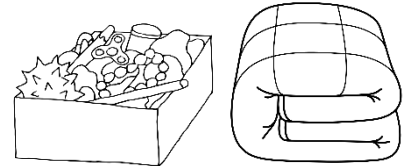


## Anxiety Management Techniques and Resources

**Sensory techniques:** Do activities that soothe and regulate your senses. This can be grounding and help you feel reconnected to your body during periods of high anxiety. For example,

- Rubbing lotion into your hands
- Squeezing play-doh or putty
- Using scents that you find relaxing, like lavender or clean washing.
- Laying under a weighted or soft blanket



It might be helpful to create a “sensory soothing kit” of items and tools that help you regulate your senses when feeling anxious. Anxiety is a state of high emotional arousal, so it is better to use sensory items that sooth your system, rather than things that make you more alert. You might need to do a sensory profile and figure out what you like to help prepare.

It can also be very helpful to use techniques and tools that limit uncomfortable sensory input. This can help you navigate environments with a greater degree of sensory control and safety. For example,

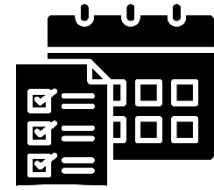
- Noise cancelling headphones, earplugs or ear defenders
- Sunglasses to reduce brightness
- Gloves to add a barrier when touching things
- A mask, nose plug or scarf to dampen smells



**Being expressive:** It can be helpful to externalise your anxiety in a controlled, safe and/or creative way. There are a variety of ways to do this, and you’ll need to find a way that suits your needs and ways of processing, Here are some ideas:

- Talking to a friend or safe person
- Counselling
- Peer support – this can be online or in-person. It can be formal or informal.
- Writing things down – you can write creatively or just dump thoughts onto paper. You can keep what you write and reflect on it or choose to get rid of it.
- Artwork – Some people process and express their anxiety through artwork or crafts. This can also be soothing and/or distracting.

**Structure and routine:** For some autistic people, having structure and routine can help manage anxiety or help you build other anxiety management techniques into the day. It can bring a sense of safety and predictability to the day. Here are some ways to do this:



- “Worry time” – This is a technique from CBT where you schedule a short period of time in the day that is dedicated to worrying, You can find a calming space and think through your worries in a controlled way.
- Sensory diet – This is where you create a routine of sensory input to help you regulate and maintain sensory wellbeing.
- Planning – It might be helpful to create plans for situations that frequently cause anxiety. For example, a plan of what to do if your bus is running late.
- Planned escape – If you are entering a new situation or place, it might be helpful to plan an escape or somewhere to retreat if you feel overwhelmed.

With structure and routine, it is important to be aware that things do not always go to plan and that solely relying on this to manage anxiety might have a negative effect in the long term. If your primary method of managing anxiety is with structure and routine, it is a good idea to back this up with good crisis and distress management techniques.

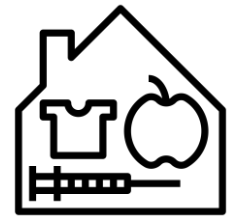


**Crisis and distress management:** Sometimes, prevention methods of managing anxiety are not effective or are unable to happen. This can lead to anxiety becoming overwhelming and difficult to manage. You might not be able to do your usual techniques and you might feel out of control. When this happens, a good next step is to reduce the immediate distress. Here are some ideas:

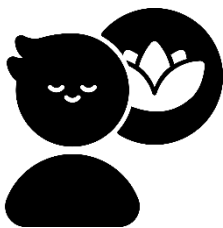
- Cold water: The chilly zap of cold water can lower your heart rate, distract you from panic and signal your body to relax. This can be a cold shower, splashing or submerging your face or rinsing your hands.
- Self-soothing and stimming: Releasing energy and tension through stimming can help you regulate when feeling overwhelmed in the moment. This might involve jumping, rocking, sucking your thumb or making noises. If some of your stims are harmful to you, it may be helpful to pre-plan safer stims that provide similar sensory input.

- Communication aids: When having an anxiety attack, it may be harder to communicate. It might be helpful to prepare easy-to-use communication cards, an alert card with important information and a safety plan.
- Intense exercise: Doing a burst of intense exercise can help to distract, relieve tension and flood your body with endorphins.
- Breathing exercises – There are a range of different breathing exercises that can help you regulate the rhythm of your breaths and slow down.
- Support from others – When you are significantly distressed, it may be necessary to get support from others, including professionals, family, friends and carers. This support should be aimed at immediately reducing distress, rather than underlying anxiety.

**Managing daily needs:** It is harder to manage anxiety and it may be amplified if you have unmet needs. This can be even more challenging if you have poor interoception and don't easily notice internal sensations. Here are some needs to look out for:



- Sleep – This is an important part of anxiety management. Sleep deprivation has a direct link to anxiety.
- Hunger
- Thirst
- Hygiene
- Medical needs
- Social contact



**Other soothing activities:** There are a variety of other activities that you can do to help you manage your anxiety. You can choose ones that fit your energy levels, the amount of time you have available and what interests you. Here are some examples:

- Sorting and organising – Many autistic people find it relaxing to sort things into categories. There are many ways to do this from sorting through a collection you own, organising your space to simple button sorting.
- Being in nature – Being in nature can help you retreat from everyday life and feel connected to your environment.
- Spending time with a pet or other animals

- Playing games or doing puzzles
- Engaging with special interests
- Mindfulness

It can be tempting to research the thing you are anxious about to find out more information or get clarity. Although this can be helpful sometimes, it comes with the risk of increasing your anxiety and getting partial or misinformation. This is particularly important for health and disaster related anxiety. Taking a screen break or stepping away from media sources might seem counterproductive, but can give you the brain space to engage in self-care and regulation.

### **Apps that might help**

- Mountain Molehill is a CBT-based app designed for autistic people to help manage anxiety. It allows you to check-in and track your worries,
- Autistic Space Kit is an app that allows you to communicate in times of distress or crisis using a traffic light system and trusted contacts.
- Finch is a self-care virtual pet app that offers a cute and fun way to look after your wellbeing.



### **Tracking and managing anxiety:**

Some people may find it difficult to recognise anxiety or its triggers, and this contributes to difficulty managing anxiety.



For this, keeping a diary or using a self-management app such as Brain in Hand or Molehill Mountain, which allow you to log and track anxiety levels, allowing you to have a better understanding of what situations affect you most and where reasonable adjustments or sensory tools might be useful.

Brain In Hand is tailored for Autistic users, and has a number of features to help self-manage in work or education, including job coaching, reminders and coping strategies, which can contribute to helping reduce stress and anxiety in work, and provide more stability.

Brain in Hand is normally a paid App, however there are a number of ways to acquire it including through the DWP's Access to Work scheme, following an assessment, or if you are in University education, through Disabled Student's Allowance grant via student finance.

## Local Organisations and Support

- Leeds Recovery College – An NHS service that runs courses where you can learn more about mental health.
- Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service – Offer a range of services and support for people struggling with mental health, such as anxiety.
- Live Well Leeds – Provide a range of services to people with mild to moderate mental health needs, including 1-to-1 support and groups.
- Further sources of support can be found in Leeds Autism AIM's Mental Health Guide: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/04/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v6-April-2023.pdf>

