

**The
Advonet
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health
Equity Project**

Strategies and Resources

Winter Time Wellbeing

Wintertime Stresses

Winter can be a stressful time for many people. The lower temperature and lack of sunlight can have an impact on mood. There can also be stressors associated with expectations from festivities and social gatherings.

During winter, routines often change which can add to feelings of anxiety. Regular groups might not be running and there can be expectations to join in with different activities. There is a higher likelihood of social fatigue and social isolation.

Autistic people may be more likely to have financial difficulties, which can be particularly impactful over the winter, as there are additional costs from things like heating and lighting, gift traditions and social activities.



This guide will provide practical suggestions to support ease and comfort during the winter season. Whether you're an autistic person navigating these challenges or someone looking to support a loved one.

Autistic Mental Health Needs during Winter

Winter can impact the mental health challenges for autistic individuals. The shorter days, colder weather and increased demands can impact areas like sleep, anxiety levels, co-occurring conditions, and susceptibility to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).



Sleep Disruptions

Changes in natural light can affect sleep. For autistic people, who may already have sleep difficulties, these reduced daylight hours can lead to difficulties maintaining a consistent routine and worsen feelings of fatigue, stress or sensory sensitivity.

Increased Anxiety



Winter can bring more social and environmental demands. These social, financial and other pressures can contribute to heightened anxiety. Additionally, colder weather may limit access to comforting outdoor activities.



Co-occurring Conditions

The change in season and temperature can worsen other co-occurring conditions, especially chronic illnesses'. With many people experiencing flare ups in chronic pain and fatigue.

Stress & Social Battery



The changes of routine, added socialising and financial outgoings can lead to additional stress placed upon the individual. Which in turn, can add to more sensory overload, anxiety and fatigue.

Stressors During the Winter Season

A number of factors can cause stressors for autistic adults during the winter season, and while these may vary from individual to individual, there are a number of common reasons identified:



Masking & Events

The winter season has multiple key socio-cultural events in the calendar, and people may feel pressure to mask more regularly due to these events.

Sensory Overload



Sensory overload, winter leads to sensory changes, and large public gatherings e.g. Christmas Markets, or New Year's firework displays.



Support & Transport Changes

The winter period can mean services are closed, or reduced. People may be without their regular support options, or transport links e.g. peer support, food coops, or buses. This can mean people feel more isolated and need other support.

Social Expectations



The winter calendar can exert additional pressures on autistic people to conform to social expectations. Whether that is due to family gatherings, public celebrations, work parties, or seasonal small talk scripts. This adds additional social stress.



Changes to Routine

The winter period is a transitional season, where annual leave and service closure can mean people's routine is disrupted e.g. train changes.

Stress & Fatigue



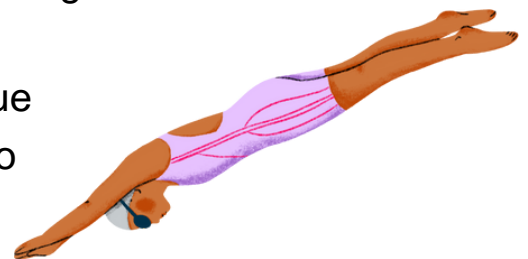
As clocks go back, people may experience differences in circadian rhythm, our internal clock, disrupting our sleep patterns.

Autistic Challenges During Winter

The winter period can come with its own set of unique challenges for autistic people, impacting on mental health and coping strategies. Below is a list of winter-specific challenges that this time of year can bring.

A list of winter-specific challenges to consider:

- Increase of social interaction – people dropping by and/or inviting you round
- Present opening anxiety – for example, opening gifts in front of people and having to have the “right reaction”
- Present buying – What is enough? What is too much?
- Financial pressures from social events and gift giving
- Encouragement to overspend/ consume - AuDHD people may be more susceptible to impulse buying
- Areas are more busy, loud, and seasonal updates e.g. menu changes
- If you have children they may be on school holiday so you may have less time in the day than you usually do – change of routine as well
- Dressing for the change in temperature and more clothes textures
- Seeing people less due to the change of weather, maybe you are spending more time indoors than you were doing
- Hobbies changing, or activities may have limits e.g. outdoor swimming pools closed due to temperature, or fewer Hub sessions due to holidays



