



IRELAND'S **AUTISM** CHARITY

AsIAm Anxiety Resource for Autistic Adults



#SameChance

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What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is our body and mind's natural reaction to threat or danger. It is a normal response to stressful situations or situations that could be threatening/ dangerous and might have a negative impact on our physical and/or psychological wellbeing. When you are in a challenging situation, your body releases hormones, such as adrenaline, which cause physical reactions in your body. This is known as the fight or flight response; it is your body's way of making sure you are alert and can respond to danger.¹

Changes to our bodies help us to prepare to fight and protect ourselves, flee from the threatening situation or can cause us to freeze in response to the threat.²

Anxiety is helpful in many situations, encouraging us to plan and adapt to things in our life, for example if you are preparing for an important exam. Anxiety is a common and non-problematic response in certain situations, like when facing a stressful life situation. But usually, these feelings are manageable and they go away when the event has passed. But anxiety can become a problem if you regularly feel anxious when there is no threat present or your feelings of anxiety are significantly greater than the situation needs. Anxiety can become counter-productive; when it stops you being able to prepare for situations and manage your life.

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread or uneasiness. It can affect your body, such as sweating, fast heartbeat, nausea, tensed muscles, feeling restless, feeling jittery, jaw tension, difficulty breathing, and so on. It can affect your thoughts; worrying a lot, being distracted, unable to concentrate, having racing thoughts, avoiding doing things, thoughts being out of control, and so on.³

Anxiety becomes a clinical condition when it is experienced over a long period of time and when it has a significant impact on a person's life.⁴

Common types of anxiety disorders are⁵:

- » Generalised anxiety disorder
- » Social anxiety- relating to of social situations
- » Agoraphobia- relating to open spaces and crowds
- » Phobias- specific fear



¹: <https://www.stpatricks.ie/mental-health/anxiety>

²: <https://www.laddersproject.co.uk/anxiety-and-autism-1>

³: <https://medlineplus.gov/anxiety.html>

⁴: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

⁵: <https://mental-health-wellbeing.middletownautism.com/information-strategies/anxiety-including-separation-anxiety/signs-of-anxiety/>

Anxiety and Autism

Anxiety is not part of the diagnostic criteria of autism. It is not a 'part of' being autistic. But this is how some professionals view anxiety in an autistic individual. Diagnostic overshadowing happens when a professional makes the assumption that a person's behaviour/ experience is a part of their disability, without exploring other reasons. This can include co-occurring mental health issues, such as anxiety. Diagnostic overshadowing has been defined as "...once a diagnosis is made of a major condition there is a tendency to attribute all other problems to that diagnosis, thereby leaving other co-existing conditions undiagnosed".

Anxiety can present differently in autistic individuals. This can make it harder to identify anxiety in an autistic child, adolescent or adult. Taking the example of social anxiety: a neurotypical person may experience social anxiety as a result of fear of being embarrassed or judged by others. But an autistic person may experience social anxiety because they find it difficult to navigate social situations.

There is a huge variety in how an autistic adult, young person or child may respond to their anxiety. Often signs of anxiety are internalized and therefore difficult to observe. However, signs of fight, flight and freeze are often clear: fight e.g., aggressive language or actions, flight e.g., hiding or running away, freeze e.g., disengagement from interactions, activities or surroundings.

Despite the resilience Autistic people often develop by living in a world where you are masking or constantly anticipating 'threats', distress can build and build until you **meltdown** or **shutdown**.

What is the difference between shutdown and meltdown?

Generally speaking, a meltdown is described as a loss of your control which shows itself externally (e.g., crying) and a shutdown is described as a more internal experience where it can feel like you are shutting down.

Shutdown

- » "Like a trapdoor closing"
- » "Dead battery"
- » "Self-preservation"
- » "Frozen in a bubble"

Meltdown

- » "Feeling sick"
- » "Total loss of control"
- » "Crying and shaking"
- » "A need to escape whatever way I can"

What is Autistic burnout?

This is a state of intense physical, mental or emotional exhaustion that an Autistic person can experience because of the additional load of having to navigate a world that is not built with Autistic people in mind. This can often arise from consistently masking or prolonged periods of sensory overload.

