Mental Health and ASD: Tips for Home Care
Did you know...?

- Mental health symptoms are common in youth with ASD
- The most common symptoms in ASD include:
  - Anxiety, fear or worry
  - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
  - Depression or other mood problems
- There are many things you can do to help your child with these symptoms!
- Let's start with anxiety....
Anxiety in ASD

• Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time

• Sometimes anxiety can be helpful (e.g., telling us not to approach rattlesnakes or reminding us to study for a test)

• Other times anxiety can interfere, and prevent us from doing things or participating in our daily lives

• Anxiety is especially common in ASD
Common Anxiety Symptoms

• **Separation anxiety**
  • Fear when separating from parents or other caregivers

• **Social anxiety**
  • Anxiety in social situations like talking to peers, teachers or other people

• **Generalized anxiety**
  • Frequent worry about what might happen in the future (e.g., “what if....happens?”)

• **Specific Fears/Phobias**
  • Fear with specific things like the dark, thunder/lightening, insects or animals
What does anxiety look like in autism?

- **Avoidance** of certain situations
- **Refusal** to do things or go places
- **Physical symptoms** like shaking, stomachaches or headaches, or rapid heart rate
- **Negative self-talk** like saying "I'm no good at this" or "I can't handle this"
- **Needing lots of reassurance** to make sure that things will be okay; asking repeated questions to get reassurance
- **Unique worries** like anxiety about having enough time to engage with a special interest; or anxiety around change in routine
Managing anxiety at home

- Validate your child's feelings: Say things like "everyone worries sometimes" or "it's okay to feel anxious right now."
- Prepare for new situations: Use visual supports to prepare for new situations
- Calm body: Schedule enjoyable activities each day that help your child calm their body – THINK SELF-CARE! (e.g., deep-breathing, going for a walk, playing with a pet)
- Calm mind: Help your child learn simple, positive phrases to help them cope with difficult situations (e.g., "I can do it" or "It's no big deal.")
- Face Fears: Encourage your child to face fears a little at a time, even if they feel scared or anxious. Reward these steps!
Activities to Calm Your Mind

• Draw/color
• Think about a favorite topic
• Count to 10 slowly
• Practice mindfulness
• Recite a calming mantra
Activities to Calm Your Body

• Squeeze a stress ball
• Deep breathing (e.g., smell the flower, blow the candle)
• Exercise
• Sensory activity or fidget toy
• Deep pressure
Helping Children with ASD
Express Feelings

• Use visuals to help children make connections between situations and their feelings

• Practice this using characters and events from a favorite book or movie!

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What does depression look like in autism?

• **Feeling sad or down** for most of the day for many days
• **A loss of interest or enjoyment** in things they used to like
• **Changes in appetite** including decreased or increased appetite
• **Changes in sleep** such as sleeping too much or not enough
• **Fatigue** such as loss of energy
• **Decreased concentration**, more so than usual
• **Irritability** or becoming easily annoyed
Depression in autism

- **Suicidal ideation** like thoughts about death or suicide; or even engaging in self-harm
- **Rigidity** like getting stuck on certain topics; insisting things must be a certain way
- **Withdrawing** from social situations (more so than usual)
- **Regression in self-care** like not brushing teeth or getting dressed
- **Anxiety and depression** can occur at the same time
Managing depression at home

- **Validate your child's feelings:** Say things like "everyone feels sad sometimes" or "Yes, things are really tough right now."

- **Keep busy and stay connected:** Keeping your child busy with activities can help with their depression. Consider scheduling 1:1 time with family members or friends, outings, or other activities.

- **Sleep schedule:** As best as you can, keep your child on a consistent sleep schedule.

- **Exercise or physical activity:** Go for a walk, bike ride, or hike, or engage in any type of physical movement – again – THINK SELF-CARE!

- **Positive mind:** Help your child learn simple, positive phrases to help them cope with their depression (e.g., "It will get better").
What does ADHD look like in autism?

