

### Anxiety and stress

Children, like adults, experience **stress** when the demands that are being made of them **exceed their current ability to cope**. Autistic children may be much *more likely* to feel stress in school simply because so many demands are made of them (including the sensory environment, the social world and communication as well as learning for example). This means their ability to cope is constantly being challenged. If the stressors become too much, and their ability to cope becomes too depleted, an autistic pupil may experience **meltdown** or **shutdown**.

Stress occurs in the presence of demands, but **anxiety** occurs even when the demands are not actually present. Strong worries that persist even after the stressor has been removed are those that tend to be described as anxiety. When a child is anxious, they are worried or afraid about stressful events that are about to happen, that may be about to happen or that *could* happen in the future. They feel under threat from these real or potential stressful events because they worry they will not have the ability to cope with them if they do. Prolonged and repeated exposure to stress can be a cause of anxiety.

### What can cause stress and anxiety in autistic pupils?

Some of the common triggers are:

- Long/regular periods of dysregulation
- Uncertainty and change (e.g. a change in support staff or change in the usual school routine)
- Sensory triggers (or fear of sensory triggers)
- Social situations (e.g. with peers and during break times for example)
- Expectations and demands (including not fully understanding what those expectations/demands are or will be)
- Anticipation of specific situations (e.g. a certain lesson, or break time)
- Specific fears (such as busy corridors, noise, accidental touch smells, insects)
- Struggling to predict or make sense of the reactions of others.
- Not be allowed to stim, or use sensory/fiddle toys to regulate
- Masking/feeling the need to mask



### How does it feel?

Stress and anxiety are very difficult and often intensely uncomfortable feelings. Autistic pupils may be experiencing any number of the following if they are experiencing stress or anxiety:

## Anxiety *(continued)*

- Nausea, or stomach churning
- Heart beating faster/palpitations
- Sweating
- Panic Attacks
- Faster breathing or holding breath
- Sleeping too much or not enough
- Headaches
- Rumination – thinking continually about a situation
- Catastrophizing
- Depersonalisation – feeling disconnected from their mind or body
- Derealisation – feeling disconnected from the outside world, as if it is ‘unreal’

Autistic pupils may therefore be feeling unbearably tense, nervous, frustrated and constantly worried in school – and it is impossible to fully engage when you are feeling this way. They may not know why they have this feeling, or that this is ‘anxiety’. It is possible for autistic pupils to be under-sensitive to the feeling of anxiety: only noticing it when it reaches very high levels at which point they are overwhelmed.

It is also possible for autistic pupils to **mask** this stress and anxiety.

### Will we know when autistic pupils are experiencing anxiety?

Not necessarily. Anxiety is experienced differently by everyone and this means we need to identify how anxiety feels and what it looks like for each child.

Sometimes of course, it is obvious to see that a pupil is struggling with anxiety. Common signs of anxiety in all children include:

*\*difficulty concentrating*

*\*repetitive behaviours*

*\*poor sleep*

*\*poor eating habits*

*\*being quick to anger*

*\*outbursts/meltdowns*

*\*constantly worrying*

*\*struggling to make decisions*

*\*tummy aches/minor ailments*

*\*retreating from others.*

However, many of these characteristics are very common in autistic pupils anyway! As a result we may not always know a pupil is specifically struggling with anxiety, unless the pupil is able to communicate their anxiety to us. However, this is also problematic. Autistic pupils may:

- Find it difficult to communicate about feelings specifically.
- Not communicate their anxiety in a way we recognise as ‘anxiety’ (e.g. through challenging behaviour)
- Have alexithymia, meaning that they struggle to recognise what it is they are feeling
- Mask- suppress their instinctive/natural behaviours and identity and behave the way they think will help them ‘fit in’ or get approval.

All of this means we may not always know when our pupils are struggling with anxiety.

### Why do we need to be concerned?

Living with high anxiety is hard. Continued anxiety can impact autistic children's *quality of life*, their ability to *access learning* and to *socially engage*. Long term it can bring an increased risk of loneliness, depression and self-harm and have significant impact on their physical and mental health. Anxiety may give rise to increased behaviours of concern in a pupil – and if we have not recognised anxiety is a factor (because of the above) we may have no idea why. An autistic pupil may desperately need help with their anxiety and no one may know.

*"I will take something the wrong way, or think literally about something and it will stick, it will fry my head, and I get a lump in my throat and all I want to is cry and cry and cry and sob" @autistic genius*  
See full clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tx7c-5Vu0S0>

### How might autistic pupils cope with anxiety?

Pupils may try to cope by:

- Withdrawing (generally, but especially from situations which cause anxiety)
- Using repetitive strategies more
- Choosing to spend more and more time on intense interests
- Masking

They may also behave in ways that cause us concern

### Helpful strategies

1. *Good quality autism support*. This naturally provides more structure and certainty, good sensory environments, support with social situations, clear expectations, support with known areas of difficulty and fears. **Now look again at 'why can cause anxiety and stress in autistic pupils above...**
2. *Create stress management plans*. Identify what causes stress for an autistic pupil, and plan ways of either removing the stressor, or managing it. This will leave a pupil free to focus on learning. Ask your autism advisor for a blank plan.

3. *Help autistic pupils recognise how they are feeling.* Use 5 point scales every day (or alternative methods such as Zones of Regulation). Get autistic pupils into the habit of checking how they are feeling throughout the day and communicating this to others.
4. *Support autistic pupils to identify and use strategies* when they are not feeling OK – these should be listed on their 5 point scale, but may include sensory activities, intense (or ‘special’) interests, time outside, exercise, time with therapy animals, music, mindful colouring etc. If they have an emotional first aid box that is ideal.
5. *Develop well-being plans* incorporating some of the above strategies into every day to bring down a pupil’s anxiety levels generally (e.g. a regular time playing a favourite sport each day).
6. *Encourage a healthy lifestyle* e.g. increase structure and routine, healthy eating, exercise, healthy sleep routine, relaxation or mindfulness.
7. *Create emergency first aid kits* for pupils whose anxiety can get high. This might contain strong distractors such as intense interests, and lists/photos of who to tell.
8. *Complete a ‘what’s your normal?’* toolkit from Ambitious about Autism. This is especially helpful for pupils who struggle identifying how or what they are feeling, or have significant difficulties communicating. See below.
9. *Medication may be necessary* – be guided by CAMHs and/or GP

Always remain mindful of the fact that many autistic young people mask in order to look like they are coping, and to ‘fit in’. Stress and anxiety can be hidden.

## Resources

<sup>1</sup>Anxiety and Autism

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/what-is-autism/signs-and-symptoms/anxiety-and-autism>

The Autism Research Group, City University of London:

Anxiety in Autism Guide

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Anxiety-in-Autism-Guide.pdf>

Ambitious About Autism ‘Know your Normal’:

<https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/what-we-do/youth-participation/youth-led-toolkits/know-your-normal>