then, when possible, slowly phase into small group discussions with peers who have similar struggles. The power of group work in discussing challenges lies in:

- Helping students break their sense of isolation regarding what is hard
- Normalizing their experience by seeing that others have similar difficulties
- Seeing and learning positive coping mechanisms peers use to accommodate for or bypass challenges

9.02.07 Challenges: Personal Inventory Checklist

- **Physical limitations**
 - a. What are my physical challenges?
 - b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
 - c. What emotions, thoughts and sensations arise?
 - d. Ways I cope:
 - to bypass/work around it
 - to get support from others and self-advocate
 - to stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.2 Sensory interferences (include environmental sensitivities)

- a. What are my sensory sensitivities?
- b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interaction with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- c. What emotions, thoughts and body reactions arise?
- d. Ways I cope
 - to bypass/work around it
 - to get support from others and self-advocate
 - to stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.3 Body awareness issues

- a. How low body awareness show up in my body and the ways I move?
- b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning

- my fun
- c. What emotions and thoughts arise?
- d. Ways I cope
 - bypass/work around it
 - get support from others and self-advocate
 - stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.4 Emotional issues

- a. What are my emotional issues?
- b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- c. What thoughts arise when I am struggling with an emotional issue? How do my body and sensory system react?
- d. Ways I cope
 - bypass/work around it
 - get support from others and self-advocate
 - stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.5 Cognitive difficulties

- a. What are my cognitive difficulties/thinking challenges?
- b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interaction with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- c. What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise?
- d. Ways I can cope
 - bypass/work around it
 - get support from others and self-advocate
 - stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.6 Relationship issues

- a. What are my relationship issues?
- b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- c. What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise when I am struggling with a relationship issue?
- d. Ways I can cope
 - bypass/work around it
 - get support from others and self-advocate
 - stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.7 Creative expression challenges

- a. What are my creative blocks
- b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- c. What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise?
- d. Ways I can cope
 - bypass/work around it
 - get support from others and self-advocate
 - stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.8 Self-care, self-advocacy, and self-regulation interferences

- a. What gets in the way of taking care of my needs, speaking up for my needs and staying regulated?
- b. What are the ways they affect:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others

- my learning
- my fun
- c. What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise?
- d. Ways I can cope
 - bypass/work around it
 - get support from others and self-advocate
 - stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.9 Roadblocks to managing my responsibilities

- a. What gets in the way of me managing my responsibilities independently?
- b. What are the ways this affects:
 - me in general
 - my interactions with others
 - my learning
 - my fun
- c. What emotions, thoughts and body sensations arise?
- d. Ways I can cope
 - bypass/work around it
 - get support from others and self-advocate
 - stay regulated and engaged with others

1.4.10 Other student generated challenges

Teachers can apply steps a through d from the sections above if students come up with additional strengths.

9.02.09 Hopes, Dreams and Goals

This section invites students to dream big and frame their futures in positive ways. As with challenges, a vulnerability accompanies sharing one's hopes and dreams. Thus, some students may wish to start the discussion 1:1 and then open up to group work with like-minded peers. Establishing respectful ground rules for the group will help students to feel safe sharing.

General guidance for this section:

- Hopes, dreams and goals are future-oriented concepts. It is vital that discussion is supplemented with visuals, activities, media clips and other interactive methods. Moving beyond just words helps individuals who struggle to conceptualize the future (or have difficulty with language) understand and express themselves effectively and creatively. Interactive activities can include:
 - making dream boards or collages
 - role play and improv
 - brainstorming activities that incorporate movement
 - story writing and acting
- It takes one set of skills to hope, dream and generate goals for oneself but it takes a whole other set of skills to work towards making them happen. Executive function and critical thinking are heavily enlisted in the art of fleshing out a vision, generating a plan and implementing it.
- Once students have generated their ideas, teachers can help them shift into developing them further by:
 - looking at logistics and figuring out how feasible they are
 - doing research to fill in the gaps and learn more
 - shaping ideas according to new information
 - activating creativity and brainstorming

Once students' ideas have been developed, they need to be evaluated and prioritized. This involves guiding students to think critically while still staying in a creative mindset – adjusting ideas as new insights evolve. The use of timelines, dream boards and other visuals are very useful in strengthening comprehension and engagement in this process. At this juncture, staff will need to assess when students are ready – and what steps and support are needed – to fold these goals into the student's program experience.

