



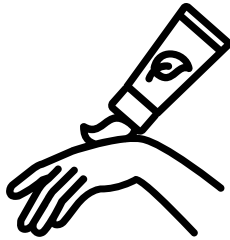
Mental Health
Equity Project

Strategies and Resources

Anxiety Management

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:



Using hand lotion



Squeezing putty or play dough



Relaxing scents or aromatherapy



Laying under a weighted 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 soothe 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.

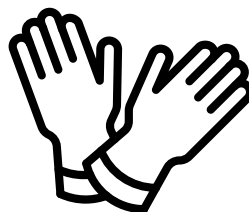
It can also be very helpful to use techniques and tools that limit uncomfortable sensory input. This can help you navigate environments with a greater degree of sensory control and safety.



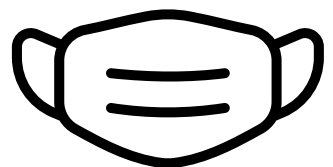
Ear defenders or headphones



Sunglasses to reduce light



Gloves as a barrier for touch



Mask/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:

An illustration featuring a purple cloud-like shape on the left with the text 'Arts and crafts' in white. To the right is an orange circle containing various art supplies: two paintbrushes, a palette with red and purple paint, and a tube of paint.

Arts and crafts

An illustration of a white sheet of paper pinned to a surface with four brown corner tabs. A blue pen with a red band lies diagonally across the top right of the paper. The text 'Writing things down' is written in black cursive on the paper.

Writing things down

An illustration of four people sitting in a circle, engaged in conversation. A blue speech bubble is positioned above them, containing the text 'Peer support: Formal or informal.'.

Peer support:
Formal or informal.

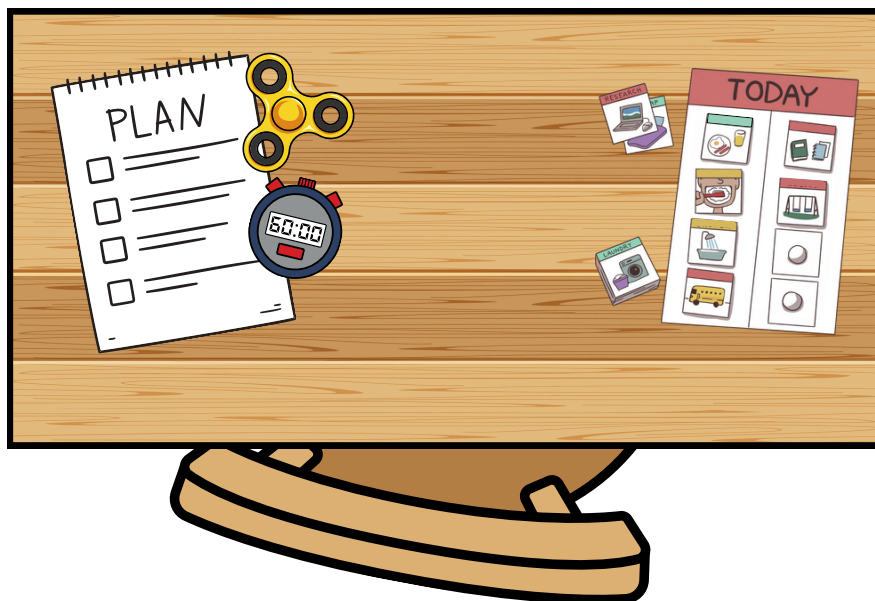
An illustration showing two blue silhouettes of human heads in profile, facing each other. Inside the head on the left is a spiral, and inside the head on the right is a tangled scribble. A black line connects the two heads. Above the heads is a red cloud-like shape containing the text 'Counselling or therapy' in white.

Counselling or therapy

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.



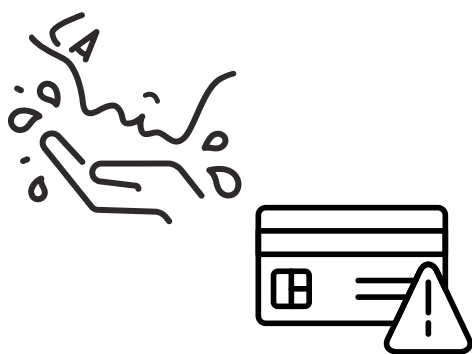
Be aware that things do not always go to plan and that solely relying on this to manage anxiety might have a negative effect in the long term.

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:

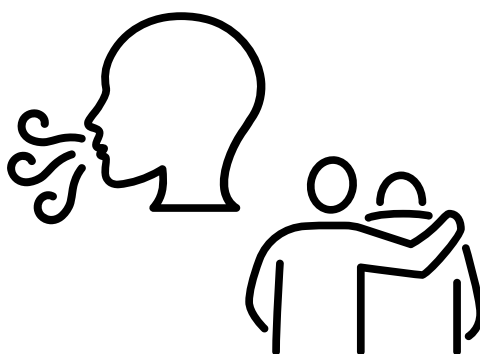
Cold water:

Try a cold shower, splashing or submerging your face or rinsing your hands. This can lower your heart rate, distract you from panic and signal your body to relax.



