

Building Conceptual Thinking in Autistic Young Women (16+)

A reflective toolkit for clinicians, carers, and mentors

Guided by You Therapy

Why Conceptual Thinking Matters

Conceptual thinking helps young people connect ideas, recognise patterns, and understand the 'why' behind experiences — not just the 'what.' For autistic young women, this skill often grows best through safety, curiosity, and relevance — when learning feels meaningful and connected to real life.

1. Theme Linking (Beyond the Literal)

Goal: Expand thinking beyond facts to patterns and meaning.

Activity: Choose a current topic or show she enjoys (e.g. Heartstopper, Stranger Things, Gilmore Girls). Ask: 'What's this really about?' Example: Stranger Things → 'Bravery, friendship, fear of difference.' Discuss what connects the characters, not just what happens.

Why it helps: Encourages recognising universal themes and emotional concepts.

2. The Common Thread Discussion

Goal: Build the ability to group ideas conceptually.

Activity: Give 3–4 abstract ideas (e.g., trust, apology, forgiveness). Ask: 'What's the thread that ties these together?' Invite her to find real-life or story-based examples.

Why it helps: Strengthens abstract reasoning and flexible linking between concepts.

3. Self-Reflection Prompts (Thinking About Thinking)

Goal: Develop meta-cognition — awareness of how she thinks.

Activity: Journaling or discussion prompts:- When I'm learning something new, what helps me 'get it'?- What kind of thinker am I — logical, creative, detail-focused?- How do I know when I really understand something?

Why it helps: Builds self-awareness and ownership of learning style.

4. Perspective Swap Conversations

Goal: Grow empathy and mental flexibility.

Activity: Choose a real-world situation (from news, social media, or personal life). Ask: 'What might each person be thinking or needing in this moment?' Explore how different perspectives can all make sense at once.

Why it helps: Encourages nuanced understanding and emotional reasoning.

5. Symbolic Metaphors

Goal: Strengthen symbolic and abstract thinking.

Activity: Explore personal metaphors through art or journaling:- If anxiety was weather, what would it be?- If confidence had a colour or texture, what would it look like?- What image or song feels like 'belonging' to you?

Why it helps: Builds comfort with abstract language and emotional concepts.

6. Concept Mapping

Goal: Help her visualise connections between ideas.

Activity: Pick a topic she's passionate about (e.g., advocacy, independence, identity). Draw a mind map with key ideas branching out — 'identity → values → boundaries → relationships.' Use colour-coding for emotional vs practical connections.

Why it helps: Turns complex thinking into something visual and concrete.

7. Analogy Practice (Everyday Abstracts)

Goal: Support abstract linking between different experiences.

Activity: Try phrases like:- 'Learning a new skill is like planting a garden...'- 'Setting a boundary is like locking your phone when you need focus.' Ask her to create her own analogies for personal experiences.

Why it helps: Builds symbolic and creative reasoning.

8. Big Picture Reflection

Goal: Move from detail-focused to integrative thinking.

Activity: After watching a documentary, reading a post, or attending a class, ask:- 'What's the key message or takeaway here?'- 'How does this connect to something else you know?'- 'Why might this matter in real life?'

Why it helps: Supports synthesis — the ability to connect and apply ideas across contexts.

9. Real-World Meaning Making

Goal: Help translate abstract ideas into life relevance.

Activity: Discuss real-world 'concepts in action' — e.g., fairness, autonomy, resilience. Ask:- 'What does fairness look like at school/work?'- 'When do you feel most independent?'- 'What helps you bounce back after something tough?'

Why it helps: Encourages generalisation and real-world integration.

10. Guided Reflection Questions

Goal: Encourage inner curiosity and flexible awareness.

Invite her to explore:- 'What am I learning about myself lately?'- 'What helps me feel seen and understood?'- 'How has my thinking changed over time?'- 'What do I believe now that I didn't a year ago?'

Why it helps: Strengthens insight, identity formation, and conceptual self-reflection.

Guided by You Reflection

Conceptual thinking isn't about changing how she thinks — it's about giving her the tools to express and connect the depth that's already there.

