

Introduction to Anxiety

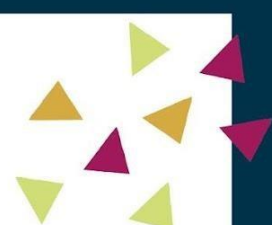
Anxiety is an emotion which is characterised by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil. Language used around anxiety can be associated with words like worry, panic, nervous, stressed. Some people aren't able to relate the feelings to words and it may be certain behaviours that indicate a person is anxious. It is important to understand that even though someone uses verbal language, their ability to do this may reduce depending on the level of anxiety they are experiencing.

Anxiety in autistic people is very common, can have a detrimental effect on their life and can manifest in many ways, including:

- Self-harming
- Self-sabotaging behaviour
- Shutdown
- Meltdowns
- Changes in communication
- Sensory-seeking behaviour
- Repetitive behaviours
- Need for control
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes to sleep patterns
- Lack of interest in things usually enjoyed

Some common causes of anxiety in autistic people include:

- Not being able to understand others, or for others to understand them
- The environment around them
- Social demands
- Masking and identity
- Having to fit in
- Communication
- Self-esteem
- Executive functioning
- Changes in life
- Fears and phobias
- Sensory processing
- Trauma



Things to think about

- The fundamental starting point is to respect the fact autistic people have a difference in their neurology. Understand that they experience the world differently and have a difference in their perceived norm, to others.
- Validate feelings: they need to know it's okay to feel different emotions.
- Observe and get to know what causes anxieties: don't forget it could be little things that you would find insignificant.
- Work out what anxiety looks like for them and don't apply typical presentations. Anxiety may look like smiling and laughter - something which you may not consider a typical behaviour for anxious people.
- Help them feel safe: safety is something everyone needs to feel and without it the world can seem chaotic and unpredictable.
- Understand that autistic people who can verbally communicate may find it difficult to do so when anxious, so asking lots of questions about how they're feeling may make them feel worse.
- In addition, understand that some autistic people have alexithymia, a condition whereby they can't identify or describe their feelings. So, when you ask how they feel it could be that they just don't know.
- Be aware how the demands you are placing on the person can impact on anxiety. Think about yourself: if someone places demands on you when you are already anxious, how do you feel?
- Acknowledge that different factors will all have an impact on anxiety levels. For example, if someone is tired, they may feel more anxious.
- Use different approaches that don't just rely on verbal language; art, drama, music, yoga etc can all be useful in helping self-expression.

