



ANXIETY

INFOSHEET

Anxiety is the mind and body's reaction to situations or stimuli which are unfamiliar or perceived as stressful and elicit unease, alertness or a nervous feeling. Chronic anxiety is considered a disorder.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: worrying and being apprehensive about daily life for at least six months. Physical symptoms include inability to sleep or concentrate. Anxiety can be about anything.

Social Anxiety Disorder: anxiety specific to dealing with social interactions: performing, meeting new people, being judged, embarrassed, ridiculed and rejected.

What does it feel like?

Thoughts

excessive worrying about the past or the future, rumination, overthinking, imagining the worst possible outcome (catastrophizing).

Body Sensations

tense, waves of fear, shortness of breath, increased heart rate or palpitations, cramping, knots in the stomach, sensation of ants in limbs such as hands and trembling of knees, sweating, freezing, inability to relax.

Actions

wringing of hands or arms, nervous tics (biting pens or fingernails, touching hair, trembling knee), repetitive behaviours stimming, pacing, rocking, flapping, skin picking. Retreating into special interests. Avoidance of anxiety triggers.

Fight response - aggressive response to the threat or danger

Flight response - running away or avoiding the situation

Freeze response - unable to move

Fawn response - trying to appease or pacify others to get out of the situation

Emotions

fear, worry, dread, agitation, immobility, nervousness, unease.

Common anxiety triggers for autistic people: Not knowing what is expected of them and what to expect in new situations, changes in routines, social interactions, workplace politics, events, travel, medical or bureaucratic appointments.



Autism and Anxiety

Almost every autistic person has experienced this to some degree. Anxiety is higher in the autistic population at 20%-50% than the non-autistic population (8%-18%). There is also a higher prevalence of social anxiety disorder with 40% of autistics having at least one or the other types of anxiety disorder.. Burnout in the undiagnosed can lead to late-in-life diagnosis.

Risk Factors

Genetics, OCD, sensory overload, executive functioning challenges impacting performance at school or work. Bullying and harassment. Panic attacks may or may not be a co-morbidity.

What Helps?

What I can do:

- Mindfulness activities, using apps or youtube videos
- Fidget toys and comforting sensory activities (e.g. weighted blanket, comforting textures, music, and colouring)
- Working with a therapist on CBT, CUES (Coping with Uncertainty in Everyday Situations), TIPP skills from DBT, and exposure therapy

What society can do:

- Publicly funded access to mental health services, such as individual and group therapy
- Oppression can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety, so social change around discrimination and inequality can help with anxiety among marginalized people
- Acceptance of autism, so people feel less pressure and social anxiety around social norms and expectations

What others can do:

- Letting people know about plans ahead of time and what to expect
- People with anxiety often ask for reassurance, and this can continue a cycle of anxiety and reassurance, so it is more helpful to encourage them to find ways to reassure themselves as well as build tolerance for uncertainty. For example, if someone asks you for reassurance, you can listen to them and help them identify their strengths and ways they can reassure themselves
- Many autistic people feel anxious because of social norms and expectations, and their fears about not being accepted. By demonstrating acceptance of autistic people's differences, you can help them feel more comfortable

Resources



[Treating anxiety in autistic adults : study protocol for personalised anxiety treatment](#)



[Anxiety in Autism An Evidence Based Guide to Anxiety in Autism \(2018\)](#)
[Sebastian B Gaigg, Autism Research Group](#)



[Anxiety Disorders in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Population-Based Study](#)

Resources



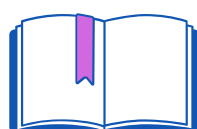
[National Autistic Society - Anxiety in autistic people](#)



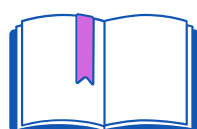
[Your Easy Guide to DBT's TIPP skills](#)



[DBT TIPP skills, worksheets, videos & activities](#)



[From Anxiety to Meltdown \(2011\) Deborah Lipsky](#)



[The Autism Discussion Page on Stress, Anxiety, Shutdowns and Meltdowns \(2021\) Bill Nason](#)



[Helping Autistic Teens to Manage their Anxiety Strategies and Worksheets using CBT, DBT, and ACT Skills \(2022\) Dr Theresa Kidd](#)



[Autistica : Uncertainty and link to Anxiety Jacqui Rodgers](#)



[Sue Hutton Mindfulness - YouTube](#)



[Autism: how anxiety affects everything - Sarah Hendrickx - YouTube](#)



[Purple Ella Autism and Anxiety.](#)



[Aspie World with Michelle - Social anxiety.](#)

References

Nimmo-Smith V., Heuvelman H., Dalman C., Lundberg M., Idring S., Carpenter P., Magnusson C., Dheeraj R. (2020). Anxiety Disorders in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Population-Based Study J Autism Dev Disorder Jan;50 (1):308-318 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04234-3>

van Steensel F.A.J., Bögels S., Perrin S. (2011). Anxiety disorders in children and adolescents with autistic spectrum disorders: a meta-analysis Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev Sep;14(3):302-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-011-0097-0>

Rodgers J., Farquhar K., Mason D., Brice S., Wigham S., Ingham B., Freston M., and Parr J.R. (2020). Development and Initial Evaluation of the Anxiety Scale for Autism-Adults Autism in Adulthood Vol. 2, No. 1 11 Mar <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0044> Development and Initial Evaluation of the Anxiety Scale for Autism-Adults | Autism in Adulthood (liebertpub.com)