



TURN AUTISM AROUND
WITH DR. MARY BARBERA

Transcript for Podcast Episode: 016

Matt Cicoria: BCBA Supervision & School Consultation

Hosted by: Dr. Mary Barbera

Mary: You're listening to the Turn Autism Around podcast, episode number 16. In today's episode, I'll be talking to Matt Cicoria who founded the Behavioral Observations podcast more than three years ago and already has a million downloads. He is a board certified behavior analyst and he'll be talking about training and BCBA supervision as well as school consultation.

Mary: Before we get to Matt's interview, I'd like to give a shout out to a listener who left us a five star rating and review on iTunes and that is Chiquita2727, who said, "a show that is much needed for anyone dealing with autism in their lives, Mary knows her stuff and has so much help and hope". And that is from Maritza. So thank you so much for spending the time and subscribing, leaving me a rating and review. I'd love to give you a shout out in a future episode, so we'd love it if you would head to iTunes and leave me a rating and review. So let's get on to Matt Cicoria on BCBA supervision and school consultation.

Welcome to the Turn Autism Around podcast for both parents and professionals in the autism world who want to turn things around, be less stressed and lead happier lives. And now your host, autism mom, behavior analyst and bestselling author, Dr. Mary Barbera.

Mary: Today we have a special guest, actually a friend of mine named Matt Cicoria and Matt has been a board-certified behavior analyst since 2002. He provides services to school districts and the agencies in New Hampshire and Vermont, and I was first acquainted with Matt when I was invited to be on his podcast called the Behavioral Observations podcast, which he started in February of 2016 so over three years ago now. And I am on episode number 12 of his podcast, and he has a new book coming out with Dr. Lisa Britton. Matt and Lisa wrote, co-wrote a book called Remote Supervision for BCBA Trainees, which will be available in April of 2019 so that is excellent. We'll be discussing that, and Matt lives in New Hampshire with his wife and three children. So please help me welcome Matt Cicoria.

Matt: Mary, I am delighted to be here. Thank you so much. This is, uh, something that I've been looking forward to ever since we put it on the calendar.

Mary: Great. And I want to thank you for introducing me really to podcasts. Up until I was a guest probably in 2016 I really didn't even know how to download a podcast and I became an avid fan of your podcast and some online marketing podcasts and um, just decided in December of 2018 to bite the bullet and start my own podcast. So I think it's a, it's a great compliment to your podcast. We're going to talk about some of those differences coming up shortly. But before we get there, I always like to start out when I interview people and talk about, um, your fall into the autism world, into the behavioral world and when and how that all happened.

Matt: Sure. Well, my first introduction to behavior analysis had nothing to do with autism. I've always, ever since I was a high school student, took my first psychology class, I always want to be a psych major. And I went to the University of New Hampshire and was just, uh, you know, kind of a, just a happy go lucky psych undergrad. I was taking courses. I was oddly enough, very interested in personality and cognitive psychology, which, you know, perhaps from some of the listeners who aren't behavior analysts might, you know, just a little bit of background that are oftentimes thought of as the antithesis of, of behavior analysis, although that's what I think less so these days.

Matt: But, uh, I was taking courses and things like that and I got to my junior year and, and uh, needed to kind of take some electives in my psych program. And so I ended up taking this course called behavior analysis and its applications, and, uh, that was my first exposure to this whole field of, um, you know, at that point it was probably more thought of as behavior modification, but I loved it right away. I thought that it was more linear, made more sense to me. I can wrap my mind around it more than some of the more heavier topics in psychology, again, such as like personality, social, and cognitive psychology. It was just a lot more simple parsimonious. Again, I kinda got it. And I think the other thing that hooked me too is that the, uh, the book that we use, um, at the time it was Malott Whaley and Malott, uh, The Fundamental Principles of Behavior I think is what the specific title was. And, uh, one of the things that the authors did that was really nice is that they throughout the... it wasn't just a textbook, it was kind of a story at the same time of a, of this, of a couple of different characters.