You might have heard the word burnout before, but Autistic burnout is different to general burnout. General burnout is usually associated with working too hard. Autistic burnout can in fact look like depression (loss of appetite, inability to concentrate, trouble sleeping, lack of interest in things, isolation). It can happen when you become completely fatigued by masking and by social interactions that cause you stress.

How can the people in your life help you? When you are in the process of meltdown, shutdown or burnout, explaining to someone what helps can feel absolutely impossible. A group of researchers in Canada decided to ask Autistic young people what they wanted the people in their lives to do when they were in meltdown. These young people concluded:

- » Know the things that make me feel out of control
- » Learn the strategies that help me regain control
- » Understand the things that make me feel worse

These might be three things you want to have a think about, and then consider sharing with the people important to you.

Autistic people are more likely to experience anxiety than neurotypical people.⁶ There are many reasons for this.

Social & Communication Differences

An Autistic person may experience anxiety when navigating social situations and environments. This can be the result of difficulty interpreting facial expressions, tones of voice, body language, and so on- this can lead to a feeling of missing key information in social situations, confusion and uncertainty. Over time, in learning that social situations are difficult to navigate, this can lead to anxiety in expectation of dealing with people. Experiencing social anxiety is valid and very common.⁷ Autistic masking is associated with higher rates of anxiety. As discussed by the double empathy problem, different neurotypes can have difficulty understanding each other and communicating with each other. (this may need to be linked together)

⁶: Find figure

⁷: <https://musingsofanaspie.com/2013/02/28/my-anxiety-is-not-disordered/>

Due to communication differences, Autistic people may experience difficulties accessing supports, asking for help, explaining what they are experiencing, and so on. Additionally, people who do not communicate verbally experience additional difficulties communicating their needs and wishes, which can lead to many issues including anxiety. For all people, neurodivergent and neurotypical, during times of stress and anxiety word-finding ability is negatively affected. For Autistic individuals who have difficulties with expressive verbal language, this will be additionally difficult.

Sensory Differences

Sensory processing differences are very common in Autistic people. All eight senses can be impacted. Sensory processing differences can lead to sensory overload which can in turn be a cause of anxiety. It is important to keep in mind that anxiety may increase sensitivity to sensory input, which can become a cycle of increasing anxiety. An Autistic person may also experience anxiety in anticipation of sensory input e.g., the school bell, busy streets. Lastly, auditory processing delays can lead to missed information, which can lead to uncertainty and confusion. However an Autistic persons sensory difference can also be a real strength to them in managing anxiety as sensory preferences can be used to reduce and manage anxiety e.g., lying under a weighted blanket.

Change & Uncertainty

Many Autistic people experience uncertainty and change as aversive and stressful. They may cope with this difficulty by seeking out sameness and predictability. This can lead some Autistic people to develop rigid ways of thinking- because it gives the predictability and consistency that is needed. Planning and seeking predictability are coping strategies. However, changes and uncertainty that naturally occur in the world can then lead to anxiety and panic.

Alexithymia

Alexithymia refers to difficulty identifying, understanding and managing emotions.⁸ Some Autistic people experience alexithymia and it is considered a factor in higher rates of anxiety in the Autistic community. Difficulty identifying internal signals of anxiety can make the experience of anxiety more confusing and unpredictable.⁹ Difficulty identifying and describing emotions can make it harder to regulate them.



⁸: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

⁹: Gaigg 2018

Anxiety Management

Managing anxiety can take time, effort and patience. This is because no single strategy will work for every person or work instantly or consistently. Most strategies work best with time and when used regularly, as well as being practiced when not experiencing anxiety. All anxiety management strategies should be individualized to the unique needs of the person.

If you are experiencing anxiety, a helpful first step can be to speak to your doctor.

Anxiety management strategies can be proactive or reactive. Proactive strategies are preventative measures which aim the anxiety from being experienced. Reactive strategies are used to calm and reduce anxiety. Below are a few suggestions for different strategies to try to support yourself with preventing and managing anxiety.

