

Strategies for Managing Anxiety

Once someone understands anxiety and has identified the things and situations that make them anxious, they can then take steps to cope with the anxiety. If you are supporting an autistic person, try and be aware of what makes them anxious and how best to help them manage certain behaviours.

Keep a diary

To help someone understand anxiety, get them to understand the symptoms they display when they are anxious and to look at the causes of their anxiety. Keeping a diary in which they write about certain situations and how these make them feel may help them to understand their anxiety and manage it better.

Use the diary also to think about the physical changes linked to anxiety. An autistic person might retreat into their particular interest if they are anxious about something - use the diary to monitor this as well. Record:

- Time and date
- Situation
- How I felt
- How anxious (1 to 10)

Use an app The National Autism Strategy have developed an ASD Planner App to help manage anxiety. <http://www.asdinfo.wales.co.uk/asdplanner>. Means that you can plan your daily activities, reduces anxiety and helps people feel in control. Features of the app include:

- Welsh / English language choice
- Personalised content added by the user
- Capacity to build activities in a step by step sequence
- Steps are stored within the app. so can be reused within different activities
- Users can add relevant advice, reminders or instructions for each step
- Activities can be created and emailed to other users

Meltdown prevention plan

Create an anxiety plan when someone is feeling positive about things. An anxiety plan is a list of things and situations that cause anxiety as well as solutions and strategies they can use to help them manage their anxiety levels. The plan can be adapted, depending upon how well someone understands anxiety.

Here's an example:

- **Situation** – going on the bus
- **Anxiety symptoms** - heart beats fast; sweat and feel sick
- **Solution** - have stress ball in pocket, squeeze the ball and take deep breaths, listen to music.

Relaxation techniques

Autistic people can sometimes find it very difficult to relax. Some have a particular interest or activity they like to do because it helps them relax. If they use these to relax, it may help to build them into their daily routine. However, this interest or activity can itself be the source of behavioural difficulties at times, especially if they're unable to follow their interest or do the activity at a particular moment.

Some people may need to be left alone for short periods of the day to help them unwind.

Physical activity can also often help to manage anxiety and release tension. Using deep breathing exercises to relax can be helpful as can activities such as yoga and Pilates, which both focus on breathing to relax. Use a visual timetable or write a list to help remind the person when they need to practice relaxation.

Any other activities that are pleasant and calming such as taking a bath, listening to relaxing music, aromatherapy, playing on a computer may also help reduce anxiety. Some people may find lights particularly soothing, especially those of a repetitive nature, such as spinning lights or bubble tubes.

You may need to encourage some adults to take part in these activities so that they can enjoy their benefits. You can do this by explaining when and where they will do the activity and what it will involve. You may have to go along with them at first and do short periods of activity to begin with.

Talking about anxiety

Some people find direct confrontation difficult. They may therefore be unable to say they don't like certain things or situations, which will raise their anxiety levels. If they identify they are anxious, they could use a card system to let family or friends around them know how they are feeling. At first, you may need to tell them when to use the card and prompt them to use it when they do become anxious.

They could also carry a card around with them to remind themselves of what they need to do if they start getting anxious.

You could also give them a stress scale that they can use whenever they find something particularly stressful.

It may help them to use the Can you See Me card and bands. They can use the card to let members of the public know that they are autistic.

Read more about this: <http://www.asdinfoales.co.uk/can-you-see-me>



Other Ideas:

- Worry Journal/worksheet
- Shared parent/child journals
- Reimagining endings/rewriting fears
- Balloon Symbolisation
- Distraction/Building Self Esteem
- Using a special interest or hobby
- Positive Affirmations
- Anxiety Thermometer
- Mindfulness
- Grounding
- School Nurture Programmes
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
- Visual Supports:- (Social Stories, Visual Timetables, 'Now, Next, Later' Timers, Tracking a journey with google maps/Sat Nav, Cards, Bracelets, Traffic light symbols, Apps to aid in communicating emotions.
- Sensory Interventions:- Weighted vests/blankets/lap pads, body socks, bubbles, bubble tubes, Rainbow projectors, larva lamps, Dark den, Swings, Trampolines, Fidget toys, Body brushing, Deep pressure

As well as the importance of honesty, empathy and sensitivity when discussing your child's worries with them.

Choosing the right approach will depend on each individual's unique profile, their developmental level and particular characteristics.

