

Dealing with Challenging Behavior in the Autism Spectrum

Sometimes the difficulties of autism can lead to behaviors that are quite challenging for us to understand and address. People with autism or Asperger syndrome may appear to behave unusually. There will generally be a reason for this: it can be an attempt to communicate, or a way of coping with a particular situation. Knowing what causes challenging behavior can help you to develop ways of dealing with it.

Anxiety is a real difficulty for many adults with autism or Asperger syndrome. It can affect a person psychologically and physically. This training talks about the different ways you can manage anxiety, from keeping a diary to learning relaxation techniques and getting support from others in a similar situation. Anxiety can happen for a range of reasons and people with autism or Asperger syndrome can vary in their ability to cope with it.

Emotions are abstract. To understand emotion you need an imagination. One of the areas of difficulty for people with autism is not being able to imagine things, so understanding emotions can be difficult for them. People with high-functioning autism may understand some emotions and recognize the feelings that are associated with them. By helping someone to understand anxiety, you can help them to manage it better.

Anxiety can affect both the mind and the body, and produce a range of symptoms. The psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety are closely linked and so can lead to a vicious cycle that can be difficult to break. The psychological symptoms of anxiety are:

- easily losing patience
- difficulty concentrating
- thinking constantly about the worst outcome
- difficulty sleeping
- depression
- becoming preoccupied with or obsessive about one subject.

Its physical symptoms include:

- excessive thirst
- stomach upsets
- loose bowel movements
- frequent urinating
- periods of intensely pounding heart
- periods of having gas

- muscle aches
- headaches
- dizziness
- pins and needles
- tremors.

If your client experience any of these symptoms, it is important to also get medical advice to rule out other medical conditions.

Strategies for managing anxiety

Once someone understands anxiety and has identified the things and situations that make them anxious, they can then take steps to cope with the anxiety. If you are looking after someone with autism, try and be aware of what makes them anxious and how best to help them manage certain behaviors.

Keep a diary

To help someone with autism understand anxiety, get them to understand the symptoms they display when they are anxious and to look at the causes of their anxiety. Keeping a diary in which they write about certain situations and how these make them feel may help them to understand their anxiety and manage it better.

Use the diary also to think about the physical changes linked to anxiety. Someone with autism often retreats into their particular interest if they are anxious about something use the diary to monitor this as well:

- Time and date
- Situation
- How I felt
- How anxious? (out of 1 to 10)

Meltdown Prevention Plan

Create an anxiety plan when someone with autism is feeling positive about things. An anxiety plan is a list of things and situations that cause anxiety as well as solutions and strategies they can use to help them manage their anxiety levels. The plan can be adapted, depending upon how well someone understands anxiety:

Situation

- Symptoms of anxiety
- Solution
- Hearts beats fast; sweat and feel sick.
- Have stress ball in pocket.

- Squeeze the ball and take deep breaths.
- Listen to music.

Relaxation techniques

Someone with autism can find it very difficult to relax. Some people with autism have a particular interest or activity they like to do because it helps them relax. If they use these to relax, it may help to build them into their daily routine. However, this interest or activity can itself be the source of behavioral difficulties at times, especially if they're unable to follow their interest or do the activity at a particular moment.

Some people may need to be left alone for short periods of the day to help them unwind.

Physical activity can also often help to manage anxiety and release tension. Using deep breathing exercises to relax can be helpful as can activities such as yoga and Pilates, which both focus on breathing to relax. Use a visual timetable or write a list to help remind the person when they need to practice relaxation.

Any other activities that are pleasant and calming such as taking a bath, listening to relaxing music, aromatherapy, playing on a computer may also help reduce anxiety. Some people may find lights particularly soothing, especially those of a repetitive nature, such as spinning lights or bubble tubes.

You may need to encourage adults who are less able to take part in these activities so that they can enjoy their benefits. You can do this by explaining when and where they will do the activity and what it will involve. You may have to go along with the person at first and do short periods of activity to begin with.

Talking about anxiety

Some people with autism find direct confrontation difficult. They may therefore be unable to say they don't like certain things or situations, which will raise their anxiety levels. If they identify they are anxious, they could use a card system to let family or friends around them know how they are feeling. At first, you may need to tell them when to use the card and prompt them to use it when they do become anxious.

They could also carry a card around with them to remind themselves of what they need to do if they start getting anxious. You could also give them a stress scale that they can use whenever they find something particularly stressful.