9.02.10 Hopes, Dreams and Goals: Personal Inventory Checklist

- **Physical**
 - What do I hope/want/dream my body can do?
 - by myself
 - with others

Emotional

- How do I hope/want/dream of feeling and reacting emotionally?
 - when I am alone
 - with others
 - in relationships

Cognitive

- What would I hope/dream/want my brain to be able to think/do?
 - by myself
 - with others

Personal

- What do I hope/dream/want to do or have in my personal life that I am not doing or don't have now?

Relationships

- What do I hope/dream/want in my relationships with others? (could be a quality such as less fighting, or a category such as wanting a best friend or girlfriend)

Social Life

- What do I hope/dream/want to do in my social life that I am not doing now?

Creative Expression

- What do I hope/dream/want to create? (remember creativity can be applied in many contexts beyond the traditional association with artistic endeavors)

Self-Care

- What do I hope/dream/want to do to take better care of my needs?

Responsibilities

- What do I hope/dream/want to be responsible for that I am not responsible for now?

Recreational

- What fun activities do I hope/dream/want to do that I have not yet tried?

Academic

- What do I hope/dream/want to learn?

- for pleasure/personal interest
- for work/career

Career

- What do I hope/dream/want to do for a job or career?

Independence

- What do I hope/dream/want to be able to do on my own that I am not doing now?

Bucket List

This is a great subtopic for fun and creative sharing, brainstorming, critical thinking and letting imagination play.

- What do I hope/dream/want to be able to do in my lifetime? (cost, logistics, and other potential obstacles should not be a factor)

Student-generated ideas

9.03 Developing the Self

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself in any direction you choose.” -- Dr. Seuss

By this point in the module, students will be well-immersed in their own journeys of self-awareness and self-understanding. Much rich information will have been uncovered that helps students expand their view of themselves in a validating, illuminating and positive manner. This next section supports staff and students to turning this new student self-knowledge to action, success and joy.

In the first section of this module, students have focused on generating goals. Students were encouraged to imagine and creatively brainstorm without focusing on implementation details, or logistics, or any interfering factors. As students now move into **Developing Self**, staff can begin to weave executive function into the process through evaluative thinking, step-wisdom, and big picture analysis. Students begin to examine their ideas in terms of feasibility, timing, priority, and other practical concerns.

Welcoming change

Understanding and developing oneself is a life-long and non-linear process. We may set a goal and then not act on it right away. We change our minds and our preferences over time. Past goals fade away to be replaced by new ones. As our relationships with others deepen, our goals may again change. Many ASD individuals find change to be distressing. It is very important therefore to explicitly address how change is a natural part of life; that it is quite OK to continue changing and developing oneself throughout a lifetime. This perspective is a vital life tool that reduces anxiety and leads to managing and even positively capitalizing on change.

To help individuals on the autism spectrum better understand the complex notion of *developing throughout our lives*, teachers should emphasize this thinking and model it throughout the work.

General guidance for this section

- Plan development and implementation require executive function and critical thinking skills. Successful goal development and implementation require motivation, engagement, flexibility, optimism, adaptability, collaboration, and negotiation. Thus when working on this part of the module, recognize the multiple demands this process makes on students. Realize it might create stress and overwhelm some. For this reason, it is important to monitor and work with any emotional dysregulation that might arise.

- An effective way to individualize approaches to student goals is through adjusting the rate, volume and complexity to fit their individual cognitive, emotional and regulatory needs and style.
- Students are encouraged to refer to any and all information (art projects, written work, charts, concept maps, lists, etc.) generated earlier to help prompt their memory and support their thinking.

