

It is completely normal to feel stress and anxiety. Caring for or supporting a person with autism can be a big responsibility, especially in a world that is not always designed to accommodate them. This information sheet gives strategies to parents and carers on how to manage their stress and anxiety.

Signs of stress and anxiety

If you are very anxious or stressed, you might experience some of the following symptoms:

- Headaches
- Sleep problems
- Increased blood pressure
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Changing eating habits
- Restlessness
- Nail biting
- Forgetfulness
- Indecisiveness
- Declining productivity

If you feel like you are getting stressed or becoming anxious, the following strategies may help you to handle the situation you are in. Don't worry if you don't feel like you can do everything. Pick and choose what you think you can manage to do, and take things one step at a time.

1. **Stop:** When you start to feel overwhelmed, stop. You could even say STOP out loud and address the negative thoughts you are having. Breathe deeply, completely fill your diaphragm with air and hold it for 8 seconds, then let the air out very slowly. Reflect on the situation, work out which of your thoughts and responses are rational and which are irrational, and discard irrational thoughts that are not helping you to handle the problem. Then choose the best solution, having given yourself time to process your options.
2. **Identify negative thoughts:** Establish which thoughts are causing you stress. What kinds of things are you thinking about that are making you stressed or anxious, or damaging your self-esteem?
3. **Challenge the negative thoughts:**
 - a) **"Should" statements:** "Should" statements can cause guilt and feelings of inadequacy. Try replacing "should" with "want". Instead of "I should have been able to finish that", try saying "I wanted to finish that today". Instead of "I must get the shopping done today", try saying "I would like to get the shopping done today". Sometimes events are outside of your control, even more so when you have other people to take care of. Allow yourself some flexibility and give yourself a break if your plan has to change.

- b) **All or nothing thoughts:** Thoughts like “I couldn’t get Johnny on the school bus this morning, I am a terrible parent” or “I got angry at Johnny today, I am rubbish as a mother” are all or nothing thoughts. They can make you feel very down and unhappy. You must remember that if something goes wrong, it does not mean that you are a failure or have let anyone down. You should allow for things to not always go right.
- c) **Overgeneralisation:** Confront ideas like “Johnny has had another meltdown, this never happens with his dad” and “I forgot my keys again, this always happens to me”. Are they really true? Has Johnny never had a meltdown with his dad? If the answer is yes, then why is that? Does he spend less time with his dad, or does dad react in a different way? Try to learn from your answers when you are feeling calm.
- d) **Rejecting positivity:** Positive thoughts and kind words are good and compliments are always nice, so accept them when you get them! Avoid thinking “She said she was in awe of how I stay on top of everything, but she was just being polite” or “They said Johnny was a beautiful little boy, but they were just being patronising”.
4. **Help your body:** Stress can have a major impact on your body and on your health so it is very important to make time to take good care of yourself.
- a) **Exercise:** Exercise makes you feel healthier and releases various chemicals that make you feel happy and more relaxed, as well as boosting your overall energy levels. It will also help to lower your blood pressure, and physically tire you out, which will help you to sleep.
- b) **Eat healthily:** Eating healthily keeps your body in good working order with a strong immune system. This means that you will be less susceptible to physical symptoms of stress as well as giving you more energy and brainpower to handle issues, preventing the build-up of stress.
- c) **Sleep properly:** Sleep plays a vital part in keeping us feeling healthy and strong. Getting plenty of sleep isn’t always possible but you should make sure you give yourself the best opportunity. Keeping the room dark, avoiding electronic devices like televisions, computers and mobile phones before bed and having a relaxing bedtime routine to help you prepare for sleep, are all great ways to promote healthy sleep.
- d) **Relax and breathe:** When you are feeling stressed, take a step back and breathe slowly to help you regain control of your body and your thoughts. You can also extend this to meditation or yoga.

Mini stress busters

- Never worry alone – talk to someone you trust to get a rational perspective.
- Get the facts – don’t rely on your imagination and negative thoughts.
- Make a plan – adapt it using any new experiences to guide you.
- Treat yourself for your successes – give yourself a break and reward yourself.