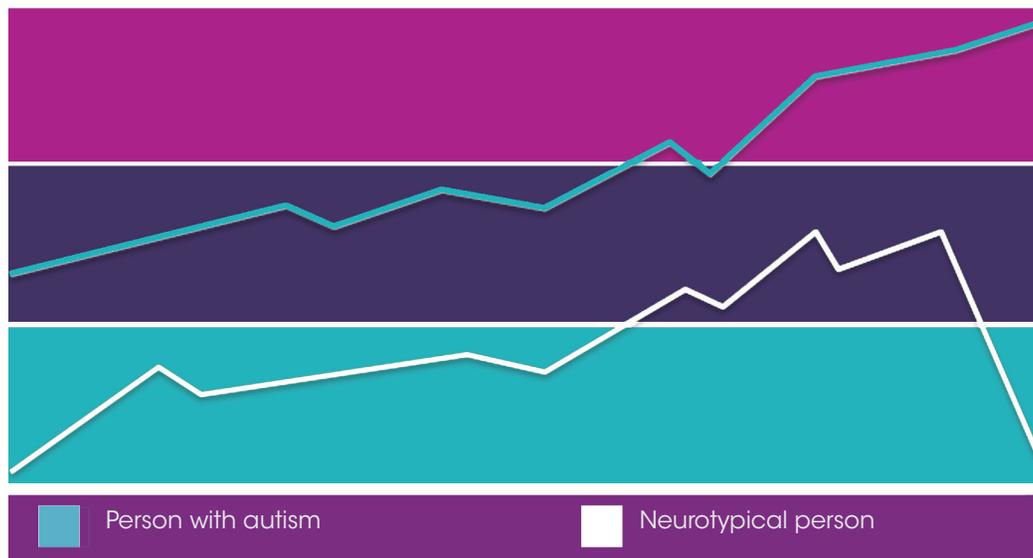


We all suffer stress, to different degrees and levels of severity and we all get anxious sometimes. However, neurotypical people (people who do not have autism), realise when they are becoming stressed or anxious and take positive steps to relieve this. When we wake up in the morning we generally start at a very low level of stress and this may rise through the day as stressful events occur. However, a person with autism starts with a much higher level and this means that they may reach crisis point more quickly than most people.



Anxiety is very common in people with autism. Around 9.2% of the general population suffers with an anxiety disorder of some kind, whereas, in people with autism the number rises to something more like 30%. These numbers only account for those people diagnosed with an anxiety disorder but many more people, particularly those with autism, suffer with heightened stress and anxiety levels and this has a significant impact on their quality of life. Anxiety can be caused by a huge range of triggers and these will depend entirely on the individual, their likes and dislikes and their past experiences.

## Sensory Issues

Many people with autism have sensory issues. This means that they are over-sensitive or under-sensitive to some kinds of sensory input. Sensory input is anything that is interpreted by our physical senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, proprioception and vestibular. Proprioception is the sense of knowing where we are in space and being aware of our body, difficulties with proprioception may include not knowing how much pressure to use when holding objects and bumping into objects. The vestibular sense helps us to understand where our body is in relation to gravity and problems with this may result in balance problems and vertigo.

Problems with interpreting information from each of the senses can increase stress, as the world is harder to make sense of and to understand. Sensory issues may also be very intrusive for a person, particularly if they are over-sensitive to the things around them such as smells and sounds. For some people, their sensitivities are so extreme that such things as bright lights, loud noises or strong smells may be physically painful to experience. These difficulties can make everyday life considerably more difficult and therefore stressful and fear of these triggers could go on to cause people severe anxiety about encountering these environments.

Struggling with these sensory issues can also make it considerably more difficult for people with autism to relax once they are already stressed. Loud noises and bright lights, for example, may make it difficult for somebody to think clearly enough to work out what they need to do to reduce their stress. Even if the solution is as simple as leaving the situation, the person may be too distracted and distressed to process this.

Sense	Hypersensitivity (over-sensitive) Behaviours	Hypo-sensitivity (under-sensitive) Behaviours
Sight	Covering eyes, dislikes sunlight/bright lights	Stares at objects and people, uses hands to explore items as well as vision
Smell	Wears the same clothes over and over, dislikes perfumes	Smells objects and people, seeks out strong smells
Taste	Fussy eating, gags easily	Eats everything, mouths objects
Touch	Does not like to be touched, dislikes messy play or activities	Seeks out deep pressure hugs and holds, fails to notice injury
Hearing	Covers ears, hears sounds not noticed by others (e.g. fluorescent lights buzzing)	Bangs objects and doors, likes loud places like crowds or busy roads
Vestibular	Moves slowly and cautiously, dislikes bending	Crashes into things, likes to spin or swing
Proprioception	Struggles to manipulate small objects, turns whole body to look at something	Appears floppy and leans on things, applies too much force in everyday tasks

You should establish what sensory issues the person with autism has and then find ways to make things easier for them. For example, it may help for them to wear sunglasses or noise-cancelling headphones or to use a swing or a sensory room. Once you have started to help the person to cope with their sensory needs then they may start to experience a lower level of everyday stress and be better equipped to cope, thereby reducing their long-term anxieties.

