

# Information Sheet:

## Stress and Anger Management for autistic people

### Getting started

Stress and anxiety are very common in people on the autism spectrum, and can be worrying for parents and teachers. An autistic person may communicate their level of stress using behaviour instead of words. For example, a stressed autistic person might get angry and this can lead to being aggressive towards others, self-harming, tantrums and meltdowns. A behaviour that is a response to stress or anxiety is part of an episode.

An episode can have three stages – the build-up, the explosion and the recovery.

It's important to understand these stages and make a plan to help the autistic person with their stress and reduce the episodes.

### Build Up

It can be hard to see the build-up but most autistic people show some warning signs that they're feeling stressed. It may be a small sign such as a blank stare or tense facial muscles. Or it could be something more obvious – a change in tone of voice, pacing, an increase in obsessive/compulsive behaviours, verbal threats or withdrawing. Take note of these signs as this is the best time to intervene, and try to prevent the explosion.

Here are some strategies to try:

#### **(1) Find a calm way to move the person away from the stressful environment.**

At school a student could be sent on an errand, or given 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 time away from the stressful environment to calm themselves.

#### **(2) Keep to the usual routine.**

Use visual charts and schedules to help autistic people to know what's going to happen next. Visual charts and schedules can also be used to warn of changes and introduce new events.

#### **(3) Set up a quiet space.**

Find a private, quiet place where the person can retreat to escape stress. The space should provide activities that are calming for the autistic person; for example, relaxing music, headphones, a bean bag to sit on often helps calm in a sensory way. Once the person has calmed down they can return to what they were doing.

If you're not sure what calms the autistic person you can try asking them or talking with their therapist(s) or parents and carers.

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Sensory overload is also part of the build-up, as well as the difficulties autistic people have with communication, social and expressing emotions.

Therapies may be helpful to help autistic people manage their sensory inputs and to improve their communication and social skills.

## Explosion

If behaviour isn't addressed during the build-up stage it will often result in the explosion. At this point the person has lost self-control and the behaviour is instinctive. Generally this means verbally and physically challenging behaviour, but it can sometimes mean total withdrawal.



During this stage the safety of the person and those around them is a priority. Sometimes simple, firm language is needed- "hands down", "start walking", "deep breath". At other times the explosion needs to run its course. Trying to stop the explosion half way can make it worse. It's good to take the person to their quiet space, wait until the explosion is over, and help the person to calm down. Everyone who cares for the person needs to agree on a plan that's safe for them and the person they're caring for. It's also important to consider the autistic person's privacy as part of the plan.

## Recovery

Once the explosion is over a person will often feel very tired, will forget some parts of what happened, or will act as though nothing happened. This can be confusing and frustrating for the people around them. The person may not be able to talk about what happened until later on. This means that it's best to wait until later stage to talk about what happened and 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 the person'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, the person can 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.

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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

The take 5 card is a strategy that has been used successfully in classrooms. This is a card with 'take 5' written on it used by autistic students to let teachers know that they need a break. When the student gives the teacher the take 5 card the teacher allows the student to go to their quiet space until they feel calm enough to return to class.

This may work for students who have trouble communicating when under stress. It's best to involve therapists in implementing a strategy so that the autistic person learns how to monitor their stress levels and ask for help.

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