

Managing anxiety in children and young people on the autism spectrum

A guide for parents/carers of children and young people on the autism spectrum during the COVID-19 restrictions.

The guide will cover:



acknowledging your child's anxiety



understanding your child's anxiety



recognising your child's anxiety



copied strategies to help manage anxiety



keeping informed about COVID-19



useful resources



Acknowledging your child's anxiety

During this uncertain and difficult time, a lot of people will be experiencing anxiety. It is good to acknowledge your child's anxiety, explaining to them that:

- Anxiety is normal. Anxiety is feeling scared, worried, frightened or nervous about something.
- A lot of people will be feeling anxious because of COVID-19. This is because we are all feeling uncertain and our daily lives have changed.
- For autistic people uncertainty and change can be especially hard.
- There are activities or strategies that may help you to cope with anxiety.
- If you are worried all the time or you feel really horrible when you are anxious, there are people that can help you. Everyone needs help sometimes.

Understanding your child's anxiety



It might be helpful for you and your child to know which aspects of the current situation may be increasing their anxiety, explaining to them that:

- There is normally a 'trigger', which leads you to feel anxious.
- Anxiety triggers can be different for different people. They can be in our environment or they can be certain thoughts or feelings.
- Some triggers are more common amongst autistic individuals, but everyone on the autism spectrum is different.
- Identifying what makes you feel anxious can help you to know how to reduce anxiety and prevent it.
- It is not always easy for a child to tell an adult why they are feeling anxious - but you can still do some things to help.

"Some triggers are more common amongst autistic individuals, but everyone on the autism spectrum is different."

Understanding your child's anxiety: COVID-19 and autism-related anxiety triggers



There may be triggers of anxiety that are more relevant during coronavirus, especially for autistic people. These include:

- uncertainty (eg who might get the virus and what might happen, or how long lockdown might go on for)
- disruption to routine and change (eg not being able to go to school)
- others' failure to follow rules (eg others not social distancing during essential trips outside)
- obsessions/compulsions and/or fear of germs/contamination
- not being able to do preferred or routine activities
- not being around familiar people
- fearing separation from a caregiver or family member (eg having to self-isolate)
- change in methods of communication (eg interacting with teachers or friends online)
- not being able to eat specific foods due to reduced availability in shops.

Recognising your child's anxiety



Different people react differently to anxiety. Autistic children and young people may find it harder to recognise and manage their anxiety. Try to notice any changes in your child's behaviour as these may signal anxiety. Here are some signs that your child may be feeling anxious:

- increased worrying
- asking for reassurance a lot or asking repetitive questions
- increased self-soothing behaviours or movements (eg flapping and rocking)
- avoiding or appearing disinterested in activities they normally enjoy
- being more irritable/argumentative, hitting out or throwing things to communicate distress or feel more in control
- engaging in self-injurious behaviour
- becoming tearful or overwhelmed
- physical symptoms (eg feeling shaky, restlessness or reporting headaches)
- changes in sleeping or eating habits.

Coping strategies to help manage anxiety



There are lots of different things that can be used to help manage and reduce anxiety. Finding which coping strategies suit your child and using the strategies before your child becomes too anxious will be most helpful. Some of these strategies may be useful for daily life, even when your child is not feeling anxious.

Coping with uncertainty:

- Let your child know that you will update them with anything important (see section below on "Keeping informed about COVID-19").
- Encourage your child to communicate their worries (through play, drawing or by talking to them).
- "Sitting" with uncertainty when we are unable to control situations. For more information, ideas and templates, see the "Useful Resources" section below.

Coping with disruption to routine and change:

- Use a visual calendar to create new routines with your child (with time for relaxing).
- Structure your child's day with regular times for mealtime and bedtime.
- Create a visual list including pictures of fun or relaxing activities your child can do in the current circumstances, including alternative activities for those not possible during lockdown.
- For ideas and templates, see the "Useful Resources" section below.

Coping strategies to help manage anxiety:



Relaxation strategies

There are different ways that your child can relax when they are feeling anxious. It may be helpful to practise these techniques with your child and encourage them to practise the techniques even when they are not feeling anxious. Not all of these techniques will be helpful - it is important to find what works for your child. It can be good to use the coping strategies when your child has encountered a trigger. It may be worth coming up with an action plan of which strategies to use and when.

A mindful walk:

Going on a walk outside during your daily exercise. Notice your surroundings (eg the clouds in the sky), including what you can see, hear, feel and smell. You can tell who you are with what you notice.

Squeezing muscles:

- Sit somewhere comfortable and quiet.
- Tense your muscles just enough to notice what it feels like, but don't overdo it.
- Starting at your toes, tense your muscles for about five seconds.
- Release, and notice how your body feels or changes.
- Repeat so you tense each muscle group twice, moving up your body (feet and legs, stomach, arms and hands, shoulders, neck, face).

Deep breathing:

- Take a deep breath in, slow and deep, through your nose.
- Hold the breath for five seconds.
- Release the breath slowly through your mouth.
- Repeat three more times, remembering to let the breath out nice and slowly.

“It may be helpful to practise these techniques with your child and encourage them to practise the techniques even when they are not feeling anxious.”

Coping strategies to help manage anxiety:



- calming sensory activities (eg making slime, going to a quiet or dark place)
- creative activities (eg writing poems, colouring, drawing, arts and crafts)
- listening to music, reading a book, watching TV or playing games
- ring/text/videocall someone (eg friends) for a chat
- set aside some 'worry time' (eg creating a set time to allow worrying can help your child feel like they have more control over their worries)
- balance out your child's thinking by helping them to identify the positive things that are happening
- physical activities or exercise (eg running, walking, cycling, dancing)
- encourage breaks from technology (eg the whole family at once) and from the news.

"Balance out your child's thinking by helping them to identify the positive things that are happening."

Keeping informed about COVID-19



Try not to be afraid about discussing coronavirus with your child. Sometimes not talking about something can make children worry more. Talk to your child in a way they will understand and try to avoid too many unnecessary details that may make them overwhelmed.

To help reduce your child's anxiety, it may be helpful to try and answer any questions they have, without pressing them to ask questions.

It is therefore important to give them factual information from trusted sources (such as from Public Health England, the World Health Organisation or NHS websites).

You could do an activity with your child where they can categorise anything they have heard about COVID-19 as facts or opinions to help decatastrophise things.

"It may be helpful to try and answer any questions they have, without pressing them to ask questions."

Useful resources



To open the documents and weblinks, please click on the title of the resource provided

- [Coping with the uncertainty of coronavirus](#) - Autistica
- [How mindfulness can help during COVID-19](#) - Child Mind Institute
- [Tips for young people: Looking after your mental health while self isolating](#) - Young Minds
- [School closure toolkit](#) - Easterseals Illinois Autism Partnership
- [Supporting children and young people with worries About COVID-19](#) - Emerging Minds
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): what you need to do](#) - Public Health England
- [Talking to kids about the coronavirus](#) - Child Mind Institute
- [Social story: My name is coronavirus \(in multiple languages\)](#) - Mindheart
- [Advice about the coronavirus](#) - Easy Read Online
- [Resources to use with people with learning disabilities through the coronavirus restrictions](#) - Learning Disability Professional Senate
- [OCD/COVID-19: Resources for kids, teens and families](#) - International OCD Foundation

If you are struggling to manage your child's anxiety at home despite these strategies then please contact your GP.

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