Matt: And they kind of taught behavior analysis through these characters. And they had what seemed to me like regular jobs, meaning they weren't university professors doing research. They weren't licensed clinical psychologists listening to the people in, in therapeutic situations. One was like an OBM, organizational behavior management, um, practitioner, the other one I think, uh, might have

done some college teaching, but, uh, you know, worked in the field of disability. Uh, and I think, um, it showed to be a kind of a, a very direct pathway towards doing something very tangible that didn't involve the academic route. And so I ended up taking other classes in whatever, any behavioral related classes that were available at UNH at the time. Like I took a, I was fortunate to get a work-study job in the pigeon lab, and I worked with some folks who were very prominent in the... uh, the experimental analysis of behavior field.

Matt: Uh, and that's again, continued to light the fire and eventually like applied to various graduate schools and had gone to Auburn University. And, um, you know, did some work there. And when I was at Auburn, I was again, again sticking with the not necessarily focusing on autism. My work at Auburn, it was with explosives in mine detecting dogs. And so I worked with Dr. Jim Johnson, who is one of the people who was instrumental in starting the behavior analysis certification board, and uh, but at that time his research program was, uh, using behavioral principles, behavioral strategies to answer questions about the olfactory capabilities of dogs as it relates to the detection of land mines, pipe bombs, various types of controlled substances. Uh, you know, so, um, as a grad student I got to play around with things like TNT and cocaine and stuff like that. That was really...

Mary: You actually worked with animals? The dogs would come in and you would do experiments with those dogs to see if they can...

Matt: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

Mary: Cool. So you did work with... you did work with pigeons undergrad and then moved up to dogs in the graduate level coursework. Were you still working with pigeons too?

Matt: No, no. Some of my, uh, uh, I don't think that... did Auburn have a pigeon lab at the time? I don't think they did. I think they had a... I definitely know they had a rat lab cause I had friends who are doing work in that area, and they also had a very strong clinical psychology program. So a lot of my friends were actually, some of my friends I'm closest to today, uh, were actually from the clinical psych program. But yeah, it was just a great, it was, it was just a great time. We had a very tight cohort of students, uh, and that all came in around the same, within the same, you know, year or two, uh, and uh, you know, in addition to the training and things like that it was also kind of a, a fun form of this experience. And I've got some, you know, kind of lifelong friends as a result of that. But yeah, I was a lab rat for er, you know, I guess a lab guy for a while.

Mary: And people don't... you know, this podcast is for both parents and professionals as you know, and a lot of people, parents, especially non-behavioral analysts,

they really don't realize that the world, the applied behavior analysis, the science that we use with children and with adults with and without disabilities is all based on the animal research and the experimental research. And there's been a lot of even backlash of like, I don't think you should treat children like animals and you know, it's just like a lot of confusion. So like, what do you say to someone if they say, well, you know, I don't want to hear about what you did with dogs or, or pigeons because you're working with kids with autism. Like, do you have any response for that before we move on to really like how you moved from dogs to people?

Matt: Yeah. Well, that's, uh, that's a great question. You know, I would say something like this, you know, like one way to think about it is that the difference between basic science and applied science or even, you know, so if you look at something like the field of medicine, like your, your husband's a doctor, if I'm not mistaken, right? He would not have nearly the amount of clinical tools in his tool kit were it not for people doing the basic science and pharmacology and biology, uh, et cetera, et cetera, right?

Mary: Or even experimentation with animals, you know?

Matt: Sure. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I would just put the animals aside for a second, but just looking at making a distinction between basic science and applied science. Um, you know, so if, if I'm a civil engineer and someone asked me to build a bridge, right? I have to have a general understanding of physics, but I did not develop an understanding of the, you know, the contemporary understanding of physics and disseminate that to other, you know, so, you know, you think of the people who are actually doing the hard science of the physics and my kind of a glib way of characterizing that, it's probably going to betray my personal knowledge of physics. But you see what I'm saying? So I think that's one way to distinguish it. You know, one of the things that, at least in the, uh, in the pigeon lab for sure, we were developing some of the, you know, I worked with a guy named Dr. Tony Nevin, who unfortunately just passed away a few months ago, but he was instrumental in developing the idea of behavioral momentum.

Matt: And guess what, he developed that with... in his animal work. But it's a very commonly used strategy in working with kids with developmental disabilities, autism, etc. Where, you know, if you give someone a difficult task to complete, the likelihood of them doing that is relatively low. However, if you front load that difficult task with the presentation of several easy tasks, the likelihood of them doing that very same task is much higher as a result of this process called behavioral momentum. We would have no clue about that were it not for the work that Tony and his colleagues did.