9.03.01 Using my preferences, affinities and interests to expand my life

This section employs brainstorming and creative thinking skills and goal setting (executive function). Using a high-affect, engaging approach helps students get excited about possibilities and activates thinking. Staff can take the roll of scribes, recording student ideas and visually representing them on paper or white board. Drawing lines to connect one thought to another supports critical thinking. Drawing arrows from ideas to their respective goals supports executive functioning.

While change excites some students, others find it daunting and anxiety producing. Still others feel a mix of both positive and negative emotions. Students with anxiety may hesitate to engage in the process because they fear they will be forced to make changes before they are ready. Students should be assured that any changes made from work in this section will occur at their own pace and timing.

Like the previous section, this part of the module is organized into printable worksheets. Some students may need or want to spend quite a bit of time on Sections A and B, current and new activities, before they are cognitively ready to make decisions and incorporate those decisions into C, which projects future goals, and any other following sections. Conduct the module at whatever pace works best for each student. Working on the Goals sections might need to be delayed until they are emotionally receptive and ready for it.

This section is filled with opportunities to incorporate engaging teaching tools and methods such as internet research, site visits, interviews, media clips, in-program and in-community experiments, etc. These experiential methods and tools will help students build upon, draw meaning, and contribute to 1:1 and group discussions.

Information and activities in this section should be revisited throughout each individual's program experience as needed. Doing so encourages students to see their personal development and goal setting as a dynamic, ongoing and flexible process.

CHECKLIST: USING MY PREFERENCES, AFFINITIES AND INTERESTS TO EXPAND MY LIFE

9.03.02 Hobbies and Recreation

□ **A. Expand on current hobbies & recreational activities**

Some students may insist they are happy with their current hobbies and recreational activities, and resist making any changes. In these cases, it is important for teachers to remember the overarching goal is for students to self-reflect and be self-determining. If a student has moved through an active reflection and evaluation process and arrived at the conclusion not to change anything, that is perfectly fine. The teacher can move on to B. If the student has not been reflective, teachers can support them through their thinking so that they arrive at a meaningful conclusion. Even if they still end up deciding not to make any current changes, they have still benefitted greatly from the exercise and practice.

□ **B. Trying new hobbies & recreational activities**

Students who carry anxiety surrounding trying new things may find this section challenging. Teachers can tailor their approaches to move at gentle speeds. Incorporate anxiety management principles and develop coping strategies to manage fears associated with trying new things and risk-taking.

Examples of low-anxiety exploration approaches:

- Watch others perform the task or activity
- Have the individual participate in the activity even if he is not ready to try it. Assign him a task that keeps him engaged and gives him exposure with minimal risk of anxiety (shopping for, gathering, and handling the materials; timing or observing people doing the activity, helping set up/break down, videoing the scene.)
- Watch media clips related to the activity or task
- Listen to anecdotes of people who also struggled when they first tried and how they coped with the change
- Research the topic
- Search for related photos in magazines, and make a collage
- Do improv and role play
- Do emotional work on identifying and coping with the anxiety and fears that arise
- Do the task in tandem with a trusted peer or staff member

□ *C. Goals*

Goal-setting requires step-wisdom, strategic thinking, time management and many other executive functions. Teachers are encouraged to use plenty of organizational tools and visual representations. Staff should share the goals discovered with other staff and the student's advisor and record progress in the Student Individual Profile. Together, come to an agreement on the best timing for developing each according to the individual readiness.

When a student is ready to set a plan into motion, the following teaching methods will support his progress:

- Create a visual means of tracking progress the student can use as a reference. This helps engage him actively in the process.
- Develop with the student an list of milestones or sub-goals that can be crossed off as they are achieved (jog around the parking lot, jog around the building, jog around the block, etc.) this incremental approach helps reinforce step-wisdom, underscore the value of the process it takes to reach a goal, and validates student efforts along the way.
- For students who respond well to rewards and markers of accomplishment and/or have difficulty waiting for a long-term reward, establish points of accomplishment. At these points, a prize or other acknowledgement of progress should be given (extra trip to the library, ice cream, lunch with a favorite staff member).
- Use other creative tools to help students with both detail and big picture thinking such as color coding, breaking goals down week by week, charts, goal journal, etc.

