

Supporting people with Autism during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 outbreak, millions of us are practicing social distancing and self-isolation. This is a huge change to our daily lives.

This change is difficult for everyone but for people with Autism, it can be even more challenging. We know that routine is important to most people with Autism and changes in routine can be very difficult for them to understand. Other behaviours and anxiety develop due to the unforeseen situation. So how can we help them?

Predictability

People with Autism like routine, they struggle with unpredictable situations – like the current crisis. Routines often serve as an important function – they introduce order, structure and predictability and help to manage anxiety.

1. Be mindful that people may experience unusual fear or anxiety.
2. Reassure them more frequently than normal.
3. Refocus to another activity (have activities planned that can be quickly accessed or chosen).
4. Tell them what is happening tomorrow before they go to sleep.

Communication

Communication is often referenced as something a person with Autism particularly struggles with. Finding the right method can take time but is so worthwhile.

1. Use a range of communication styles to help them understand what COVID-19 is so they become familiar with it. They may need you to explain this regularly.
2. Try explaining COVID-19 in the morning. This gives you time throughout the day to observe any anxiety build up and manage behaviours. It also gives them plenty of time to process the information and so should help reduce sleepless nights.
3. Try to stay positive and avoid speaking about any fears that you may have about the virus while the person with Autism is around.

Visual aids

Visual aids can be very useful to both process information and communicate how they are feeling. Examples include:

1. Posters on the front doors saying “no exit”.
2. Visuals of police checking cars and chatting to people with masks on.
3. Visuals of empty public transport, closed shops and empty parks to explain why people are not going out.
4. Personalised visual Timetables and routines.

Consistency

This is as important as routine. Inconsistency can confuse and frustrate a person with Autism.

1. Remember what you have done or said and be consistent.
2. Ensure all people in the household are working from the same information so they too can be consistent. A person with Autism may ask the same question to different people and repeatedly, even though they know the answer. If one person gives a different answer, it might cause behaviours.

Earlier interventions

Unexpected things can happen:- identifying behaviours early on can allow you to put interventions in place before things escalate.

This allows you to apply interventions earlier and then refocus.

1. Monitor and understand changes that may indicate an escalation of behaviours.
2. Define what interventions you could use to calm and refocus.
3. Have a plan should incidents happen. For example, redirecting others away to give the person the space and time they need.

Sensory overload

As people are not allowed out unless essential, home may be busier and louder than usual. This can lead to sensory overload and possibly cause anxious behaviours. Equal importance needs to be provided to manage:

1. Consider a range of activities to keep the individual busy and active.
2. Have a designated quiet space.

Resources and Information

The National Autistic society have a number of useful links to information and resources:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx>

Parenting special children information and resources:

<https://www.parentingspecialchildren.co.uk/support-we-offer/coronavirus-psc-updates/>

Some social stories and information about the corona virus links:

This link has a social story about Corona virus that can be personalised before sharing with your child.

<https://theautismeducator.ie/2020/03/11/corona-virus-social-story/>

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Childrens-story-about-coronavirus.pdf>

Newsround videos and information for children <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround#more-stories-2>

https://nosycrow.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus_INS.pdf

Anxiety information and support:

https://youngminds.org.uk/?gclid=EAlalQobChMIyuTiiqn56AIVDM53Ch2BPwWxEAAAYASAAEgKUCvD_BwE

<https://www.childline.org.uk/>

https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/childrens-mental-health/depression-anxiety-mental-health/?gclsrc=aw.ds&&gclid=EAlalQobChMI1pHI5an56AIVIOR3Ch2kRANKEAAYAiAAEgJ5BPD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus.aspx>