Anxiety

Brief Informational Guide



Anxiety is common in autistic people. It is the body's way of reacting to stress, but sometimes the signals feel too strong or happen when there is no real danger. Understanding these feelings can help autistic people and their loved ones find ways to feel safe and comfortable.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, fear, or nervousness that happens when we think something unexpected or bad might happen. It's a natural way our brain and body respond to stress or new situations. This response helps keep us safe by preparing us to react to danger. But sometimes, our brain sends these signals even when there isn't real danger, or the feelings become so strong that it's hard to focus or feel calm. Anxiety can affect our thoughts, bodies, and actions. Some signals of anxiety include:

- **Body Signals**
  - Fast heartbeat
  - Feeling like throwing up
  - Difficulty taking a deep breath
  - Sweaty hands
- **Thought Signals**
  - Constant worrying
  - "What if?" questions
  - Getting stuck thinking of the same thing
- **Behavior Signals**
  - Running away
  - Hiding
  - Fidgeting
  - Overeating
  - Not sleeping

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Managing Anxiety

Exposure



Anxiety can get better when the body and mind learn that a situation isn't as scary as it seems. Try these simple steps:

- **Start small** – Take baby steps to help your child get used to a situation. For example, if they cry when you leave, step out of the room for just a few seconds at first.
- **Increase gradually** – Slowly make the situation a little harder, like staying out of the room a bit longer each time.
- **Praise bravery** – Give high fives, kind words, or extra time with a favorite toy to celebrate their efforts.
- **Be patient and consistent** – Over time, their anxiety should get better with practice.

Coping

Anxiety can be easier to manage when your child learns how to recognize and cope with it. Try these strategies:

- **Recognize anxiety signals** – Help your child notice signs like a racing heart or tight muscles.
- **Practice slow breathing** – Teach breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth; try using bubbles or a pinwheel.
- **Use distractions** – Encourage calming activities, like listening to music, during anxious moments.
- **Practice when calm** – Practice these skills when your child is not anxious to prepare for stressful situations.

Medication

Antidepressants, especially SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors) and SNRIs (Serotonin Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors), are commonly used to treat anxiety. Medicines can be helpful and are best used with behavioral treatments as well.



- **SSRIs** are the first choice, these medications increase serotonin in the brain and are well-tolerated.
  - Common SSRIs include sertraline (Zoloft), fluoxetine (Prozac), fluvoxamine (Luvox), and escitalopram (Lexapro).
- **SNRIs** may be considered but are less commonly used, especially in children. These medications target both serotonin and norepinephrine but may have more side effects.
  - Common SNRIs include venlafaxine ER (Effexor XR) and duloxetine (Cymbalta).
- It may take time to see the full benefits of these medicines. It often takes 2-4 weeks, with maximum effectiveness seen after 8 to 12 weeks. It's recommended to continue medication for about a year after symptoms improve.

NOTES:

If you have questions about anxiety, please talk to your healthcare clinician.