Matt: So, you know, again, I think there's tremendous value in terms of understanding what makes us tick as organisms and a lot of the processes, no one gets to violate the laws of behavior, right? Uh, we're all subject to them whether we're, you know, and again, not, not to denigrate, uh, any one species over another, but we all, we all kind of follow the same, uh, you know, when something, when something great happens after we do something and we do it that something more as a, as a result of that we call that positive reinforcement; and that's understood to occur both, uh, you know, regardless of, you know, whether you have feathers or a tail or opposable thumbs or what have you.

Mary: Or four legs or two legs.

Matt: So I don't know if that helped answer your question but that's my...

Mary: Yeah. And I had Rick Kubina, Dr. Rick Kubina on, on the podcast a couple of sessions ago. And Dr. Kubina and I published an article together on transfer procedures to teach, uh, naming tacts to my son. And up until our article was published in 2005, the majority of research, I think all but one other research study, was all done on animals to teach them via transfer procedures. And so we really do need to, especially with our children that don't talk yet, you know, we need to go back to more and more basics, more and more pairing and shaping and those sorts of procedures because they don't have the language or even the understanding of language to be able to follow, you know, any kind of directions.

Mary: And so I think it's fascinating and I think with your background being so heavily on the animal focus, I thought we'd jump in there and just kind of talk about that briefly. But, so how did you then you get into the autism world specifically?

Matt: How did I start working with people? Well... so when I was at Auburn University, it was a Ph.D. program, and we had some family circumstances that, and I'm originally from New England, uh, and so we had some family circumstances going on that we had to move closer to home. So I had to basically wrap up my master's degree and get back to the general area of the northeast. So I started looking for jobs in New England and in the mid-Atlantic and the places where we had, um, you know, my wife and I have a family, so we could closer and stuff like that. So I started looking... Again, look at the time, and this is something I really try to emphasize with people who are newer to the field, even within the last 10 years or so, uh, this was in the late nineties; it's like 98, ninety-nine-ish. It was so hard to find positions and I stopped to emphasize that because today we have the opposite problem, right? We have this problem of, uh, of abundance where if you're a board certified behavior analyst, you get a dozen emails a week minimum trying to get you to come to work for some organization. And if you're a BCBA you can work anywhere in the United States you want to basically. This job search process took me several months.

Matt: And so one of the places I did end up, however, was this company called Advoserv and I ended up, uh, working... the person that hired me is a woman by, uh, her name is Dr. Judy Fable who, uh, has been in the field for, you know, forever. And Judy, um, went to the University of Kansas and, you know, studied with all the greats there. You know, she knew my major professor Jim Johnson very well. Judy was the past president of the Association for Behavior Analysis. She was the president, the board of directors of the BACB. I think also president of the APBA at one point. And, uh, so she had the vision to understand that, hey, you know, this guy understands operant behavior, and you know, we can teach him what he needs to know about working with individuals with disabilities.

Matt: So were it not for Judy's leap of faith, you know, who knows what I'd be doing? I don't know. And I'll be forever grateful for that. So yeah. So Judy gave me, you know, basically took a chance on me and I started working at Advoserv in Bear, Delaware, and I worked supporting the individuals with perhaps some of the most severe behavior disorders, Uh, in, in our program.

Matt: We had several... we had a dormitory and several kinds of group homes scattered around the New Castle County, Delaware, and um, yeah, so I worked with some of the more challenging kids there and we were working with kids with severe self-injury, working with kids with detached retinas, kids with severe pica, uh, you know, and everything else in between. So it was a, it was a fantastic learning experience. I learned... I worked for Advoserv for five years and I felt like I got like 15 years of experience crammed into these, you know, these five very fast years.

Mary: Right, right. So back in 2002 you became a board certified behavior analyst, and I know I was a certified in 2003, so I know that you were among the first 1000-ish behavior analysts, because I know what my BCBA number is an...

Matt: Yep! 755!

Mary: There you go! So, um, so what do you think are the differences between how you were trained and how the ABA students of today are trained and educated now? And what do you think are the key struggles or issues facing the newer BCBA's?

Matt: Well, it's night and day. I mean, my experiences were just by what I've shared already were very, very atypical than what's happening right now.

Mary: Yeah, with very much pros and real big names in the field, and hands-on, and in the classroom with them, in the lab with them. I mean it is really different. And

then, but okay, so, so now I, I don't know the stats, but most, most BCBA's are trained in online courses, I would imagine.

