

Coronavirus: Mental Health and Resilience skills for autistic adults

This is a difficult and uncertain time for everyone in the world at the moment. You might be worried about coronavirus and how it could affect your life, especially since we have been asked to stay at home and avoid contact with other people. It is normal to feel anxious and/or scared right now!

This pack has been adapted for autistic adults to help you to cope and develop skills to support your mental health and wellbeing during this challenging time. The skills detailed in here are particularly focused for autistic adults, however they may, of course, be helpful for everyone.

- Work through this pack slowly and at your own pace. You may need to reread sections of this pack or come back to sections as and when you need too.
- You may find some elements of this pack more practical and useful to you than others, find what works for you and feel free to discard what does not.
- Feel free to discuss this booklet with your mental health practitioners or your care team.

We also asked our Experts by Experience for their tips about how to cope during the Coronavirus pandemic. These are ideas from autistic adults who work closely with our service.



TOP TIPS

It is likely that your routine has been drastically changed as a result of the Coronavirus restrictions. You may have had to stop going to college or work; seeing people; or attending activities such as Church, the gym or bingo. Whilst a change to routine can be unsettling for everyone, we know that this can be particularly hard for autistic adults who had often have a strong sense of routine and need for structure.

Therefore, it is important that you establish a new routine based around your new living arrangements. This could look quite different to how things were before the restrictions were put in place. However you may want to think about having a structure to your day and doing things at set times including:

- Getting up and going to bed
- Eating meals
- Engaging in pleasurable activities, this may be related to your special interests
- Home based exercise
- Doing chores such as housework

You could draw this out on a timetable or schedule. This will help you to stick to it.

TOP TIPS from our Experts:

Come up with a new routine and prioritise the things that help you. For example:

*Get up at 7am
Breakfast at 8am*

Shower at 8.30am and so on.

Then schedule in activities such as reading, writing, exercise, mindfulness, Online chat/ autism support groups, drawing, painting, singing, university or college work, jigsaws

I cannot do anything unless I have showered and dressed. I get up earlier so I can do that first.

Use the one hour exercise, maybe walk around the block. I go at the same time every day.

Activity

At the time that we wrote this, the rules said that people could only go out once a day for exercise, and that they had to stay close to home. However the Department of Health and Social Care have recognised that going outside for exercise is very important to the health and wellbeing of many autistic people. Sometimes, autistic people may need to go to quieter places, away from other people, even if these places are further away from their home. They may also need to be accompanied by a carer or support worker who is not someone they live with.

Some people might be worried about this as they are anxious that they might still be stopped or judged by others. The government has published official guidance about this and you can check whether this has changed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do>

When we wrote this document this is what it said:

15. Can I exercise more than once a day if I need to due to a significant health condition?

You can leave your home for medical need. If you (or a person in your care) have a specific health condition that requires you to leave the home to maintain your health - including if that involves travel beyond your local area - then you can do so. This could, for example, include where individuals with learning disabilities or autism require specific exercise in an open space two or three times each day - ideally in line with a care plan agreed with a medical professional.

Even in such cases, in order to reduce the spread of infection and protect those exercising, travel outside of the home should be limited, as close to your local area as possible, and you should remain at least 2 metres apart from anyone who is not a member of your household or a carer at all times.

Emotional Toolkit

The concept of an “Emotional Toolkit” is a useful way to encourage people on the Autism Spectrum to develop ways of coping with difficult emotions. This is based on research by Professor Tony Attwood who has developed lots of useful resources for autistic people



Physical:

This is a tool which gives a constructive release of emotional energy:

Exercise	Household	Kitchen	Other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online workouts, such as ‘PE with Joe Wicks’ or ‘Yoga with Adriene’. These can be found on YouTube • Talking your daily walk or run • Dancing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recycling – crushing up cans or throwing bottles in the bin • Tearing up old clothes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Squeezing oranges • Pounding meat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DIY • Gardening

Relaxation:

This can help to calm a person and lower the heart rate. This can include:

- Relaxation exercises, such as breathing, mindfulness.
- Repetitive actions such as rocking, using a stress ball, worry beads
- Listening to a favourite piece of music
- Massage
- Spending time alone

TOP TIPS from our Experts:

I use mindfulness apps such as headspace, calm, guided relaxation very helpful.. There are lots available. Mindfulness can also be done on Alexa and programmed for the same time everyday

Social:

This is when you can use interaction with others to manage feelings. It is important that this is enjoyable and without the stress which may be associated with social interaction. Due to the restrictions on people leaving the house, you may find that you spend more time with other people than usual. This can be anxiety provoking for autistic people and therefore it is important that you also spend some time alone if you need to.