Some students may lapse into comparing themselves with others, breeding a sense of competition for achieving goals. Since all individuals will be working at their own pace and with their own unique set of strengths and challenges, this type of peer comparisons and competition is normally counterproductive.

Staff are encouraged to be vigilant to this dynamic and emphasize the importance of celebrating each other's accomplishments and affording fellow peers the respect and privacy they need to work on their goals. Reinforcing a climate of non-judgment and support regarding goal achievement provides the modeling students need to build skills in collegiality and mutual respect. Additional suggestions to reduce comparisons and competition include:

- Posting the goal progress charts in the student's advisor's office instead of in a general area so they have access to them in a more private manner
- Have small peer group meetings where students get facilitated guidance in how to share personal progress and frustrations and support each other's goals in a pro-social manner
- Have designated goal-in-progress celebrations intermittently where all students participate and receive kudos for their work. The focus is on a general celebration of their effort, commitment and creativity and helps infuse enthusiasm into the process. Instead of a focus on achievement, this type of

celebration highlights the importance of participation and the bravery it takes to take risks. This type of celebration also models for students that the journey to our goals is just as important as the end result.

9.03.03 Increasing My Knowledge/Education

This section helps students widen their view of learning beyond the linear concepts we are supposed to learn for specific end results – to get a diploma or a job. Teachers help students to increase their excitement and receptivity to learning as a dynamic and pleasurable activity that does not have to have any other end goals than personal enjoyment and sharing with others.

Teacher approaches for reframing learning with students include:

- Lively brainstorming discussions of why and how learning benefits us throughout our lifetime.
- Generating examples of learning in everyday life (how to fill out a lottery ticket, discovering a new short cut to get somewhere, making a new recipe, etc.)
- Technology is an affinity with many students (iPods, tablets, computers, game consoles, cell phones, automated checkout lines, web TV, etc.). Because they also have frequent exposure to technology's constant changing and upgrading, it provides an excellent concrete example of having to learn in everyday life. Video gamers also have a lot to contribute about learning for fun, as each new game requires learning in a multitude of ways.

This section lends itself well to a small group approach with peers who have similar interests. A group configuration introduces valuable elements of sharing, giving and receiving feedback, collaborating, group brainstorming to name a few. It allows students to examine possibilities about themselves in a group context where peers can mirror back and respond to each other's ideas, feelings, beliefs and reactions. Nonverbal and verbal games and activities, movement, role play and improv, art and other creative experiences enliven and anchor discussions.

Some students may desire or need to do this work in a 1:1 context. They may have strong emotional reactions to learning, planning for the future, employment and/or change in general. In such cases their emotional experience needs to be incorporated into the work, particularly because these students need additional time to strengthen their emotional regulation on scary or intimidating topics. Teachers are encouraged to start with what feels safe and grounding to the student, introducing more complexity and social dynamics when the individual is ready.

- **A. Expanding my knowledge on the things I am already interested in**
 - How can I learn more? (Internet, books, movies, articles, enlisting others, places to go such as museums)
 - Why do I want to learn more (for pleasure, to meet a personal goal, etc.)
- **B. Topics of interest I would like to start pursuing**
 - What I am interested in
 - Why I am interested in it (for pleasure, to meet a personal goal, etc.)
- **C. Goals**

Although many students are likely to generate goals that focus on themselves (to be smarter, to know more, to get a job, etc.) staff are encouraged to weave the social aspects into goals (how can this pursuit include others both for fun and for practical reasons)

 - Short Term
 - Long Term

9.03.04 Career exploration, jobs, and internship possibilities

Internet research, outings, site visits, guest speakers, articles, media clips and group discussions are all great methods for approaching this section. In the next two sections, students will be evaluating their potential work and career options in light of their strengths and weaknesses. In this section, the goal is simply to brainstorm, think creatively and dream big. The list each student generates will shape and revise as they work their way through the remainder of the module, and will be revised throughout their program experience as they change and grow.

