

Resources and Tips for Managing Anxiety

Co-occurrence of Autism Spectrum Disorders and Anxiety

Many children with autism also experience anxiety¹. For some children, this anxiety can be at low, manageable levels, and for others, anxiety can make it difficult to control their emotions and behaviors. When anxiety is unmanaged it can lead to problematic behaviors and even aggression². For children with higher levels of anxiety it may be helpful to seek out treatment for their struggles. Assessing and understanding anxiety in individuals with autism can be challenging as many of the symptoms of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are similar to high levels of anxiety.

This guide will provide information that can be helpful for understanding a child's challenges with autism and anxiety.

Symptoms and Risk Factors

Symptoms of anxiety are hard to differentiate between the symptoms of ASD.

Symptoms of anxiety include²:

- intense feelings of worry
- restlessness
- irritability
- trouble concentrating
- muscle tension
- fatigue
- trouble sleeping
- racing heart
- shallow breathing

Risk factors for anxiety include:

- Continual negative stressors²
 - For children with autism this can be bullying or stress in the household.
- A family history of anxiety³
 - Having a parent or close relative with anxiety puts a child at risk for anxiety.

- Higher cognitive functioning⁴
 - Children with autism that are higher functioning are often more aware of their challenges. This can lead the child to being more self-conscious and feeling anxious.
- Emphasis on rigidity and routine^{4, 5}
 - When a child is especially dependent on routines and sameness, this increases their odds of becoming anxious when things do not go as planned.
 - Rigid thought patterns may get in the way of using coping skills that help to manage anxious feelings.

Treatment Options

For children that are experiencing impairing levels of anxiety treatment may be helpful. Often psychotherapy is an effective treatment for anxiety. Many cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approaches are effective in reducing anxiety in children. There are slight adjustments that can be made to make these treatments more successful for children with autism. Research has suggested that the following accommodations to therapy can help a child with autism^{6, 7}

- having extra visual aids and models in session
- involving parents and family in therapy
- including interactive exercises (role-play, relaxation techniques, exposure)
- extending session times to provide summaries and insure understanding

Behavior interventions can also be used to reduce anxious behaviors. There are a few techniques that can be included in behavior intervention programs (such as ABA services) that can help ease anxiety. Discussing the incorporation of anxiety reduction techniques with an ABA supervisor can create the possibility of a child learning to manage symptoms of anxiety. Including behavior programs such as positive self-talk, and regulating physical symptoms with muscle relaxation and deep breathing can be helpful.

Tools to Manage Anxious Feelings

These are a few tools and exercises that are often used to reduce stress and anxiety. Using these skills are a lot like training for a race; the more you practice these techniques the

easier they become and the better they work. Having a coach, such as an experienced adult or supervisor, can help to get the best results from these exercises.

Mindful Breathing:

During times of intense anxiety, our body reacts by breathing short, shallow breathes which leads to hyperventilating and makes anxiety worse ⁹. To stop this, it helps to focus deeply on each breath; taking long deep breaths, and feel the air reach all the way to lower stomach.

Practicing mindful breathing for a few minutes can help calm the mind and body.

Videos to teach mindful breathing

For younger children: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CdPQ7X1MzU>

For older children: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uxbdx-SeOOo>

Imagery:

When experiencing high levels of anxiety, one is typically having extremely worrisome thoughts and it can be hard to think about anything else. Imagining visually relaxing situations can help one to relax and get their mind off stressful thoughts ⁹.

To practice this, take a few deep, relaxing breaths and imagine yourself in a peaceful place (a park, at the beach, etc.). Imagine yourself feeling very relaxed there. Imagine all the scenery around you. Imagine the smells, the sounds, the breeze, as if you were actually there. Now try thinking about one worry you have. Notice it is there with you, but is not harming you. See the worry and then let it blow away in the breeze. Do this with more worries you have, and let them blow away in the wind.

Guided imagery for children video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KF52txZvUsA>

Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

When there are high amounts of stress and anxiety, the body often reacts by tensing its muscles. By focusing on tensing our muscles purposely, and then relaxing the muscles, we take control of the body's reaction to stress, and can alleviate anxiety ⁹. To fully relax the body, it is best to focus on specific muscle groups one at a time, and work your way through the whole

body. For example, start by tensing your feet and calf muscles for 10 seconds, and then relax. Then repeat the technique while moving to your thighs, stomach, arms, neck, and face muscles.

Video for muscle relaxation for children: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaTDNYjk-Gw>

Attention:

It can be hard to focus on anything other than stressful and worrisome thoughts when anxiety is high⁹. Practice focusing on objects in your environment, instead of your worries. Try to focus on 15 objects around you and name them (example: trees, swing-set, blue car, red car, stop sign etc.) or counting backward from 100 by 5s (100, 95, 90, 85... etc.).

Positive Self Talk:

Sometimes anxiety triggers one to think negative thoughts about their situation or themselves. It is hard to recognize when this happens and it can be difficult to get out of this negative thinking trap, making anxiety worse⁹. To help break this negative train of thought, practice repeating any of the following phrases out loud or to yourself:

“I can get through this.”

“I have felt like this before and it has been okay.”

“I do not like how I am feeling but it will pass. I will let it go.”

“These are just thoughts. It does not mean they are true.”

“I can do anything.”

Resources in the Community

This list of local resources was put together by Mary Teresi, a Cal Poly graduate with a BA in Psychology. These are psychologists, therapists, and ABA providers in the area that have a specialization in working with autism and related disorders.

Psychologists and Therapists:

Cronin Assessment (based out of county but travels to SLO county for assessment)

Dr. Pegeen Cronin

PO Box 1723, Agoura Hills, CA 91376
877-428-8478
CroninAssessment@yahoo.com
www.croninassessment.com

Family Institute of the Central Coast
Dr. Julie A. Daggett
1411 Marsh St, Suite 104, San Luis Obispo, 93401
805-801-9972
drjdaggett@charter.net

PEAKS Clinic
Dr. Jessica Kaczorowski
1411 Marsh St, Suite 106, San Luis Obispo, CA 93401
www.peaksclinic.com
DrK@peaksclinic.com

Spark Psychological Services
Laurie Ferguson, PsyD
5975 Entrada Ave, Atascadero, 93422
805-610-8694
LaurieFergusonPsyD@gmail.com
www.lauriefergusonpsyd.com

Tidelands Counseling
1411 Marsh St, San Luis Obispo, 93401
805-543-5060
www.tidelandscounseling.com

Behavior Interventions:

Autism Connections
4251 South Higuera Street, Suite 800, San Luis Obispo 93401
805-541-7130
contact@autism-connections.com
www.autism-connections.com

California Psychcare
889 Murray Ave, San Luis Obispo, 93405
355 Posada Lane, Templeton, 93465
805-456-2333
tmarrs@calpsychcare.com
www.calpsychcare.com

Holdsambeck & Associates, Inc
1112 South Broadway, Santa Maria, 93454
office@holdsambeck.com
www.holdsambeck.com

Monarch Behavior Solutions
805-610-1998
lindsey@monarchslo.com
www.monarchslo.com

National Behavioral Care
313 East Plaza Dr, Santa Maria, 93454
805-273-6556
info@NatBCare.com
www.natbcare.com

STAR of CA Behavioral and Psychological Services Inc.
6955 El Camino, Atascadero, 93422
805-466-7827
qneel@starofca.com
www.starofca.com

Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD)
1124 Nipomo St. San Luis Obispo, 93401
805-715-4484
855-345-2273
<http://www.centerforautism.com>

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