This can include:

- Time spent with someone in your household who you know will 'say the right thing.'
- Communicating with others by telephone, text or video call
- Pets and animals
- Helping others – volunteering, being needed and appreciated.

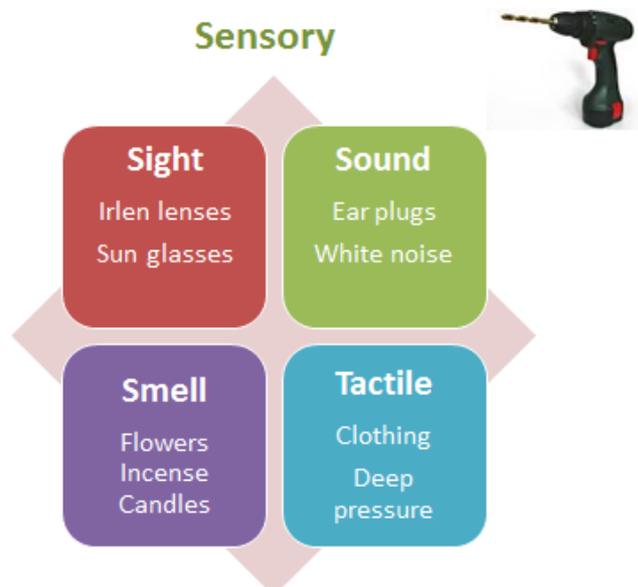
TOP TIPS from our Experts:

*Speak up and talk to loved ones, friend and family. Ask for help/ support/ understanding.
I sit in the garden, it feels like an escape.*

Sensory:

Whilst often autistic people may have sensory sensitivities which they find to be unpleasant and overwhelming, there are often other sensory experiences which are soothing. They can help to distract from other difficult feelings.

This could also include colouring, listening to music, smelling a favourite hand cream or aromatherapy oil, or feeling something which has a soothing texture. You could also make a self-soothe box which includes a variety of materials that you can go to if you are feeling stressed.



TOP TIPS from our Experts:
If you have a sensory kit use it! Look at the different things in it when things feel tough.

If things feel overwhelming then you could use your sense to help to distract you from your difficult feelings

- 5 things you can see right now
- 4 things you can hear right now
- 3 things you can touch, and reach out and touch them, right now
- 2 things you can smell or like the smell of
- 1 slow, deep breath

Then focus on your breathing, before shifting your focus of attention onto something different

Thinking:

These are strategies which change the way you think.

This includes:

- Putting events into perspective - 'I know that this is really hard at the moment, but I will get through it.'
- Positive self-talk – 'I can do this.'

TOP TIPS from our Experts:

It is ok not to be ok with this huge change. Be kind to yourself! Remember that you are awesome! You are not alone! Let's get through this together :)

Using special interests:

To restore emotional equilibrium, the most effective strategies can be solitude and being absorbed in a special interest. This might include watching something on television or YouTube; reading and learning more about it online or in a book; or doing further research. For everyone routines, rituals and repetition are calming and for autistic people, it is thought that a preferred activity can create a sense of comfort and security.

It is important that your special interest does not become too compulsive in times of extreme stress and so it might be useful to schedule a start and end time for doing this as an activity.

TOP TIPS from our Experts:

*Use this time to research exciting subjects.
I eat similar food, it is something I can control.
Listen to music. I listen to the same song over again.. Sing along! :)*

Accessing Further Support:

The National Autistic Society also have some advice and guidance on their website. They also have a helpline which is still working via email. You can access these at www.autism.org

- Mind – mental health charity & support: 0300 123 3393
- Samaritans - If somethings troubling you, then get in touch: 24 hours a day, 365 days a year: www.samaritans.org Call 116 123 free from any phone.
- Rethink Mental Illness: Charity supporting people with mental illness - www.rethink.org
- CALM - the campaign against living miserably, is a charity set up in response to the high suicide rate among young men: www.thecalmzone.net 0800 58 58 58 - 7 days a week, 5pm to midnight (anonymous & free phone on 3, Virgin, Orange and Vodafone networks).

If you are experiencing significant mental health issues, you can call your GP. If you need urgent help then you are able to call the Mental Health Urgent Response Team on 01942 63 63 95.

This document was compiled by the Autism Diagnostic Service in Wigan, which is part of the North West Boroughs NHS Foundation Trust, with support from the Experts by Experience.

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