Matt: That's a great... yeah. Oh, man. Would it be great to get some... I'm sure the board has some information on that. That reminds me of...

Mary: Yeah, I'm sure there are stats. I mean I was trained that way. I was trained in a distance learning program through Penn State. So, um, so you just wrote a book on remote supervision of BCBA trainees. So why don't you tell us about your book and like some of the key points, um, that you found with your research?

Matt: Yeah. Um, probably about two years ago, Dr. Lisa Britton connected with me and she's like, hey, I do a lot of supervision, do a lot of supervision that's remote in nature, would love to come on the podcast and share my experiences about what works and things like that.

Matt: And I was like, cool, that's something that's very, very important, very valid these days, right? Especially given as you say, the, you know, uh, that the number of BCBA trainees who are obtaining their education in either online or some sort of hybrid program, so, and that was an experience kind of that was different than mine. So I said, sure, let's talk about it. And, uh, so she came on the show. It was a very well received podcast. We got lots of great feedback on it. Uh, and she basically, through her company, Britton Behavioral Consulting, does basically super... she does other behavior analysts activities, but she's, you know, she specializes in providing distance-based supervision.

Matt: And, uh, she had done some workshops and presentations at various conferences in distance based supervision, and again, these went over very, very well so, you know, she's made quite a name for herself in this area. And she reached out to me and said, look, you know, this publisher Elsevier has reached out to me and they want me to write a book on supervision, you know, can, can you help me write it? So, uh, one of the things I looked at it as kind of my job to do is to, is to add my two cents to it, but also to help Lisa share some of the really, really cool things she does as a supervisor.

Matt: So, um, you know, I kind of approached this as basically... I, personally speaking just for myself, not for Lisa, I don't think I'm God's gift to supervision. Right. I know there's a lot of wonderful supervisors out there. I'm sure there are people who can supervise circles around me. But I want to... again, I wanted to help Lisa kind of communicate some of the practices she's found very helpful. But I also wanted to, you know, I had my own ideas about supervision, mainly about things that I... I stepped back, and some of the chapters that I wrote were about more, I guess Metta topics, like should you supervise, you know?

Matt: The default perhaps for many, many people say, okay, I gotta get my BCBA and you know, maybe in a year or two out I'm going to start supervising people and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Or, my company is making me supervise people, you know, et cetera, et cetera. And so some of the, some of the content that I put in the book was meant to kind of tap the brakes a little bit, you know? And that's not to say people shouldn't supervise, far from it, but we need to be thoughtful about it. At least that's my point of view, you know?

Matt: Um, do you have the... do you literally have the bandwidth to supervise, right? Or are you so maximally booked out with the cases that you're currently working on, are you able to give that trainee your undivided attention and give them the help that they need? Because if you... what we don't... we have a responsibility that goes a couple of ways. Uh, it goes two ways in particular.

Matt: One, you have a responsibility to the trainee to give them the best experience as possible. We also have a responsibility to our fields, right? And so if we don't do good supervision and we put trainees out there that perhaps are less capable than they could be otherwise, and then that doesn't do behavior analysis and ultimately our... whatever clients that come from that, uh, any, any favors.

Matt: So I wanted to write about, you know, okay, if you're going to do supervision, here are the things you need to think about, right? And what are those things? Uh, you know, are you doing this as part of your job? If not, are you doing this as a side-gig? Well, what does that mean? Okay. Does that mean that you need to start an LLC? You know, does that mean you need to see a lawyer?

Matt: Uh, you know, and so I kind of go through some, yeah, I'm self-employed through my, my day job, Positive Behavioral Outcomes. So I'm not a business expert, but I've gone through the process of creating my own company and getting my own insurance and all that fun stuff. So I wanted to share that information to those who don't have that experience. And, um, you know, so I wrote a little bit about that. Um, we wrote about some of the nuts and bolts that you would need to provide supervision in terms of just logistical things like creating videos with vignettes of uh, various, uh, things that for your trainees to, uh, uh, to look at. So, um, you know, Lisa has a nice appendix that she wrote up all the videos you'd want to create, I guess you want to create kind of like a, uh, some sort of video that people can use to score for functional assessments and things along those lines.

