**MY LIFE AS AN EPIC WIN: PROVIDING TRANSITIONAL SUPPORT TO YOUTH DIAGNOSED WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER – A PILOT STUDY**

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**Objectives**

Individuals diagnosed with high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HF-ASD) face a number of challenges during the transition to adulthood. Decreased service availability, as well as persistent challenges with self-esteem, anxiety, and self-determination can lead to poor educational attainment, underemployment, dependence on parents, and poor relationship outcomes (Barnhill, 2007; Glennon, 2001; Howlin, 2000; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). While the majority of typically developing individuals experience enhanced well-being, decreased depressive symptomatology, and increased self-esteem following a successful transition, many individuals diagnosed with HF-ASD do not have the supports and services necessary to experience a positive transition (Arnett, 2007). As such, it has been argued that enhanced service provision during this critical life stage could result in better adult outcomes for this population. The current study served as a pilot project evaluating the effects of a transition to adulthood program on self-determination and self-esteem for five youth diagnosed with a HF-ASD. It was hypothesized that there would be an increase in self-esteem and self-determination following completion of the course.

**Methods**

Five youth ages17-22 *(M* = 19) diagnosed with HF-ASD took part in a transition to adulthood curriculum. *My Life as an Epic Win* is a twelve-week curriculum designed to teach the skills needed for a successful transition into adulthood, including problem solving, self-determination, goal setting, and goal attainment. Early on in the *Epic Win* course, participants’ limiting beliefs regarding themselves and/or their HF-ASD diagnosis are challenged, emphasizing that thoughts and beliefs need not hold you back from designing and acting on your ideal life goals. Throughout the course, participants are challenged to envision and develop their Epic Life plan, taking a more self-directed approach, to enhance self-determination. The areas of relationships, work and careers, lifelong learning and independence are the core areas of focus, with long term goals being set in each area, along with short-term S.M.AR.T. goals (that are simple, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound). Participants then learn to design action plans, problem solve, and take the necessary steps toward each goal that they have created.

The course’s effect on self-esteem and self-determination was evaluated through a qualitative analysis of a structured pre and post-course interview, as well as through pre and post-course administration of the AIR Self-Determination Scale (AIR-SDS).

**Results**

Results from the interview suggested that participants talked about themselves in qualitatively different ways, indicating more personal strengths, fewer personal weaknesses, and more self-affirming beliefs following completion of the *Epic Win* curriculum. Although all participants demonstrated increases in self-determination on the AIR-SDS, the differences were not significant, likely due to the small sample size of the study. Qualitative analysis of the interview, however, indicated that participants viewed themselves as causal agents of change within their own life after the course.

**Discussion**

The results indicate that participants talked about themselves in qualitatively different ways following participation in the *My Life as an Epic Win* curriculum. The need for innovative intervention methodology within this underserved population will be discussed, as will the need for future research into the curriculum. Limitations of the study will be addressed.

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