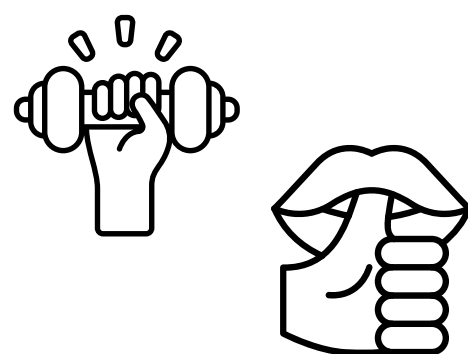
Breathing exercises:

Breathing exercises can help you regulate the rhythm of your breaths and slow down.



Intense exercise:

Doing a burst of intense exercise can help to distract, relieve tension and flood your body with endorphins.



Communication aids:

When having an anxiety attack, it may be harder to communicate. Try easy-to-use communication cards, an alert card with important information and a safety plan.

Support from others:

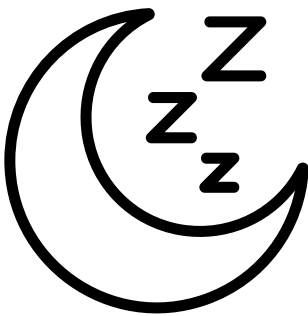
Support from others may be necessary. This support should be aimed at immediately reducing distress, rather than underlying anxiety.

Stimming:

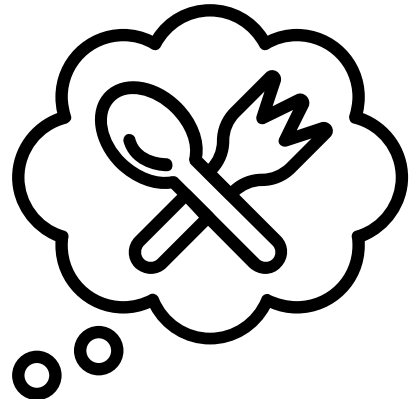
Actions like jumping, rocking, sucking your thumb or making noises can release energy and tension. If some of your stims are harmful, look for safer alternatives.

Managing Daily Needs

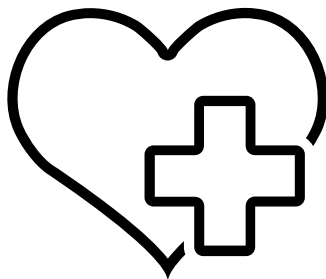
Anxiety may be amplified if you have unmet needs. This can be even more challenging if you have poor interoception and don't easily notice internal sensations. Here are some needs to look out for:



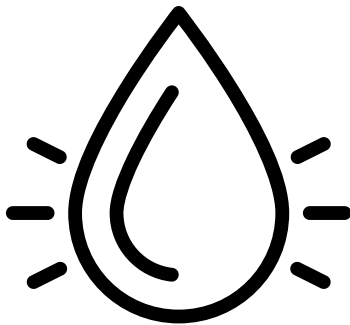
Sleep



Hunger



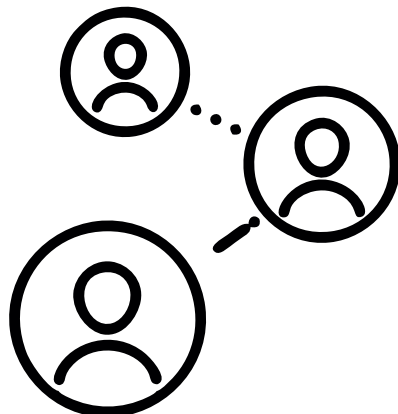
Health



Thirst



Hygiene



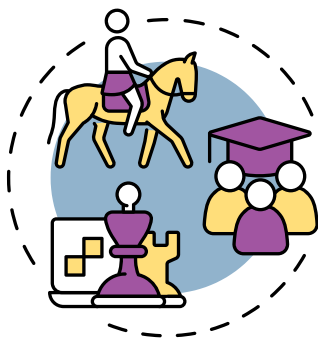
Social Interaction

Other Soothing Activities

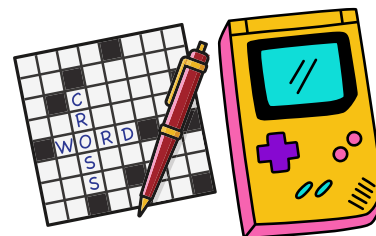
There are a variety of other activities that you can do to help you manage your anxiety. You can choose ones that fit your energy levels, the amount of time you have available and what interests you. Here are some examples:



Spending time with a pet or other animals.



Engaging in special interests and hobbies



Games and puzzles



Mindfulness



Nature - Being outdoors in nature can help you retreat from everyday life and feel connected to your environment.



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.

Warning about Research and Social Media



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.

“Doomscrolling” or looking at negative posts on social media can also increase anxiety. Social media in general can be unpredictable and anxiety-inducing for some.

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,



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.

Additional Resources

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>

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This guide was produced by the Mental Health Equity Project, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.