Matt: One of the things we also felt strongly about is talking not just about the stuff that's on the task list. Because everyone says, we want to learn the task list, we want to learn the task list, we gotta pass the test, gotta pass the test, right? But what are some things that go beyond the task lists that are worthwhile imparting

on your trainees? So in that context, we wrote about, you know, just, just some thumbnail sketches but some just general ideas.

Matt: Okay, here are some other topics you're going to want to expose your trainees to that, that aren't on the current task list. So we talk about the Standard Celeration Chart, precision teaching, we talk about acceptance and commitment therapy, executive function, not a behavioral concept, but a concept that is everywhere. Especially if you work in schools. And if you don't speak that language, you are going to be not as effective as perhaps other people. And so what is that? What does executive function mean? How does that operationalize, where are some resources, what are some resources that you can find that would get you more up to speed? You know, direct instruction and curriculum-based measures and so on and so forth. So we have a chapter about that. Uh, we've got a chapter about, you know, using performance management with your trainees.

Mary: Where can people get the book? It's going to be available in April 2019. Is it going to be on Amazon or on a website or...

Matt: Yeah, it'll be available on Amazon and it'll be available on the Elsevier website as well. Uh, in fact, I think there's a discount on that website and I can send you both of those links for the show notes for this episode.

Mary: Okay, great. Great. Speaking of show notes, let's switch gears and talk about your podcast. As we said, you created your podcast called Behavioral Observations in 2016 so it's more than three years old. And, um, why and how did you get started with that?

Matt: This is my midlife crisis, Mary. So, you know, so I, yeah, we've talked a lot on and off about how old I am and, so, you know, I figured I've been doing the same thing. Well, you know, not doing the same thing, but I guess what I was trying to do was, uh, I was trying to figure out a way to share some of the lessons I've learned or to contribute some sort of content to younger practitioners mainly. Especially having observed the just massive growth in the field. You know, we're approaching, what, 35,000 BCBA's, right?

Mary: Right. And you, you know, both of us were among the first 1000-ish people. Um, and now we have 35,000 and, and so it's, it's massively exploded. And, and I, even though I took a distance learning program, I got heavily involved with the Pennsylvania Verbal Behavior Project and with Dr. Vince Carbone and Dr. Sundberg and, and a lot of the greats, you know, Dr. Jack Michael and Dr. Kubina. And so I was able to, even though I had a distance learning track and I had a master's degree in nursing administration, I was able to kind of get those experiences and that training from, from the greats too.

Mary: But I think that's getting harder and harder as the field grows. And I was just, was in a lucky spot, um, in a lot of ways. Like you were in a lucky spot with your mentors, so you wanted to get the word out to, to be more accessible and you saw the need. And I mean, there's hardly any autism podcasts. There's hardly any behavioral podcasts. There's becoming more and more, you know, Amanda Kelly just started a podcast and there are a couple of other ones that recently have cropped up and, but there's still, I mean, given the, you know, huge rate of autism and the huge need for this information, there are very few still podcasts, but yours is great, it started three years ago, and how many downloads do you have now?

Matt: Over a million.

Mary: Which is incredible. You almost always have a guest. You almost always do an interview style, but you did do at least one solo show that I actually listened to, and that was on school consultation. Um, is that going to be something that you incorporate more... solo shows?

Matt: Maybe. I got, uh, I got some, some... I got a lot of nice feedback. A lot of people messaged me with some very kind comments about that. And uh, yeah, I don't know. I was happy to be able to do it and I was talking about something that I, was kind of practicing what I preached if you will... or trying to...

Mary: So yeah, the solo show that you did was on 11 strategies for school consultation or something like that?

Matt: Yep. It was 11 tips for school consultation. Yeah. So a lot of us behavior analysts go into schools and basically ostracize ourselves by... In various ways. And then the next behavior analyst comes in has this kind of baggage to overcome that's not necessarily their fault. Right?