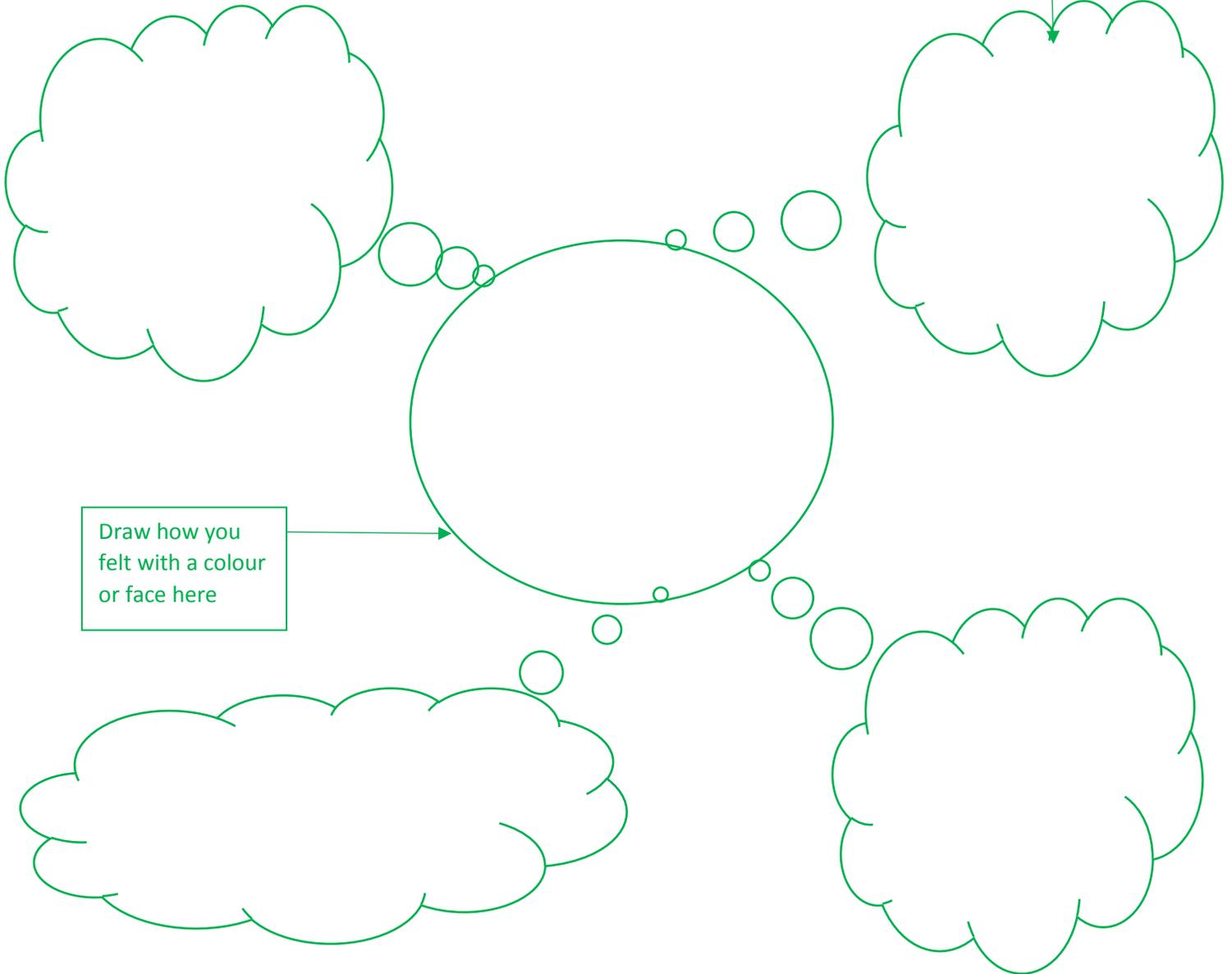
A lot of the time, it comes down to trial and error. Using your best judgement to identify the most appropriate strategies and then trying them until you find the one(s) that work for you and your family.

Worry Worksheet

Today I felt _____

Because _____

Fill in your thoughts and worries here



Draw how you felt with a colour or face here

What I did/said _____

What I could try next time this happens

Getting support from other autistic people

Personal accounts

It may help someone on the autism spectrum to read the personal accounts of other autistic people, and to see how they dealt with certain situations and managed any anxiety they experienced. A number of autistic people have written personal accounts of their experiences:

Glass half empty, glass half full: 'how Asperger's syndrome has changed my life'

by Chris Mitchell

Making sense of the unfeasible: 'my life journey with Asperger syndrome' by

Mark Fleisher

'Thinking in pictures' by Temple Grandin

The NAS also produce a quarterly newsletter called Asperger United. It is written by autistic people and includes personal accounts of having autism.

Online resources

- Aspies for Freedom (AFF)
- Wrong Planet
- Identity First Autistic
- The National Autistic People's Organisation
- Puzzle Buddies (NEW peer support group for Monmouthshire Parents)