- **A. Expanding my understanding of careers & jobs I am already interested in**

Prediction & self-reflection prompts:

 - What parts of this job/career seem easy?
 - What parts of this job seem hard?
 - What aspects do I think I would enjoy the most?
 - Considering my preferences, interests and affinities, in what ways does this job seem like a good fit for me?
 - Considering my personal challenges, in what ways might this job not be a good fit for me?
 - How would this job benefit me in my life?
 - How does this line of work benefit and contribute to others, my community/society?

□ ***B. Exploring careers & jobs that might interest me***

The predicting and self-reflection questions above can be applied to new ideas generated.

□ ***C. Goals***

- Short term: Short term goals will largely be exploratory in nature – getting more information, visiting places, talking to people, etc.
- Long Term: Long term goals will be revised continuously based upon what is learned in the information-gathering stage above and due to individual shifts in interests.

9.03.05 Increasing social interaction/Building and maintaining social relationships

This section helps student to bridge their personal interests with social interaction. Students may be able to generate examples from past experiences where they shared in an activity, endeavor or interest with a peer, family member or friend of the family. Media clips and examples of famous interest-based collaborations are also engaging ways to reinforce these concepts with students.

Section 8.0, the Relationships module, includes raising awareness to the idea of interest-based relationships. This module helps students take that concept and practice putting it into action with current interests, affinities and preferences.

- ***A. How can I use my current affinities, preferences & interests to create and improve relationships***
- ***B. How can I identify activities, people, groups and organizations that potentially match my interests, affinities and preferences***
- ***C. What I need find out more about and how do I do it? (talk to people, send emails, research on web, etc.)***
- ***D. Goals***
 - Short term
 - Long term

9.03.06 Getting more involved in the community

To help students generate ideas, it is recommended that staff have a list of community organizations on hand. This list gives students a starting point for matching themselves with groups that are align with their interests and affinities. The list does not have to be definitive, for students and staff can co-research additional ideas through the web and walk-about in the community.

An additional benefit to this section is that the process will naturally expand student views on community-based options. Ideas generated in the Understanding and Participating in Community module can provide a wealth of ideas, as will local community papers and websites. A visit to the local business and/or tourism bureau combines fact-finding and social interaction with additional experience navigating the local community.

Staff are encouraged to keep a running list of the places and ideas generated in this section, as they can inspire future field trips, guest speakers and more.

- *A: What groups and activities in the community tie into my current affinities, preferences and interests?*
- *B: How can I use my current affinities, preferences and interests to find new groups and activities in the community?*
- *C: Goals*
 - Short term
 - Long term

9.03.07 Capitalizing on my strengths

The concept of capitalizing on a strength is an abstract one. A good starting point for this section is using examples familiar to the student. Looking at famous people (history and now) and drawing the connection between their strengths and their successes is helpful.

Once the concept is anchored, staff can move onto closer, less grand examples drawn from daily living. Use known people such as themselves, family members, and students. Run through as many varied examples as needed until the connection between a strength and the successful accomplishment of a task is clear.

At this point students will be more ready and more flexible in their thinking. This will enable them to apply this concept to their own lives. Teachers can line up experiences and activities that show how their strengths, when applied to doing something, shine through.

To do this, identify a specific strength and an activity that will best highlight it. Example: A student is artistic and writes well. She can do an activity making signs. The signs can then be evaluated in terms of their strengths (artistic qualities, use of color, lettering is even, well-spaced and readable; spelling/words spelled correctly)

The teacher may have the same strength and make a lovely sign as well, or not be skilled in this area and make a shoddy sign.

The activity is followed by reflection:

- What strengths do I have that helped make this task easy?
- Did I enjoy myself more because this was easy to do?