Mental Health during Winter Coping Strategies

Tips and Coping strategies to manage mental health needs during the winter period:

- Establish a sleep schedule / sleep hygiene routine you can stick to.
- Tools such as black out curtains and light boxes can aid with sleep.
- Sensory friendly aids such as soothing sounds, lighting and weighted blankets can help with bedtime routine.
- Sensory friendly hobbies and activities can help with emotional regulation and ease anxiety.
- Heat pads and over the counter medications can help with pain flare ups.
- Visual schedules, planners and checklists can help prepare for events and reduce uncertainty.
- Grounding techniques, meditation and breathing exercises can help to manage anxiety and emotional regulation.
- Speaking to your GP about any mental health issues, including sleep for additional support or medication that may be needed.
- Utilise peer support, such as online forums, groups and 1-to-1 peer support options.
- Plan times and places where you can safely unmask, reducing the risk of burnout.
- Journaling can help you to process emotions and anxieties.
- Make time for hobbies and soothing activities.
- Plan in and prioritise recovery time



Coping Strategies for Winter



Having a Safe Sensory Space



Recharging Activities



Reducing Expectations & Setting Boundaries



Financial Support & Citizen's Advice



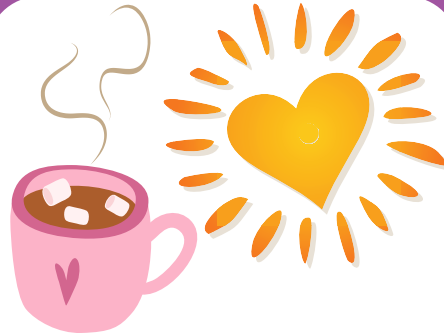
Event & Exit Plans

Add Your Own Here

Additional Tips for Winter Wellbeing



**Winter Sensory
Friendly Wardrobe**



Warm Spaces Support
(e.g. Libraries/ Community Hubs)



Peer Support



**Schedule
Recovery Time**



**Support from Primary
Care e.g. GP, Counselor
or Social Prescriber.**

Unmet needs, chronic pain, or fatigue through the day can compound winter stressors, so it is important these needs are addressed to help regulate mood, and support your window of tolerance during the winter season.

Autistic Mental Health Needs during the Winter - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

SAD stands for Seasonal Affective Disorder, sometimes known as 'Winter Depression' due to the symptoms often being more apparent and severe during the winter months. However, some people with SAD may have heightened symptoms in the summer and feel better during winter.

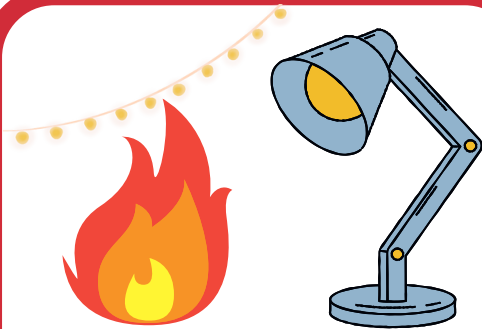
The main theory of the cause of SAD is that the lack of sunlight stops the hypothalamus working properly, affecting the production of melatonin, serotonin and the body's internal clock.

Symptoms include:

- Loss of pleasure or interest in hobbies and special interests
- Difficulty concentrating / brain fog
- May have a flare up of other symptoms that you have due to other co-occurring conditions
- Craving foods such as carbohydrates
 - May only need to eat safe foods
- Feelings of despair and worthlessness
- Persistent low mood
- Fatigue
- Decreased interest in sexual activity
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Sleeping difficulties



Coping Strategies to aid with SAD



Warm Lighting / Sun Lamps



Talking Therapies / Peer Support



Getting Outdoors



Doing some Exercise



Medications through your GP

Add Own Here

Traditions and Resolutions

During the winter period we are often encouraged to reflect on the past year, celebrate old traditions or engage in new ones. This can be a challenging time for anyone, but especially if we struggle with routine change, or new social events.