Matt: So it's kind of like the, uh, the cliché of the ugly American who goes to Paris and demands everyone speak English to them and, and uh, is as loud and rude and blah, blah, blah. You know, so I just tried to, you know, I just... it was funny, it kind of came about as, as a cancellation from another guest. Uh, I've been trying to put three episodes out a month and I had a guest cancel at the last minute, and I could have probably gotten away with just leaving that month with two episodes. I had some others scheduled a little bit later, but at the same time I figured, okay, should I... I've been kicking around the idea of doing a solo episode for awhile especially in the area school consultation, which is, you know, kind of my main day job. And so I just got out of... I went down to my printer, I pulled off a, you know, one of those white, the white piece of paper, the printer paper, and I just kind of made a list of like, you know, eight bullets. And then I kind of played

around with them and rearranged them for a bit and they got turned into 11 bullets and then I typed them real quick. And then, uh, well my, my kids were downstairs either watching Netflix or playing video games, I went up to my bedroom with my microphone and my digital recorder. I just did it all in one take. And, uh, so yeah, I dunno...

Mary: Yeah, it was really good. Actually, I listened to it on my way to New York City recently, and I was fascinated because, well, I've heard a lot of your interviews, which are great. So I was in school consultation from 2003 up until last year when I transitioned my last couple of clients. And, um, you know, I really felt a lot of your strategies, like, you know, not going in in the middle of a lesson, you know, not just walking in... barging in and interrupting things. And I mean, it's like that happens. And I can't say that I have not done that because it depends if it's your first visit if they know you're coming and they know you're coming around 10:30, it's like you're not going to stand at the door for 40 minutes, you know?

Matt: Mary, you wanna know a secret? I have made every one of those mistakes. I learned those... those tips came from me actually doing the opposite of that. And I still do them today from, you know, to this day, right.

Mary: Because you know, you're being paid to go in and observe and it's like if you're, you know, five minutes after the bell rings, it's like, you're not going to waste that time and money. But, um, it was interesting because one of your points was that we have, as behavior analysts, and I know there's more than behavioral analysts listening, that we have an ethical code to follow and we can't be, you know, oh, well the school district's paying and they want full inclusion or they want not to send the child to a private school or whatever they want or don't want, we can't let whoever's paying us, whether it's the advocate working with the parent and a lawyer at, you know, I go in as an independent evaluator, I can't let their wishes control what's in my report.

Mary: And it was funny because I got to New York City and I was at a workshop there, and I met a woman and she used to be in the ABA field and she's like, I took all the coursework to be a BCBA and I never sat for the exam and everything. And I, and I'd just listened to your podcast literally like two hours before I met her. And I'm like, oh, why, why didn't you, you know? And she's like because I went into this IEP meeting, I was working either contracted or working for a school district, and she said they wanted me to change my recommendation and change a report. And, and they were like, adamant, and I was like, no, I'm not doing that. And she said, I gave my recommendation as is, and I went in and I resigned and that was it.

Mary: And it's like, wow, that's terrible that we lost a good potential BCBA from the field. But I do think there's a lot of ethical dilemmas that behavior analysts, and teachers and speech pathologists, face when you're, you know, competing for whose agenda. And it really is all about what's appropriate and best for the child. And should all other opinions or budgets and all that should be secondary, which sometimes is okay.

Matt: I mean yeah, according to, you know, obviously our code of conduct and, uh, you know, what the... the client is, you know, drives everything essentially. And, uh, regardless of who is the, uh, yeah. Um, so yeah, that's, that's, yeah, that was a good, um, I'm glad that one resonated with you. Yeah. You know, so we, we get ourselves in the situation sometimes when you just have to kind of call a spade a spade.

Matt: There are probably ways to do that, you know, kind of tactfully, you know, so someone's running around saying everyone's untrained, no one knows anything about it. You know, there's a way to do it, you know, kind of wily or, and there's a way to do it that's perhaps a little bit more smooth. Uh, you know, that like, hey, you know, this is what this child is going to maximally benefit from. Um, you know, and then you can list off the qualifications or characteristics of, you know, whatever the, you know, the setting requirements are, whether that's materials, staff training, etc.

Mary: Yes. Or staff support. So, um, one of the goals for the, for my podcast is for each child... To give strategies so each child can reach their fullest potential, be as independent, as safe, and as happy as possible. But I also want the parents and professionals listening to be less stressed and lead happier lives. So do you have any advice for professionals or parents to help them, you know, be less stressed? Like any advice for self-care or ways which parents and professionals can collaborate more and advocate for the same goals?

Matt: Yeah. So let's, let's tackle this self-care one, cause I have a lot of thoughts on that. And one of the things that I stumbled upon, uh, at a very particularly stressful point in my life is, uh, we mentioned already it's the area of study called acceptance and commitment therapy. And...

Mary: And you have a couple podcasts on that, too: acceptance and commitment therapy.