## Change and Transition

Most people find change and transition difficult and there are lots of big changes that we go through during our lives that may cause significant stress, such as moving house, changing schools or starting a new job. However, this is much more pronounced in people with autism.

Autism is characterised by rigid thought and a need for routine and predictability. This is both a result of anxiety and a cause. Even when a person is able to follow their usual routine, they may feel anxious about something disrupting this or preventing them from following the routine in the future. This can then cause anxiety for the future as well as reinforcing the person's need to follow a routine.

Any kind of change, even seemingly small ones, could cause great distress and discomfort to a person with autism. This may be a new support worker, a different shampoo or even a new mug. Changes that are made or that happen to a person with autism take away predictability and familiarity and this can make them feel vulnerable and scared and this is a source of great stress.

Transition tends to refer to specific, life-changing events such as starting at a new school, puberty or losing a loved one. These can be extremely difficult times for a person with autism and should be dealt with carefully and sensitively. The key is to understand the person and learn what helps them most and what their specific concerns are. This will help them to make sense of the changes and feel safe and supported throughout.

Sometimes parents and carers can reinforce bad behaviour by giving punishments that the person with autism enjoys. For example, if a brother lashes out at his little sister because he is overwhelmed by a situation, then his parents send him to his room. Next time he is overwhelmed, he knows he can quickly remove himself from the situation by lashing out at his sister.

The best way to ease a person's anxiety about change and transition is to provide some kind of predictability and consistency and support them to understand what is happening and what will happen next. Some questions that it is helpful to have an answer to, are: What is the person going to be doing and what is expected of them? How long will they be doing this for? What will they be doing next? When can they do something that they want to do?

If the person is repeating questions and phrases then it is likely that they are seeking a predictable response from you, they are not trying to annoy you and you should try to offer a reassuringly predictable response. You can also support the person by offering them plenty of time to prepare for a transition between different activities. It is better to tell the person 15, 10 and 5 minutes before you need them to start a new task, rather than expecting them to make the transition straight away.

## Communication

Some people with autism struggle to communicate. This may be because they are non-verbal, limited verbally or have reduced verbal abilities when stressed. This can cause the person great stress as they struggle to put across their thoughts and emotions effectively. Some individuals also have processing delays and so you should be careful to speak clearly and allow plenty of time for the person to respond. If the person is very stressed then it is best to address this before attempting to have a conversation.

Taking things literally may also mean that a person feels excluded from the meaning of a conversation, as they don't know how to interpret what is being said. This can cause stress and anxiety when the person is not sure that they fully understand what is going on around them, concerned that they are missing meaning.

## Social Anxiety

People with autism can have trouble with communication and social understanding and this can make social situations very challenging and stressful. Most people with autism struggle to read the body language and facial expressions of other people and therefore struggle to understand the motives of other in a given situation. This also leads to the possibility of making potentially embarrassing social errors and means that people with autism may struggle to make and keep friends.

It can be difficult to understand social rules because they are so flexible and applied differently throughout a person's life. For example, there are different rules for children and adults and so new rules need to be learned when a child becomes an adult. Sometimes it can also be unclear to a person with autism, who is a friend and who is a stranger since often the main distinction is an unspoken one and this is very difficult to quantify. A need for predictability and rigidity of thought can leave a person with autism feeling very confused by complex, changeable social rules. Furthermore, this lack of understanding can leave the person open to bullying and abuse thereby causing significant distress and, potentially, anxiety.

All of this means that navigating the neurotypical social world can be very stressful and uncomfortable. This may also become more extreme in some people, leading to social anxiety, avoidance of social situations and potentially agoraphobia and other mental health problems.

We can support people with autism by being clear and direct with our social rules and not drawing unnecessary distinctions between people and situations or at least keeping these to a minimum. We can also help to guide the person by explaining situations they do not understand and especially situations where they may have made an error and caused offense, do not take this personally and help the person to understand what went wrong. We should also try to provide an escape route, which means a way for the person to get out of a situation if it becomes unbearably stressful.

Some people find interacting with others extremely distressing and even painful. If a person is caused extreme stress then we should support them to spend plenty of time to themselves and not force company on them.

## Mental Health

Mental health problems seem to be more common in people with autism, than in the general population. People who experience the high levels of stress and anxiety that people with autism do are more prone to mental health difficulties. Mental health problems, in turn, can cause extremes of stress and anxiety. It is important that people with autism are

supported to find healthy outlets for their stress and anxiety and are able to deal with these appropriately. If you are at all concerned you should encourage, or if appropriate take, the person to see their GP.

