

# Anxiety - a guide for parents and carers

Many autistic children and young people experience anxiety. This guide talks about the ways you can help your child to manage their anxiety, including keeping a diary to explore what makes them anxious, and how to seek medical advice.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe.

Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life. For example, you may feel worried and anxious about sitting an exam, or having a medical test or job interview. During times like these, feeling anxious is normal.

But your child may be finding it hard to control their worries. They may be feeling anxious a lot of the time at school or home.

## What are the signs of anxiety?

Signs of anxiety include:

- sweating
- sleep issues
- panic attacks
- hyperventilating
- negative thoughts
- catastrophising
- self-harm.

These are signs that the anxiety has become a significant and debilitating issue in your child's life. Recognising this early can help you to get the

right support for your child.

## What causes anxiety?

Autistic people may experience anxiety for range of reasons such as:

- differences in sensory processing for example, being over or under-sensitive to noises, lights and smells
- finding it hard to predict or adapt to certain sensory situations
- difficulties with communication and social interactions
- having alexithymia (difficulties identifying and describing your own and other people's emotions) - it is more difficult to manage emotions if you cannot identify what you are feeling
- worrying about uncertainty and change or transitions, which comes with a fear of the unknown. Your child may like predictability and routines, and experience high levels of anxiety if things change
- trying to 'fit in' or attempt to appear 'normal' by changing their behaviour and internalising any stress/anxiety they feel in certain situations
- performance anxiety – particularly at school or college.

## Ways to help your child with anxiety

Start by finding out what makes your child anxious and then try some of these techniques to help them manage their worries.

### Understand the triggers

Keep a diary to identify when your child is anxious, and the symptoms and triggers.

### Reduce uncertainty

Structure your child's day with a schedule to minimise stress. Plan for any changes to their routine. Use social stories to explain what is going to happen.

## Monitor and manage your child's energy levels

Social interactions and other situations can use up a lot of your child's energy and they may experience overload. They can recharge by enjoying their interests, hobbies or nature.

## Adapt the environment

Adapt your home surroundings to minimise sensory overload and suggest to your child's school they do the same where possible.

Ask your child's school to:

- use clear visual instructions to minimise confusion
- evaluate the school environment and identify potential sensory triggers for your child
- have quiet spaces available at break and lunchtimes
- allow children to leave/enter classrooms before corridors get busy at break times.

## Can your child self-soothe?

See if your child can use sensory toys such as fidget spinners to decrease their anxiety. Some autistic people stim to reduce their anxiety.

## Relaxation and calming activities

Encourage your child to try relaxation methods such as yoga and exercise.

## Use an app

For older children and young people at college/university, these apps offer personalised support with anxiety:

- [Brain in Hand](#) – a diary, notes and reminders of daily tasks, individual coping strategies, system to monitor anxiety levels and access to support from the National Autistic Society.
- [Molehill Mountain](#) – tracks mood, identifies triggers and gives evidence-based tips on how to self-manage anxiety levels.

