

FASD AND MENTAL HEALTH: REFRAMING BEHAVIOUR

The following table was adapted from the [Moving Towards FASD-Informed Care in Substance Use Treatment \(2022\)](#)

Areas of challenge for people with FASD may include executive functioning, language, memory and attention, emotional regulation, and adaptive functioning. The following table gives examples of behaviours and actions you may see as a mental health professional, why you may be seeing this behaviour, and potential responses. This is not an exhaustive list but more of an exercise in recognizing why someone's behaviour may be what it is and how reframing that behaviour may support adaptation in practices.

Executive Functioning

What I Might See	Why I May See It	Potential Response
Not showing up to appointments or being late to appointments	Challenges with memory and/or difficulty with organizational skills	Time management assistance (e.g., reminders prior to appointment, visual schedules)
Unable to develop goals for therapy	Challenges with planning and problem solving	Adjusting expectations for therapy, developing concrete and realistic goals relationally
Fidgeting, staring out of the window, seemingly not paying attention	Challenges with attention (e.g., sustained attention) and executive functioning (e.g., self-monitoring, task initiation)	Regularly checking-in, breaking down work into smaller tasks, change structure of session, include breaks for movement

Language

What I Might See	Why I May See It	Potential Response
Saying they are going to do something but not doing it or agreeing with a plan but not following through	Difficulty planning/identifying barriers, communicating and attending to and processing what is being spoken about	Simple linear instructions, comprehension check-ins, using examples, present in multiple modalities

Difficulty and frustration when completing written or hands-on work	Challenges with motor skills (e.g., handwriting, drawing), difficulty with abstract language/ideas	Additional time and support, repeat instructions (multiple modalities, comprehension check-in, adapting practices to the person's abilities)
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Memory and Attention

What I Might See	Why I May See It	Potential Response
Not remembering what was talked about in previous sessions	Challenges with long-term recall and/or attention difficulties	Work positively around obstacles with memory, avoiding punishment or creating embarrassment (e.g., repetition, summary from previous session)
Trouble remembering and applying new information even after it was presented	Challenges with transferring new learnings/information into action without applied practice	Repetition, breaking tasks/learnings into small tangible chunks, presenting information visually, completing tasks together
Difficulty being able to tell a story sequentially or in order	Challenges with memory and/or communication and language	Holding patience for clients, leaving space for them to express themselves, asking probing clarifying questions

Emotional Responses

What I Might See	Why I May See It	Potential Response
Strong reactions (e.g., sadness, anger, aggression) when confronted about behaviour	Challenges with managing stress, previous experience of abuse/trauma, difficulty regulating emotions	Identify fear provoking situations, examine environmental sensory modifications, develop safety plans

Inappropriate questions or responses	Differences in social communication, difficulties with boundaries	Kindly setting clear and concrete boundaries with clients (many people with FASD appreciate a kind but straight forward approach)
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Adaptive Functioning

What I Might See	Why I May See It	Potential Response
Not engaging in self-care behaviours (e.g., showering, eating, etc.)	Challenges with adaptive skills and/or difficulties with memory	Asking if the individual wants support developing skills (e.g., cooking), set reasonable goals, engage in communication about daily routines
Difficulty securing income and/or appropriate housing	Challenges with adaptive functioning, systemic impacts, mental health challenges, other comorbid diagnoses	Connecting individual to other resources, facilitating applications, using step-by-step instructions

Understanding the brain-based differences that may occur in individuals with FASD can create a better understanding of people and an ability to reframe presenting behaviours.