Mental Health Issue	Possible Causes
<b>Obsessive Compulsive Disorder</b>	Need for routine and consistency, fear of germs or contamination
<b>Social Anxiety Disorder</b>	Lack of understanding in social situations, repeated lack of success in past social situations
<b>Generalised Anxiety Disorder</b>	Excessive worrying and inability to cope appropriately with stress
<b>Panic Disorder</b>	Stress levels that are high enough to cause regular panic attacks or episodes
<b>Agoraphobia</b>	Fear of sensory issues occurring or social anxiety
<b>Eating Disorders</b>	Need for routine and control over surroundings
<b>Oppositional Defiant Disorder</b>	Resistance to change, rigid thinking, lack of understanding of consequences or social compliance
<b>Depression</b>	Consistently high levels of stress and anxiety leading to a loss of hope or motivation

## Behaviours of Concern

People with autism generally operate at a much higher level of stress than people in the general population. Imagine the feeling of waking up on a day when you know you have a job interview. This is one way of understanding the stress that people with autism may be under, except that they experience this every day.

This can lead to challenging behaviour as the person struggles to cope with their stress levels. Behaviour like this should be seen as communication and you should ask yourself, what is the person getting from this? If you find a pattern in the behaviour that suggests there is a particular trigger for this person's stress then you can attempt to eradicate that to reduce the person's stress and therefore the behaviour.

Some people with autism say that their first reaction to a highly stressed situation is to feel angry. This is often anger directed towards themselves but is also frequently directed towards the person they are with or that supports them. They may feel that the person has let them down by not protecting them from the stress that they are feeling. But many of those same people also say that they react against the people they love because they know that they are safe with those people and they will not reject them for behaving in a way that helps them to cope. If somebody is particularly angry or stressed it is important to give them plenty of time to calm down and not take anything they say personally.

## How to manage stress and anxiety

It is extremely important to keep calm and quiet when supporting somebody who is highly stressed. This will ensure that you are a consistent, safe presence that will help the person to feel safe and therefore begin to relax. If that person trusts you and you are worried then this may make them feel less secure and more anxious.

You should always remember that the person with autism may be unable to act appropriately and your approach should be to comfort and reassure them to help them to regain control of their emotions and fears. This is as opposed to attempting to control and suppress the anxiety as this is likely to make things escalate.

Many people with autism need predictability and routine and they struggle to remain calm when they are not sure of what will be happening in the future. It can be useful to write things down to give them a guide of what is expected. You could use a dry wipe board to go in their room to help them to plan their time. If the person is non-verbal, it is vital that they have some communication system and are allowed to use it properly. This will help them to express themselves and their frustrations and anxieties.

If a person has a particular "stim" or repetitive movement that helps them to feel calm then you should support them in this. "Stimming" is a coping mechanism and is a good sign that the person is attempting to self-soothe. If the person

engages in a dangerous or inappropriate "stim" then work out what they are getting from this and try to find a more suitable way for them to reach the same aim.

Sometimes distraction can be a helpful technique. You may be able to remove a person from a stressful situation for long enough for them to recharge and return. It may also help for the person to listen to their favourite music or use a comfort object that they carry with them to remind them that they are safe. This may be particularly useful to help people to reduce the impact of sensory issues.

### Top Tips

- Preparation will allow the person to organise their thoughts, ready themselves and feel more relaxed going in to an activity and this will help them to feel more comfortable once it begins. They may be able to engage with a special interest or hobby beforehand, or arrange to do so after the activity, to reduce their stress levels.
- There are lots of apps that might help, including apps that play soothing sounds and music to reduce stress.
- Seek to reduce sensory input if it is becoming overwhelming, or provide sensory input if the person needs this.
- Remember, a person with severe anxiety or extreme stress levels is scared, not difficult. Support the person to feel safe and secure and this will help them to feel less scared.
- Stay calm.
- Keep a submissive stance and do not attempt to restrain the person, this will help them to see you are not a threat.
- Do not leave somebody unattended if they are in full meltdown, they are extremely distressed and may put themselves in danger.
- Do not try to force the person to speak or make eye contact and do not ask open-ended questions as this may cause more anxiety.
- Do not try to reason with someone who is experiencing a meltdown or tell them to calm down, this is not a possible or reasonable request.
- Do not attempt to interrupt routines or prevent "stimming" or repetitive behaviours, these show the person is attempting to self-soothe.
- Do not take anything the person says or does personally, they are in a state of extreme stress and may lash out.
- Touch should be offered but never forced.
- Once the meltdown is over, formulate a plan to prevent it from happening again. If you already had a plan, discuss what went wrong and what you might need to add.