



Anxiety and Autism Spectrum Disorders

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When is it a problem?

- Worry is part of our everyday life.
- Some worry is useful as a motivator.
- It becomes a problem when it affects our lives in some way
 - Underperformance
 - Avoidance
 - Effects on family, friends, work or study.

Features of Anxiety

- Physiological – fight or flight response
 - Heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, sweating or feeling hot, chest pain, nausea, dizziness, shakiness.
- Behavioural
 - avoidance/tantrums/endurance and distraction
- Cognitive
 - worries, distortions

ASD Experience of Anxiety

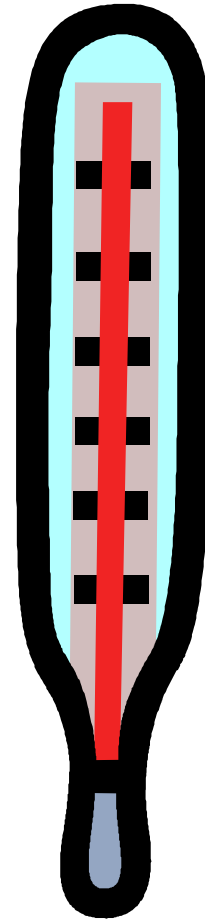
- Caught in the detail
- Narrow focus
- Difficulty changing attention
- Poor understanding of the social world
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Strong preference for sameness
- Language difficulties
- Learning difficulties
- Heightened sensory experience

Broad Strategies

- Social skills training and groups.
- Social groups – scouts, interest groups.
- Schools – schedules, timetables, structure, written instructions, buddies, aides, support during transitions, advocates, consideration of special interests, focus on the requirement rather than how it is delivered.

Reducing Anxiety

- Feelings thermometer
 - Rate anxiety from 0 (no problem) to 10 (severe)
- Provides a visual way to communicate distress
- Can also be used to show that anxiety has reduced



Reducing Anxiety

- What to do cards for different emotions
 - Idea of a toolbox or set of ideas to help to cope with difficult situations
- Expressing worries through writing, drawing, emails, dolls, putting in a worry box



Reducing Anxiety

- Psychoeducation on anxiety – what happens in the body
- Calming strategies
 - pictures, memories, music
- Breathing techniques
 - Long, slow breathing, counting to 4 breathing in and 4 breathing out

Reducing Anxiety

- Understanding the relationship between thinking and feeling
- Thinking styles – catastrophising, all or nothing, negative focus, mind reading, predictions of the future, labelling (I'm useless at maths)
- Using logic – what is really true, where is the evidence, what is actually going to happen?
- Planning for difficult events/changes

Reducing Anxiety

- **Calming statements**
 - It will be OK
 - Stay calm and I will think clearly
- **Coping statements**
 - I will do my best
 - I've survived stuff like this before, so I will this time