

Tips for supporting anxiety

Anxiety can affect everyone to differing degrees of severity however research tells us that autistic people can experience greater levels of anxiety than non-autistic people.

What follows are some considerations to think about in relation to providing

- Seek professional support: If anxiety is impacting on everyday life, then you should encourage the seeking of professional help from their local GP. GPs can have a more detailed discussion and can also recommend support options.
- Understand and validate the person's feelings: To you it may seem small and insignificant but to someone else it may be the biggest worry in their world. Try not to be dismissive of feelings, but instead validate them.
- Understand what's happening inside the body: This can be really useful to understand but should be taught when the person is calm and relaxed. You could use simple drawings, videos or a model of the brain and body.
- Become a behaviour detective: Support the person to reflect on their own feelings where possible: Remember that many autistic people find this difficult therefore they may need support for example, keep a diary and try to identify patterns of behaviour. It is important to record things in the diary such as the time and date of the anxiety, what the situation was, how the person felt/dealt with the anxiety.
- Help label emotions: To help someone understand their anxiety, you may need to first understand the emotions and behaviours that take place when they are anxious. Giving each emotion a name may help. Remember they may use their own words to name their emotions, for example, 'angry' could be 'fizzy'.
- Try out some apps: There are many apps designed to help alleviate anxiety. Some examples of apps include, Kooth, Smiling Mind and Head Space. Search in the app store of your device.

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- Crisis prevention: Plan ahead for times of crisis during times of calm. Where possible when the person is calm, talk to them about what they can do when they feel anxious. You could try tools such as scaling exercises to avoid an escalation of anxiety. At first, you may need to prompt and offer a reminder to use these tools, but over time they may learn to use the tool themselves as a self-regulatory strategy.
 - Teach relaxation techniques: Most people have a particular interest or activity that helps them to relax. Identify these things and help them relax by building these into their daily routine. This could include things such as drawing or listening to music. Remember that relaxation strategies need to be personalised, don't assume what works for you will work for others.
 - Physical activity: This can also often help to reduce anxiety and helps to release endorphins which make a person feel happier.
 - Ensure the person has a comfortable way of communicating their anxiety: Some people find it uncomfortable to talk about their anxiety so are unable to let you know when they are feeling anxious. Create opportunities to communicate their anxiety, perhaps through drawing, music, art, drama, and other mediums.
 - Encourage support from other autistic people: Hearing from other autistic people has been shown to be both helpful and empowering.
 - Consider sensory input: Understanding sensory needs and reducing or increasing input as needed is crucial. Stimming may be used as a coping strategy and should be understood and respected. If stimming is harmful then additional support will of course be needed.
 - Remember anxiety presents differently: You may be able to conjure up an image in your head of what an anxious person might look like. They may be pacing the floor, shaking nervously while talking at speed. It is important to understand that anxiety can present in many different ways, some of which are incredibly subtle.
 - Model your own self-care and emotional regulation: Be an appropriate role model by demonstrating good and effective emotional regulation strategies and self-care techniques. It is important that you also look after your own needs.

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- Consider your own approach and language: It may be that you are unknowingly doing things that are causing the person more anxiety. Do not try to force speaking or eye contact and try not to ask open-ended questions.
 - Be proactive: Over time you will start to understand what causes the person you're supporting to become anxious. You will then be able to use this understanding to put in changes to your life or come up with strategies to support.
 - Create predictability and consistency: You can do this by instigating a daily routine that works for your family. Be realistic about what can be achieved in a day if you overload yourself, you will find it harder to be consistent.
 - Sleep: Sleep and wellbeing go hand in hand, but unfortunately for many people good quality sleep can be difficult to obtain. Consider understanding the sleep cycles of your family and think about ways you can all get a better night's sleep.
 - Encourage the building of personal resilience: Look at strategies the person can use without you, so they don't become dependent on you or specific things you do in times of anxiety. You won't always be present, for example when they are at school.
 - Learn and reflect: You won't get everything right all of the time, and this is only natural. Try not to be too hard on yourself and use it as a learning experience. Evaluate and analyse the situation after, writing things down can help you with this.
 - Before completely removing something that's known to cause anxiety, consider all the various options and steps in between, obviously being mindful that causing repeat situations which are known to be anxiety-inducing will or could be traumatic. A minor example of things that fall into this category could be the noise of a vacuum cleaner. If that's known to cause anxiety it would be tempting to simply eradicate it completely. A more major example could be about crossing roads or dealing with something that could be dangerous.