We may also be asked to reflect on the year, or milestones based on other people's expectations of achievements and targets. These can be exclusionary to autistic people, or not acknowledge our interests and goals, as well as the barriers we face.



Tradition & Change:

Social events in winter can be shaped by family, or social traditions. These traditions adapt with time and new people to celebrate with. Share how you feel, what you like and take time to process changes.



Autism-Friendly Resolutions:

New year's resolutions, don't need to be linear. Try to approach them from a growth mindset. Find goals which enable you to participate in things you enjoy and support you to meet your needs.



Skill Regression, Burnout and Achievements:

Autistic burnout can make reflecting on achievements difficult, causing rumination and negative thinking. Please be compassionate to yourself and appreciate your resilience.



New Foods and Sensory Experiences:

Celebrations and social gatherings can involve sharing new food, or may have sensory events to explore e.g. fireworks, paints, or clothing. Make sensory accommodations.

Reasonable Adjustments for Events

Winter is often filled with more social gatherings, from festive celebrations to family reunions and community events. These gatherings can present unique challenges. The increased number of invitations, the busier environments, and the heightened expectations for social interaction can feel overwhelming and draining. Even if you're not directly participating, the heightened activity in the community (e.g., decorations, music, and crowded public spaces) can make this period stressful.



Coping with new social and sensory environments:

- Try to take a safe person, or have a trusted contact, if you can and agree a safe word/ gesture if you need a sensory break, or to leave
- Set boundaries and explain your needs to the organiser (ahead of time, if possible)
- Have an exit plan, you may not need to stay for the whole gathering
- You may want to reduce demands and limit how many events you agree to attend to allow you to recharge your social battery
- If you are hosting, make sure you keep a room for yourself to go to if you need some quiet time
- If you are at someone else's house, you may be able to step outside or use a room, such as the bathroom, to have some recovery time
- Take safe foods with you, this is helpful if you are struggling, or cannot eat things that are at the gathering. Ensure your hunger needs are met
- Take sensory tools, such as small fidget items you can have in your bag and pocket
- Take ear plugs, or headphones to reduce or control noise input
- Plan recovery time before and after social events
- Take time to do activities you enjoy - engage with personal hobbies

Coping Strategies for Events and Tradition in Winter



Safe Foods



Dressing in Layers



Safe Person,
or Code Word/ Gesture



Accommodating Sensory
Needs



Arranging Comfortable
Social Activities



Having Familiarity in
Routine, Where Possible

Planning and Social Engagements

The winter season often has inherent key changes to routine and social engagement e.g. changes to work, or educational commitments. Winter has many socio-cultural events in it's calendar that can place additional social pressures on autistic people.

However, this can also offer us space and time to reconnect with community and better understand our own social needs.



Acknowledgement of Barriers:

- Change and Routine Disruption
- Social/ Organisational Demands and Demand Avoidance
- Unmet Sensory Needs and Unknown Sensory Experiences
- Pressure to Make Decisions
- Unfamiliar Social Groups and Large Events
- Isolation, or Lack of Peer Support



Ways to Address Key Barriers:

- Create an event plan, think about your needs and let others know
- Set reminders and let people know if you struggle to organise, or attend events - you can have support from other attendees too
- Create an event chart that maps energy levels/ needs - then when you are experiencing decision fatigue, you can reference this chart
- Set boundaries and let people know your limits
- Take flashcard, or other forms of communication to support your needs
- Reach out for support, please refer to Additional Resources, on **page 16**

List of Some Winter Festivities and Traditions



Christmas &
Advent Festivities



Hanukkah



Mari Lywd
Festival



Lunar New Year
Celebration



Pongal

Add Your Own Here

Apps to help with Winter Wellbeing



Finch
Self Care App



Spoony
Neurodivergent Friend App



Brain in Hand
Wellbeing & Organising
App



Antistress
Sensory Needs App

Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

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.

Leeds Christmas Support in Leeds -

<https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/2024/12/17/christmas-2024-support-in-leeds/>

Touchstone Winter Wellbeing Booklet - <https://touchstonesupport.org.uk/winter-wellbeing-booklets-2024/>

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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Please leave a message for the AIM Mental Health Equity Project team.



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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.