- » Understand your anxiety: It can be helpful to keep a record (in a journal/ diary/ app/ notes on your phone) to learn more about your anxiety. You can use this to look at what might be causing it- is it certain times of day? Specific places or people or situations? What did you do? Did it reduce the anxiety or make it worse? You can use this information to put adaptations and supports in place for yourself.¹⁰ Understanding your triggers can take time to start to see patterns and causes for your anxiety.
- » Monitor and manage your energy levels: Do you feel tired or energized at certain times of day or after different situations? Again use this information to decide when it is time for a break and when are the best times to tackle a demand. Allow enough time to recharge and do things you enjoy- whatever that is for you.¹¹
- » Make your environment work for you: Consider your individual sensory needs and preferences and make adjustments. This may include using earplugs, noise-cancelling headphones, dim lights, weighted blankets, creating a relaxing-space, and much more.¹²
- » Self-soothe: Get to know what objects or actions make you feel good. Sensory tools and stimming can help with self-regulation when experiencing anxiety.¹³
- » Relaxation and calming activities: Try scheduling time into your day or starting a morning/evening routine that includes activities that help you feel regulated or reduce your anxiety. Some people find meditation, mindfulness (breathwork, colouring, etc), yoga, exercise (walking, jogging, gym, etc), stretching, and so on help them. You can find short videos on YouTube to try many of these and help you get started.¹⁴

¹⁰: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

¹¹: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

¹²: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

¹³: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

¹⁴: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

- » Use visual supports: You may find a visual schedule or checklist helps you to structure your day, reduce uncertainty and/or remind you to do what you need to do. This can be printed, on a phone, app. You may find reminders helpful by way of phone notifications or notes in the house.¹⁵
- » Reflect on your strengths: It's not always easy to acknowledge the good things about ourselves, but actively noticing and focusing on things you like about yourself, your strengths, times you overcame adversity, coped with a difficult situation, used a strategy well and so on can increase your confidence, self-esteem and belief in your own abilities. When you are feeling overwhelmed or anxious, it can help to focus on these strengths and remember times when you were able to cope- even when you didn't think you would!¹⁶
- » Request accommodations: If you are experiencing anxiety in certain situations, e.g., at work, you may consider asking for accommodations that help to reduce these feelings. You can find some information on this topic here: <https://asiam.ie/advice-guidance/faqs#employment>
- » Explore and engage with special interests: Consider scheduling time to become consumed in hyper-focus. This can provide a feeling of control, certainty, regulate the nervous system and facilitate the experience of a happy and calm 'flow' state. (see monotropism for deeper understanding)



¹⁵: <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety>

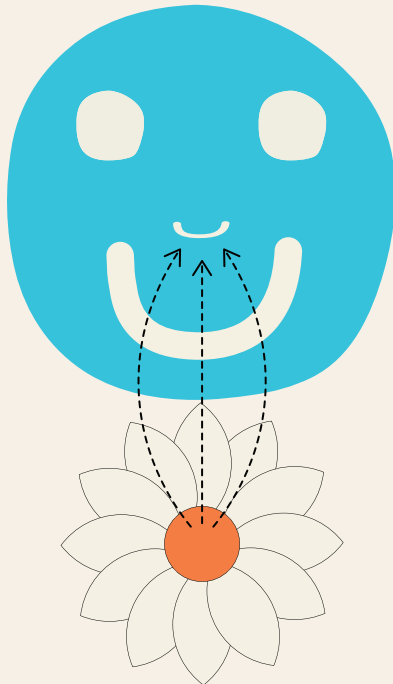
¹⁶: https://www.medecoded.com/shadow_anxiety/

Other Information & Resources

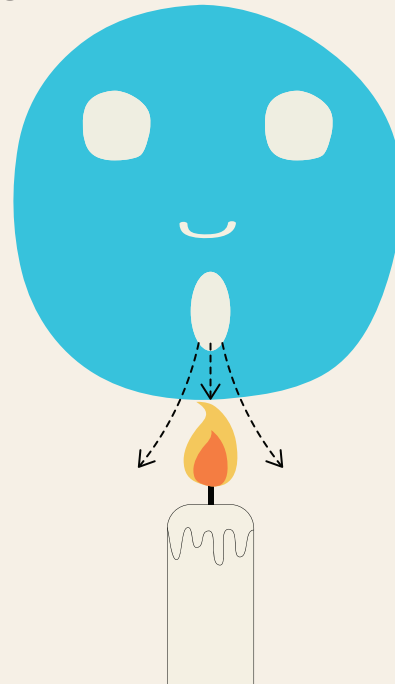
Middletown Centre for Autism <https://www.middletownautism.com/>

