

Important

If you feel like the person's mental health is deteriorating, it's important to contact the GP for advice. Tips for a visit may include knowing the building beforehand, booking the first or last appointment of the day, encouraging the individual to write down how they are feeling to minimise the anxiety of social communication.

Living with mental health issues or supporting someone dealing with difficult experiences and emotions can be an incredibly tough journey. It affects different people in different ways and it might help to talk to others that you are close with or look for some additional supports.

Resources

<https://www.autismni.org/resources>

<https://www.mindyourhead.org.uk/>

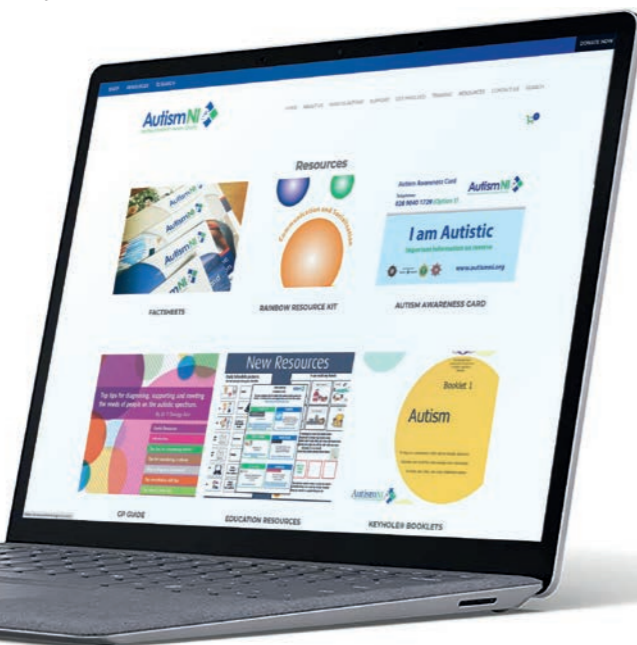
<https://www.aware-ni.org/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

<https://view.pagetiger.com/kgbmzm/1>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/>

<https://www.lifelinehelpline.info/>



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Autism and mental health



Approximately one in four people in the UK will experience mental health problems at some point. Individuals on the spectrum are more vulnerable to mental health issues, particularly in adolescence and early adulthood. This could be due to increased self awareness, communication or social difficulties and generally feeling isolated.

Autistic individuals are likely to experience high levels of anxiety or stress on a daily basis. The world is a confusing place to navigate at the best of times and some autistic traits may make this more difficult. For example a simple conversation for neurotypicals can be straightforward and not stress provoking, for an autistic individual this conversation can be overwhelming.

Autistic individuals may have to work harder to figure out social cues including body language, background noise and eye contact and therefore may find it hard to focus for a prolonged period of time. They may replay conversations at a later point, further analysing every word which can lead to feelings of low self esteem or defensiveness.

It's important to recognise the signs of mental health difficulties but it can be hard, especially for those that have an ability to 'mask their difficulties'. One way is to look for any changes in behaviour, explore if there are patterns in the changes alongside what is going on at home, school, work or other areas of life.

Possible behaviours to be aware of:

- Increase or decrease in interest areas
- Lack of motivation or withdrawn
- More fatigued than usual
- Unusual or difficult behaviours (some mental health issues can cause people to see, hear or believe things that other people don't)
- Worthlessness or low self esteem
- Change in sleeping or eating patterns
- Increased anxiety
- Self harm

It is very important to understand each individual's autistic traits and sensory differences. These can contribute to stress levels and are often seen in behaviours. Try asking what would help? This may assist them with knowing someone is there if they need a listening ear or practical support.

Autism NI provide a Helpline 02890 401729 (Option 1) and training. These will assist you learn some strategies to increase resilience in autistic people so that they may have a slightly easier time getting through life.



How to maintain positive mental health:



Maintaining routine and structure can alleviate some of the anxieties around the unknown.



Praise positive behaviours and achievements, and try to put more focus on the effort the person has put into their work as to not reinforce the need for perfectionism.



Encourage the autistic individual to tell a trusted person if something is bothering them, this can be a parent, teacher or youth leader. You can come up with an alert phrase such as 'yellow' when they have concerns to talk through. If talking is too difficult another option is a worry or query box



Encouraging exercise can be very beneficial to alleviate stress or anxiety, endorphins produced will help to lower the cortisol levels (stress hormones) and help the individual to feel calmer.



Explain the importance of and encourage a good diet. Eating healthier and drinking more water can help promote positive mental health. Sensory differences may affect a persons diet, if this is the case try and find a multivitamin that will be appropriate.



Research suggests 40%-80% of autistic individuals on the spectrum may have sleep problems. Lack of sleep may contribute to mental health problems. It may be beneficial to look up resources on sleep hygiene and autism for ideas on promoting good sleeping habits.



There are many useful apps and websites available. Apps that focus on relaxation and mindfulness. Websites such as getselfhelp.co.uk or therapistaid.com have many useful resources on self esteem, anxiety and general mental health.

TIP

You could try an anxiety trigger rating strategy, to find out when the individual's anxiety is highest. For example, in regards to school they may rate maths at a 3, where as english is a 9. By working with the individual we can focus on certain areas to introduce adjustments.

