

## Stress and Anger Management for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Stress and anxiety are extremely common in people with an autism spectrum disorder, and certainly an area of great concern for parents and teachers alike. The stress experienced by people with an ASD may manifest in many ways, one of the obvious ones being anger – leading to aggression towards others, self-injurious behaviour, tantrums and meltdowns. It is very important to keep in mind that this behaviour is often not intended to be malicious or destructive – rather it is simply a way for the person to communicate, using behaviour instead of words.

These episodes can typically involve three stages – the build-up, the explosion and the recovery (these are my terms, you probably have heard/used other terms to describe these stages). Essentially the basis to implementing a successful stress/anger management program is in understanding these stages and then formulating a plan of attack.

### Build Up

The build-up is often difficult to observe – many individuals with an ASD seem to go from zero to one hundred in a matter of seconds. But on closer inspection most display the warning signals that something is 'brewing'. It may be as subtle as a blank stare or tense facial muscles, or something



more obvious – change in tone of voice, pacing, increase in obsessive/compulsive behaviours, verbal threats or withdrawing. It can be easy to ignore these signals however this is the most crucial time of intervention, as it provides the opportunity to prevent the explosion.

Helpful interventions strategies at this point include:

**(1) Removal of the person from the offending environment in a non-threatening way.** At school this can be via an errand, or library time at lunch; at home it can be performing an easy task for a parent or taking some 'quiet time'. This gives the person an opportunity to escape the demands of the environment and regain a sense of calm.

**(2) Keeping to routine.** Using visual charts and schedules can assist in the reassurance of routine, and can alleviate a major cause of stress for the person with an ASD. This

method can also be used to warn of changes and introduce new events. Don't assume that teenagers don't need this support; it just needs to be adapted to their particular level.

### **(3) Designated space (or "chill out space").**

A private, quiet place where the person can retreat to escape stress. The space should provide activities that are calming; relaxing music, headphones etc, a bean bag to sit on often helps calm in a sensory way. Once the person has calmed down they can return to their previous activity.



Whatever method you use at this point there is one very important aspect to keep in mind – you must choose a method that is going to work for this particular individual. Do not assume that what works for your other children/students will work for the person with an ASD. If unsure, consult those who know the person best.

Sensory overload is a major contributor to the build-up, as are the communication and social difficulties, and emotional immaturity characteristic of ASD. So it stands to reason that another area to target is the teaching of the skills that a person may be lacking.

### **Explosion**

If behaviour is not addressed during the build-up stage it will often result in the explosion. At this point the person has lost

self-control and resorts to instinctive behaviour – that which will convey the message in the quickest possible way. Generally this means verbally and physically challenging behaviour, but can sometimes mean total withdrawal.

During this stage emphasis must be placed on the safety of the person and those around them. Some situations will call for simple, firm language - "hands down", "start walking", "deep breath". On other occasions the explosion needs to run its course. Trying to stop this process half way can actually escalate the matter further. In this case it is just a matter of directing/taking the child to their designated space, waiting until it is over, and helping the child to calm down. It is also very important that all involved (parents, siblings, teachers, peers) have an agreed upon plan to ensure their safety and the privacy of the individual.

### **Recovery**

Once the explosion has ended a person will often feel very tired, will forget some aspects, or will act as though nothing happened (much to the confusion and frustration of parents and teachers!) Often the person is not able to discuss the situation until much later on, so it is important to wait until a later stage to discuss what happened, perhaps using it as a teaching opportunity to talk through what they could do differently next time.

Prevention really is better than cure, so be more aware of the warning signals, act sooner, implement strategies that are going to work at the build-up stage. You are not always going to see it coming, but if you manage to prevent explosions 50% of the time you are going to make a real difference to your child's stress levels, and your own.

## Alternative Behaviours

The importance of teaching alternative behaviours must also be considered. Instead of lashing out when stressed or angry, your child needs to be shown what would be more acceptable behaviour. Once again this approach must be tailored to the individual – some people need to be quiet and inactive to address stress levels, others need to be physical.

Some useful methods are:

Inactive	Active
Lying in bed	Riding a bike
Reading a book	Squeezing a stress ball
Looking at pictures	Jumping on a trampoline
Having a warm bath	Throwing a ball against a wall
Listening to calm music	Punching a pillow or punch bag

## Take 5 Card

This is a fantastic strategy that I came across at an Autism Conference in Adelaide that was being used very successfully by a secondary school in South Australia. A card was made which had the phrase “Take 5” written on it. The student (in this case a teenage boy with Asperger’s Syndrome) used the card to inform his teachers that he was feeling overloaded and needed to ‘Take 5’. The teacher then allowed the student to retreat to his quiet space where he remained until he was feeling calm enough to rejoin the class. All of his teachers were aware of the plan and the student was very aware that this was to be used in times of genuine distress, and not as a means of escaping from class work. It worked well because it meant the student did not have to anxiously think of the appropriate words, he had a quick, easy and appropriate method of communicating his levels of stress and that he needed help.

This strategy can easily be implemented both in the home and school setting. A crucial part of the strategy is to teach the person how to monitor their stress levels and how to alert others by using the card. It takes a combined and consistent approach, and some willingness on the part of parents and teachers, but the rewards will be worth the effort.

## Useful Resources from the Library

No.1845 - *Asperger Syndrome and difficult moments* - a book for parents about anger and the rage cycle

No.2437 - *The Incredible 5 point scale* – how to teach stress management

No.2441 - *When my autism gets too big* – a story to help kids understand their stress

No.2319 - *A volcano in my tummy* - anger management for kids

No.1609 - *I’m mad* - a story to help kids understand anger

No.2142 - *Relaxation video* - strategies for teaching relaxation to people with disabilities

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