Jac den Houting's Ted Talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/jac_den_houting_why_everything_you_know_about_autism_is_wrong/transcript

Deep Breathing Exercise



Smell the flower



Blow out the candle

5 Finger Breathing



Worry / Anxiety Scale



5 Grounding Technique

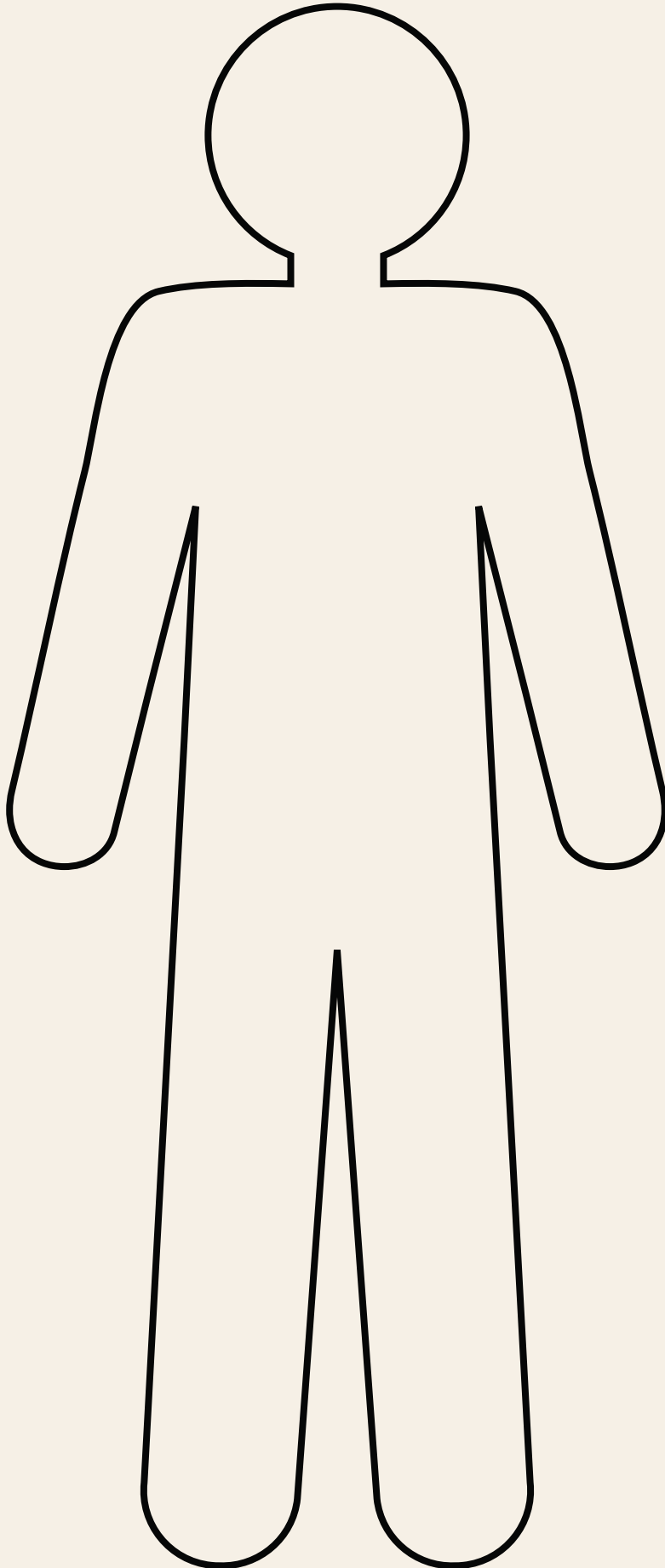
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Grounding Technique

A calming technique that connects you with the present by exploring the five senses



How My Body Feels When I'm Anxious

When you're feeling worried or anxious, you can draw how your body is feeling inside. Maybe you feel like there are bees buzzing in your stomach! Or is there's a thousand worries swirling in your head? Talk to a trusted adult as you draw your feelings in the outline below.





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Same Chance

As I Live, Work, Grow, Participate

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