• **Difficulties with focus and attention** like being easily distracted, difficulty following through on tasks, organizing belongings

**AND/OR**

• **Hyperactivity and impulsivity** like having trouble sitting still, interrupting others, fidgeting, climbing on things, often "on the go"
ADHD in autism

• Not every child with ADHD is “bouncing off the walls” – some children only have difficulties with focus and attention

• Sometimes youth on the spectrum with ADHD can REALLY focus on something they are very interested in, like video games
  • They still need support for focusing on schoolwork and chores!
Managing ADHD symptoms at home
Part 1: focus

- **Movement**: Schedule movement or exercise breaks throughout the day

- **Limit distractions**: When focus is required, limit distractions such as screens, music, other people, or high-interest activities

- **Rewards**: Implement a reward system based on clear expectations and positive reinforcement
Managing ADHD symptoms at home
Part 2: organization

• Break into smaller steps: Break up demanding tasks, such as homework, into smaller, more manageable chunks

• Create clear organization systems: Utilize written planners or to-do lists to keep track of tasks and due dates

• Visual supports: Visual supports in the form of schedules, checklists, and/or visual models of completed tasks
When do children need professional help?

- Many people experience anxiety, sadness and other problems; These are common human experiences!

- Most of the time feelings of anxiety and sadness come and go

- When anxiety and sadness are excessive, persistent, and interfere with daily life it might be time to speak to a professional
Seeing a mental health professional

- If you notice significant changes in mood or behavior, for example:
  - Changes in sleep or appetite
  - Withdrawal or frequent tearfulness
  - Increased aggression or impulsivity

*If a crisis arises, such as a suicide attempt, active suicidal ideation, self-injury, elopement, dangerous impulsivity, seek professional intervention immediately.*
Seeing a mental health professional

- If worry or negative mood are interfering with day-to-day life
- If you feel you or your child would benefit from professional support! Prioritize mental health.

*If a crisis arises, such as a suicide attempt, active suicidal ideation, self-injury, elopement, dangerous impulsivity, seek professional intervention immediately*
Self-care Ideas for you and your child

• Do something relaxing like reading a book, or taking a bubble bath
• Take care of your physical health by eating healthy and getting enough sleep (when possible!)
• Exercise or even just regular movement
• Go outside
• Take breaks from work throughout the day
COVID Related Ideas
Limiting Worry During COVID-19

• Creating and following a schedule provides predictability and a sense of control – particularly during the uncertainty of COVID-19!
• Schedule self-care and high interest activities throughout the day
• If the news feels overwhelming, schedule "worry time" once per day to watch/read the news
Preparing an Individual with ASD for a COVID Test

• Create a step-by-step visual so the individual knows what to expect – this can be a checklist, social story, or both!

- Wear Mask
- Wait With Ipad
- Doctor Or Nurse
- Swab Nose
- Hand Sanitizer
- Chick-Fil-A

• Prepare preferred distraction activities to engage in during the test, such as watching a movie or squeezing a sensory toy.

• Use a visual countdown to show how long the nasal swabbing will last.

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Virtual Learning Strategies – tips/tricks

- Provide a visual schedule for the day AND for shorter periods throughout the day
- Make sure your child knows the rules for online learning (e.g., chat function, mute/unmute mic, etc.)
- Give frequent breaks (even just alternating standing and sitting)
- Set small goals for engagement (e.g., ask 3 questions, write down 3 things)
- Reward completing small goals and for on task behavior
- Break school tasks down into small steps your child can manage
- Allow sensory input (fidget toys, chewing gum, ice) during online learning
Resources

• Mental Health:
  • Contact your local mental health center
  • Use the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies "Find a CBT Therapist" Tool: findcbt.org/FAT/
  • Colorado Crisis Services - https://coloradocrisisservices.org/ or 1-844-493-8255

• Covid-19 support:
  • Anxiety and Autism: Family-based strategies for returning to school after shelter in place, from the UC Davis Mind Institute: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvI26zHncZU
  • Online Learning Resources from AFIRM: https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/online-learning-resources?fbclid=IwAR3_W6-ZMnlX9itKL4piQ3nOJv1_3MMwvCB_uj0O30Eg62RtfgExXVtn3eU
  • Check out the JFK Partners webpage for more resources, coming soon to https://medschool.cuanschutz.edu/jfk-partners

• Support groups for parents:
  • Monthly potluck at CHCO – email Samantha.marquez@childrenscolorado.org to sign up, or call Collette Christen at 720-777-5486 for more information
  • The Living Spectrum parent support groups– see thelivingspectrum.org/index.php for more information
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