Matt: Yeah, yeah we have several. Yeah, yeah.

Mary: Yeah. Um, so, and I actually don't know much about acceptance and commitment therapy, but I know that through listening to some of your podcasts on it, I've become more aware and, and I do think that I need to bring on some

guests and talk about it more. But why don't you tell our listeners what that is and how that relates to self-care, cause I think it absolutely does.

Matt: Sure. I am not an expert in ACT. Uh, so I will do my, my kind of a thumbnail sketch of it, which, you know, if you are an ACT expert listening to this, you might be screaming at your phone or what have you. So just bear that in mind.

Matt: But the general idea is that ACT, you tend to work on a handful of skills that, that lead to something called psychological flexibility. Now as... The behavior analysts listening to this might hear that and say, whoa, that sounds like this big, you know, kind of honk and hypothetical construct. Uh, but which, when you look at the six skills that, that lead to this state of flexibility or behavioral flexibility, perhaps it is, I think Jonathan Tarbox might say is that, um, you know, these are a handful of skills that can be more closely operationalized.

Matt: And so the six skills are basically, uh: acceptance, which is basically the willingness to have an experience, thoughts, feelings, and you know, other types of private events that, that, that may be uncomfortable. The willingness to have those, and experience those things without trying to push them away.

Matt: Um, present moment awareness, which is basically kind of what it sounds like, which is kind of paying attention to what's going on now, not worrying about tomorrow, not mulling over what happened yesterday.

Matt: Um, diffusion, which is, um, you know, boy, it's kind of... Some of these are a little more difficult to describe, but you know, how do you, how do you use language? What I'm saying language, I'm talking about the language that's going on between our ears. How do you treat that language lightly? So it doesn't bother you in a way that's disproportionate?

Matt: In other words, how do you know, uh, we can often times repeat scripts in our heads, uh, that are, that are not helpful, you know? So, um, I was talking to a colleague this morning for example, and she just went to, she had what I call like, the best week ever. She went to the behavior analysis certification board as a subject matter expert. And then she went to WIBA conference and uh, you know, she was talking about all the cool things that these people were doing and all these events and whatnot.

Matt: And there's, sometimes, you know, depending on how you're built, sometimes there's this kind of like the negative comparison that you could make. You know, it's like, wow, these people are all doing amazing things. I suck as a clinician. I suck as a behavior, you know, so it's that kind of negative, you know, kind of self-talk, and if you really buy into that and you repeat that a lot then that starts to get fused with your behavior, you could be in trouble.

Matt: Whereas you get a diffusion, you know, exercise might be like, oh, there's me just saying I'm, you know, playing the I suck song again, haha, it's not funny. So it's kind of like playing with language very, very loosely. I had a Russ Harris on my podcast, one of the, one of the many shows we've done on ACT, and he talks about fusion quite, he's got some really neat examples of that. Um, but even something as a technique, as silly as repeating, I suck a hundred times, you know, by the 15th time, it's going to sound pretty boring and it'll, it'll kinda not have any meaning behind it.

Matt: So there's diffusion, self as contacts, which is kind of like a perspective taking a process, you know, seeing yourself from somewhere else... someone else's perspective. Um, it's a little more complicated than that, but that's, that's probably good enough for the, you know, this context. Um, let's see. Um, committed action only talks about values first... identifying value. So, you know, trying to determine, what are the big things that are important in your life? You know... so let's say one of the big things that you, you know, you've identified as a value is you know, is being a good spouse, right? What does that mean? Or having a close relationship with your spouse or your children or what have you.

Matt: So these are things, these aren't goals per se. These are, these aren't things you can have or hold or attain, right? Same thing with like me. Okay, well I have a value. You know, someone might have the value of living a healthy lifestyle. The next skill is the committed action. Those, that, that kind of interact with values quite nicely. So the committed actions happen. Okay. What, what are the the very concrete steps that you're going to take to live a life and values directed way? So if you have a value of living a healthy lifestyle, the committed action step is okay, well, I'm going to get my butt to the gym, you know, three or four times a week, you know, going to eat, you know, lean meats with veggies and blah, blah, blah.

