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## Background

- Employment provides a source of independence, offers a sense of achievement, and leads to opportunities for socialization.
- Maintaining employment is an ongoing challenge for youth and young adults with ASD [1].
- Primary barrier to gaining and sustaining employment includes being unable to cope with the social challenges of work [1].

## Objective

To explore how youth and young adults with ASD cope with stress and anxiety in competitive employment.


## Methods

**Design:** A phenomenological qualitative study with in-depth, semi-structured interviews done remotely (Zoom n=11, Phone n=1)

### Sample

A purposive sample of 12 youth and young adults with ASD aged 15-30 (Males n=7, Females n=5)

### Inclusion Criteria

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- 15-30 yrs with ASD
  - Employed or have work experience

## Results

### Workplace Salient Factors



*"I feel like you're telling me my contract has to be dissolved and restarted...I don't know what you're saying" and then she pulls out [inaudible] and action figures to explain it to me as if I was a child. So, that was awesome..."*  
(#9, female)

#### Subthemes included:

- My interests align with my work
- Ways I prevent future stress occurrences
- Disability disclosure
- Asking for adjustments
- Workplace environment
- Challenges with my coworkers or supervisors

### Stress and/or Anxiety Inducers



*"Well, basically I was having a meltdown, so the manager took me to his office and he's like, "are you alright, like why are you acting like this?" I was like, "oh its because I have autism.""*  
(#10, female)

#### Subthemes included:

- ASD-related challenges
  - Impact of ASD diagnosis
  - Communication challenges
  - Tasks at work
- Past trauma/experiences
- Personal experience with disability disclosure
- Impact of COVID-19

### Coping Mechanisms



*"Well, I ask myself, what is the problem, try to boil it down to simpler terms then analyze how the problem occurred. From there, I can then uhh...look at either way to solve it in the immediate or ways to prevent it in the future."*  
(#4, male)

#### Subthemes included:

- Problem-focused coping
- Emotion-focused coping
- Pushing through

## Implications

- Disability and inclusivity training to promote diversity in the workplace.
- Coworkers can help minimize feelings of stress and/or anxiety on the job for individuals with ASD by fostering a positive workplace.
- Workshops that involve situating stressful scenarios and finding healthy strategies to overcome feelings of stress may be beneficial for employees with ASD.
- Clinicians should provide psychological help and resources for employment-related challenges for youth and young adults with ASD in competitive employment.

## Limitations and Future Directions

- This study relied on self-reported diagnosis of ASD.
- Study consisted of an all-English-speaking sample
- Future studies can look at the role of coping before and after stress and anxiety-inducing situations to see its role and impact in the workplace.

## References

1. Lorenz T, Frischling C, Cuadros R, et al. Autism and Overcoming Job Barriers: Comparing Job-Related Barriers and Possible Solutions in and outside of Autism-Specific Employment. PloS one. 2016;11(1):e0147040.

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