

# The Essential Guide to Anxiety and Autism: Summary



**RESEARCH AUTISM**  
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE  
IDENTIFICATION INTERVENTION INCLUSION

## Introduction



this leaflet provides a summary of our essential guide on anxiety and people on the autism spectrum.

It provides the key facts about anxiety and examines some of the causes and effects of anxiety.

It also looks at some of the interventions (treatments, services and other forms of support) designed to prevent or reduce anxiety in autistic people.

## Anxiety

- Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe. Everyone experiences feelings of anxiety at some point in their life. For example, you may feel worried and anxious about sitting an exam or having a medical test. However when you are unable to control your worries and they affect your daily life you may have what doctors call an anxiety disorder.
- There are several different types of anxiety disorder that are common in autistic people including generalised anxiety (constant feelings of anxiety about everything); social anxiety disorder (persistent fear about social situations and being around people); phobias (fears about specific things, such as a fear of dogs or dentists); obsessions and compulsions (unwanted, unpleasant thoughts / and repetitive behaviours designed to prevent those obsessive thoughts coming true).

## Causes of Anxiety

- There are a number of underlying factors that may be associated with anxiety in some people on the autism spectrum. Those factors include the need for routine and structure; sensory sensitivities (such as hypersensitivity to noise); difficulties with emotional regulation (being able to understand and control your own feelings); physiological difficulties (such as having heightened arousal) and medical issues (such as gastrointestinal problems).
- Some people on the autism spectrum may become more anxious under certain situations, such as if they have to meet strangers; if they are asked to do something new; if they experience unpleasant sensations, such as hearing a dog bark; or if they are traumatised by unpleasant events, such as bullying.

## Effects of Anxiety

Anxiety affects each individual on the autism spectrum in a different way. For example some people may

- shut down altogether, preventing them from interacting with or communicating with other people
- become more rigid in their thought processes and in their insistence upon routines. When they are happy and relaxed, they may become less rigid and fixed
- become controlling or oppositional. They may use tantrums, emotional blackmail, and non-compliance to ensure they avoid the circumstances that could increase anxiety
- become angry, aggressive or violent. This aggression may be turned on others or on themselves in the form of self injury.

## Interventions

Most of the interventions (treatments, services and other forms of support) designed to help autistic people deal with anxiety are the same as those designed to help everyone else.

### Psychological approaches

Psychological approaches include behavioural techniques, such as teaching someone to be less sensitive towards the causes of their anxiety; behavioural tools, such as social stories and visual schedules ; psychotherapeutic practices, such as cognitive behavioural therapy; other approaches, such as offering someone a safe, quiet place to go during breaks.

### Medications

Medications include anxiolytics, such as diazepam (Valium) and buspirone (BuSpar); antidepressants, such as citalopram (Celexa) and sertraline (Lustral); anticonvulsants/ mood stabilisers, such as clonazepam (Klonopin) and lamotrigine (Lamictal).

### Other approaches

There are numerous other interventions sometimes used to help people on the autism spectrum deal with anxiety. These include acupuncture, hypnosis, low arousal techniques, massage, meditation, music therapy, physical exercise, relaxation techniques, yoga and so on.

## Research Evidence

There is very strong research evidence to suggest that cognitive behavioural therapy may be effective in reducing anxiety in some children and young people on the autism spectrum without learning disabilities, provided it has been adapted to meet their particular needs.

Determining the benefits of other interventions to treat anxiety in for individuals on the autism spectrum is not currently possible. We must wait for further research of sufficiently high quality to be completed. The fact that there is little or no research evidence to show that some interventions are effective doesn't mean that they do not work. It may simply mean that more research is required to find out if they do.

## Our Opinion

We believe that if you can identify the causes of someone' s anxiety (including any underlying risk factors and any specific situations that are likely to make them anxious) you are more likely to be able to help them. We also believe that, whatever you do to prevent or reduce anxiety in an individual, you should do so in a safe, consistent and predictable environment. You should also involve them in any decisions that affect them.

## Further information

Research Autism is the only UK charity exclusively dedicated to research into interventions in autism.

You can find more information on this topic (including sources of evidence, glossary of terms used etc.) on our website at <http://researchautism.net/anxiety-and-autism>



[www.theinformationstandard.org](http://www.theinformationstandard.org)

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Research Autism, 25 Nutford Place,

London W1H 5YQ, Tel: 020 3490 3091

Email: [info@researchautism.net](mailto:info@researchautism.net)

Website: [www.researchautism.net](http://www.researchautism.net)

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