

# Managing Stress & Anxiety for Autistic Individuals

This information sheet is designed to give an introduction to stress and anxiety in autistic people, and how best to support them.

**Anxiety is very common in autistic people.** A survey by the National Autistic Society found that 94% of autistic adults experience anxiety and over 50% have a clinical diagnosis. Anxiety disorder affects about 40% of autistic children compared to 3% of non-autistic children.

**Autistic experience of anxiety can be different.** It can last longer and be experienced more intensely than non-autistic experiences of anxiety. An autistic person may start their day with a much higher level of stress and anxiety. This means that they may reach crisis point more quickly than those who are not autistic.

**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. Some of the most common causes are explained below.

## Sensory differences

Many autistic people have sensory differences. This means that they can be **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, where our body ends and the rest of the world begins (referred to as proprioception), balance (referred to as the vestibular sense) and our internal body signals such as hunger, pain, temperature awareness (referred to as interoception). Differences with interpreting information from each of the senses can increase stress, as it can be harder to make sense of the world.

## Alexithymia

Some autistic people can experience differences in identifying, understanding and managing emotions.

## Change and transitions

When change happens in an autistic person's life it can take away their predictability and familiarity. This can make them feel vulnerable and scared and can be a source of great stress. The key is to understand the person and learn what their specific needs are and what helps them most. This will help them to make sense of the changes and feel safe and supported throughout.

## Social interaction and communication differences

Autistic individuals can have communication differences.

- They could have a different communication preference to what is typically expected by non-autistic people. They may be non-speaking or prefer to communicate through Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).
- They may have a literal communication style and find indirect speech difficult to decode.
- They may process communication at different speeds.
- Sometimes autistic people can find it difficult to understand non-autistic social cues and may struggle to understand body language.

These potential differences can lead to social exclusion and social anxiety, with some autistic individuals masking their autism. This can result in mental health difficulties and possible burnout.

## Mental health and autism

**Autism is not a mental health condition.** However, many autistic individuals unfortunately experience mental health difficulties, often because of unmet needs. Improved understanding as well as appropriate and adapted support is urgently required. Autistic people have the right to full access to mental health services.

### Ideas for support

- Understand the **triggers**. Keeping a diary can be helpful in identifying these.
- Ensure that the person you are supporting has an appropriate and preferred **communication system** that they are able to use. This will help them to express themselves and their needs.
- Help to create **predictability** to help minimise uncertainty. This could be through creating structure and communicating this through visual supports if helpful.
- Create a **supportive sensory environment** depending on what the individual's sensory needs are. This may involve changing the environment and/or making use of sensory aids.
- Adopt a **low arousal approach**. This approach focuses on reducing stress and creating a calm environment. This can be achieved through reducing demands and requests, reducing/providing sensory input, not trying to reason with the individual in that moment, listening to and validating their experiences.
- Monitor and manage **capacity**. Notice energy levels and what activities or situations use up energy. Be cautious in doing things if individual capacities will be exceeded. Make time for things that refresh and recharge.

- Access to **soothing activities**. If a person has a particular “stim” or repetitive movement that helps them to feel calm, then support them in this. “Stimming” can be a coping mechanism and may be a sign that the person is attempting to self-soothe. If the person engages in a dangerous “stim”, you may need to work with them to find a suitable alternative way to self-soothe. It is important that an autistic individual has regular access to their areas of interest. These can be essential to their recovery and overall sense of wellbeing.
- Seek **healthcare services** where appropriate. Ask for support to be autism informed and neuroaffirming.

## **Recommended resources**

***Avoiding anxiety in autistic adults - Luke Beardon***

***Avoiding anxiety in autistic children - Luke Beardon***

**<https://www.barrierstoeducation.co.uk/anxiety>**

**<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg142>**

**<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg170>**

**<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health>**