

Managing Stress in Autism

This factsheet is designed to provide with you some tips on managing stress in autism, along with links to organisations, websites and publications that may help.

If you have any practical suggestions for managing stress or you know of any other resources we should add to this factsheet please email info@researchautism.net with the details. Thank you.

Tips for Helping Yourself*

- **Exercise:** Exercise makes you feel healthier and releases various chemicals that make you feel happy and more relaxed, as well as boosting your overall energy levels. It will also help to lower your blood pressure, and physically tire you out, which will help you to sleep.
- **Eat healthily:** Eating healthily keeps your body in good working order with a strong immune system. This means that you will be less susceptible to physical symptoms of stress as well as giving you more energy and brainpower to handle issues, preventing the build up of stress.
- **Sleep properly:** Sleep plays a vital part in keeping us feeling healthy and strong. Getting plenty of sleep isn't always possible but you should make sure you give yourself the best opportunity. Keeping the room dark, avoiding electrical items – such as televisions and mobile phones - before bed and having a relaxing bedtime routine to help you prepare for sleep, are all great ways to promote healthy sleep.
- **Relax and breathe:** When you find yourself under stress, take a step back and breathe slowly to help you regain control of your body and your thoughts. You can also extend this to meditation or yoga.
- **Never worry alone.** Talk to someone you trust and they may be able to provide a rational perspective.
- **Get the facts.** Don't rely on your imagination and negative thoughts.
- **Make a plan.** Use the information you have gathered to make a plan for the future. If you had a plan and it didn't work, adapt it using your new experiences to guide you.
- **Apps:** There are lots of apps that might help, including apps that play soothing sounds and music to reduce stress.
- **Treat yourself for your successes.** Give yourself a break and treat yourself to something nice – be that a nice bath or a night out with friends – rewarding yourself for your achievements will also help you to learn to forgive yourself for mistakes.



Tips for Helping Someone Else *

- **Prepare:** Preparation will allow the person to organise their thoughts, ready themselves and feel more relaxed going in to an activity. This may help them to feel more comfortable once it begins.
- **Safety and security:** Remember, a person with severe anxiety or extreme stress levels is scared, not difficult. Support the person to feel safe and secure and this will help them to feel less scared.
- **Stay calm.** Being calm is more likely to help the other person to stay calm as well.
- **Posture:** Keep a relaxed stance and do not attempt to restrain the person, this will help them to see you are not a threat.
- **Touch:** Touch should be offered but never forced.
- **Eye contact:** Don't try to force the person to make eye contact or speak. Don't ask open ended questions as this may cause more stress.
- **Routines:** Don't attempt to interrupt routines or prevent "stimming" or repetitive behaviours - unless the person is injuring themselves. Repetitive behaviours often show the person is attempting to self-soothe.
- **Sensory sensitivity:** Seek to reduce sensory input if it is becoming overwhelming, or provide sensory input if the person needs this.
- **Meltdowns:** Don't leave somebody alone if they are in full meltdown, they are extremely distressed and may put themselves in danger.
- **Reasoning:** Don't try to reason with someone who is experiencing a meltdown or tell them to calm down, this is not a possible or reasonable request. Give them space and time to calm themselves.
- **Create a plan:** Once the meltdown is over, formulate a plan to prevent it from happening again. If you already had a plan, discuss what went wrong and what you might need to change.
- **Don't take it personally:** Don't take anything the person says or does personally, they are in a state of extreme stress.

*These tips are based on materials published by Autism West Midlands and reproduced with their kind permission.



Organisations

- Autism Alliance. The major UK network of specialist autism charities. <http://www.autism-alliance.org.uk/>
- Autism NI – PAPA. Northern Irish not-for-profit organisation which provides a range of services to people on the autism spectrum. www.autismni.org/
- Irish Society for Autism. Irish charity which provides a range of services for people on the autism spectrum. <http://autism.ie/>
- Mind. UK charity which provides a range of mental health services including advice and help on stress. www.mind.org.uk/
- National Autistic Society. Charity which exists to champion the rights and interests of all people on the autism spectrum and to ensure that they and their families receive quality services appropriate to their needs. www.autism.org.uk/
- Rethink Mental Illness. UK charity which provides a range of mental health services including advice and help on stress. <https://www.rethink.org/>
- Samaritans. Charity which supports anyone who needs them through 201 branches across the UK and Republic of Ireland. Helpline 08457 90 90 90 (24 hour) www.samaritans.org/
- Scottish Society for Autism. Scottish charity which provides services, influences policy and practice, and raises public awareness about autism. www.scottishautism.org/

Website Pages

- Mental Health Foundation. Stress. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stress>
- National Autism Society. Stress. <http://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/family-issues/stress/>
- National Institute of Mental Health. Fact sheet on stress. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml>
- NHS Choices. Struggling with stress. <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/understanding-stress.aspx>
- NHS Choices. Ten stress busters. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/reduce-stress.aspx>
- Raising Children Network. Autism spectrum disorder and family stress. http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/autism_spectrum_disorder_family_stress.html
- Synapse. Stress and autism spectrum disorders. <http://www.autism-help.org/adults-aspergers-stress.htm>



Publications

- “How to manage stress”. Mind. <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/stress/signs-of-stress>
- “Managing stress and anxiety: Parents and carers.” Autism West Midlands. http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/upload/pdf_files/1403678300_ManagingAnxietyCarers.pdf
- “Managing stress and anxiety: Supporting people with autism”. Autism West Midlands. http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/upload/pdf_files/1423836671_Managing%20Anxiety_Autism.pdf
- Managing stress for carers and their families. Ann Edworthy. <http://w3.cerebra.org.uk/?ddownload=3147>
- “Stress: How to cope”. Rethink Mental Illness. <https://www.rethink.org/resources/s/stress-how-to-cope>
- “Stress: Take a load off.” Kathy Labosh. http://www.autism-society.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/opt_stress-take-a-load-off.pdf
- “Stress: Moodjuice self help guide”. Terry Locker. <http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/stress.asp>

More Information

Please note: the information in this factsheet is based on the best evidence currently available. However the evidence on stress in autism and the best way of dealing with it is still very limited. More research is desperately needed.

For more information about the Beating Stress in Autism campaign, please visit <http://researchautism.net/beating-stress-in-autism> and follow the campaign on social media. Twitter: www.twitter.com/ResearchAutism Facebook: www.facebook.com/ResearchAutism #BeatingStress

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