- What other things do I do that are easy for me because of my strengths

Once students have practiced identifying strengths in others and in themselves, they can shift to applying the concept in various contexts below. Use the master lists of strengths developed for each student earlier in this module (Strengths, section 9.02.06). Staff may have to help students recall previously identified and discussed strengths.

CHECKLIST: USING MY STRENGTHS TO EXPAND MY LIFE

9.03.08 Ways I can use and expand on physical strengths and skills

- A. To increase learning*
- B. To interact more meaningfully with others*
- C. To find a good match for internships, jobs or careers*
- D. For fun (recreational activities, hobbies, creative expression etc.)*
- E. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.09 Ways I can use and expand on my emotional strengths and skills

- A. To increase learning*
- B. To interact more meaningfully with others*
- C. To find a good match for internships, jobs or careers*
- D. For fun (recreational activities, hobbies, creative expression etc.)*
- E. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.10 Ways I can use and expand on my cognitive strengths and skills

- A. To increase learning*
- B. To interact more meaningfully with others*
- C. To find a good match for internships, jobs or careers*
- D. For fun (recreational activities, hobbies, creative expression etc.)*
- E. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.11 Ways I can use and expand on my relationship strengths and skills

- A. To increase learning*
- B. To interact more meaningfully with others*
- C. To find a good match for internships, jobs or careers*
- D. For fun (recreational activities, hobbies, creative expression etc.)*
- E. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.12 Ways I can use and expand on my creative strengths and skills

- A. To increase learning*
- B. To interact more meaningfully with others*
- C. To find a good match for internships, jobs or careers*
- D. For fun (recreational activities, hobbies, creative expression etc.)*
- E. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.13 Ways I can use and expand on my strengths and skills in self-care, self-advocacy and self-regulation

- A. To increase learning*
- B. To interact more meaningfully with others*
- C. To find a good match for internships, jobs or careers*
- D. For fun (recreational activities, hobbies, creative expression etc.)*
- E. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.14 Ways I can use and expand on my strengths and skills in managing my responsibilities

- A. To increase learning*
- B. To interact more meaningfully with others*
- C. To find a good match for internships, jobs or careers*
- D. For fun (recreational activities, hobbies, creative expression etc.)*
- E. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.15 New and other ways I can use this skill

- A. Personal enjoyment*
- B. Learning*
- C. Relating to others*
- D: For fun*
- E: To help others*
- F: Employment*
- G: Be more creative*

CHECKLIST: WORKING WITH MY CHALLENGES TO EXPAND MY LIFE

9.03.16 Physical challenges

- A: Review the ways my physical challenges affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B: How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C: What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D: Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.17 Emotional Challenges

- A. Review the ways my emotional challenges affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B. How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C. What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.18 Cognitive Challenges

- A. Review the ways my cognitive challenges affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B. How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C. What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D. Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.19 Relationship skills

- A Review the ways my relationship challenges affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D Goals*
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.20 Creative Expression

- A** *Ways my creative challenges affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B** *How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C** *What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D** **Goals**
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.21 Self-Care & Self-Regulation

- A** *Ways my self-care & self-regulation challenges affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B** *How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C** *What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D** **Goals**
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.22 Managing my responsibilities

- A** *Ways my challenges managing my responsibilities affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B** *How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C** *What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D** **Goals**
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.23 Self-advocacy

- A** *Ways my challenges in speaking up for myself and my needs affect my life and my ability to do the things I want or need to do*
- B** *How others can help me (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- C** *What I can do (physically, emotionally, cognitively)*
- D** **Goals**
 - short term*
 - long term*

9.03.24 Summary

The Understanding and Development of Self module thoroughly navigates the exploration of self, an exploration that marks the beginning of a lifelong process. As our strengths, challenges, affinities, interests, passions change, we change. Thus, the material presented here can be revised and revisited at various junctures throughout a student's program experience to help him better see the changes that he has undergone.

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