Matt: You know if my value is having a, um, you know, a close relationship, close intimate relationship with people I care about the committed action step is, is to stop staring at my phone during dinner, you know, and to engage in conversation or you know, to, to schedule specific outings with people to do stuff that, you know, that foster connection and so on and so forth. So I think I might've left one out, but I think those, anyway, you do all those things, I guess, you're gonna, you know, oftentimes going to be able to, uh, have a lot less stress in your life but that's not going to make the stressful things go away. Um, but you, you can...

Mary: So your thinking and your perspective on those stressful events can lessen and you can, I actually think there are, I know there are resources on ACT, there's ACT for parents of children with autism, I believe. There's ACT for, uh, you know,

acceptance and commitment therapy for children with high functioning autism. I do end up, you know, most of my clients are, well I don't have any clients anymore, but most of my work is, revolves around kids that are within VB-MAPP level one, two or three, so they have language ability of a four-year-old or less. And I think I've sent many people to your podcasts were, where you have some podcasts on executive functioning and the ACT, which is acceptance and commitment therapy and um, the Peak Assessment, which I tend to use after the VB-MAPP and you know, for those higher skills. So I do think that there's a lot for, not only for parents and professionals in terms of ACT but there's a lot of potential use for ACT with higher language kids as well. So I would really encourage people...

Matt: Oh yeah, yeah, I mean, Mark Dixon, he's been on the podcast a couple of times, uh, he has two wonderful curricula out there. One is called ACT for Children With Autism and Emotional Challenges. And the other is Aim that he co-wrote with a Dana Paliliunas Accept, Identify, and Move. Um, the first one, it was written mainly for kids with, you know, very, very highly verbal kids on the spectrum. Not necessarily the ones that have the profile that you described a minute ago. Uh, and then the AIM is geared towards, uh, it's almost like a, it's a three-tiered type of intervention, so, you know, there's some schools that I'm talking with that, you know, I'm encouraging them to apply this almost universally with some of the lower intense interventions, you know, can you say over the loudspeaker in the morning, hey, kids, if you're worried about tomorrow or thinking about yesterday, you can't enjoy today, you know, uh, go out there and have an awesome day.

Matt: Right. You know, saying something like that at morning meeting or whatever, it can be a universal intervention, you know.

Mary: To be more positive. Yeah. That's awesome. Yeah.

Matt: Yeah, yeah. I mean, and so that would, and that works on the skill of, you know, present moment awareness and there might be another kind of pithy statement that speaks to values or speaks to self as context or speaks to diffusion. So, uh, and then there's more intense activities and things like that for someone for like kind of tier two and tier three levels of intervention.

Mary: Yeah. I do plan on expanding my podcast too to get some of these experts on, because even though it's not my expertise, I definitely see the value of learning, um, all we can about how to help everybody reach their fullest potential and live their happiest life.

Matt: Yeah you know, the fun thing about interviewing people, Mary, real quick, is that you don't have to be the expert. That's how I, you know, you have to know how to email people or call them. So.

Mary: Yeah, yeah. Which is great. So how can people follow you and listen to your podcast and get more information?

Matt: I'm pretty much everywhere you can find the podcast. So that's you know, Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify...

Mary: And the podcast is called...

Matt: The Behavioral Observations Podcast with Matt Cicoria.

Mary: Okay. And is it behavioralobservations.com?

Matt: Yup, behavioralobservations.com. And if you click the tab that says "start here", it lists all the different places where you can listen to the podcast. But long story short, the podcast, it's the Behavioral Observations Podcast with Matt Cicoria, it can be found basically wherever you listen to podcasts, whether it's Apple Podcast, Stitcher Radio, Spotify, and all other podcast outlets like that. You can also connect with me on social media. I am at Behavioral Observations pretty much almost everywhere, except for Twitter because of space limitations, like I couldn't do at behavioral observations there, so I am at Behaviorpodcast. So feel free to follow me on social media and if you have any questions or any comments or anything like that and you can shoot me a direct message.

Mary: Great. Well, thank you so much for taking your time today to talk with me, and I wish you the best of luck with your podcast. Thanks again for introducing me to your, to the podcast way of life, and, um, look forward to connecting with you again in the near future. So thanks again for your time.

Matt: Oh, and thank you Mary, and best of luck with the, with this podcast. I've listened to a number of episodes already and it's going to be a hit.

Mary: Great. Thank you. Have a great one.

Thanks for listening to the Turn Autism Around podcast with Dr. Mary Barbera. For more information, visit marybarbera.com.