

# Mental Health and ASD: Tips for Home Care



Developmental Pediatrics

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO  
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## 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!

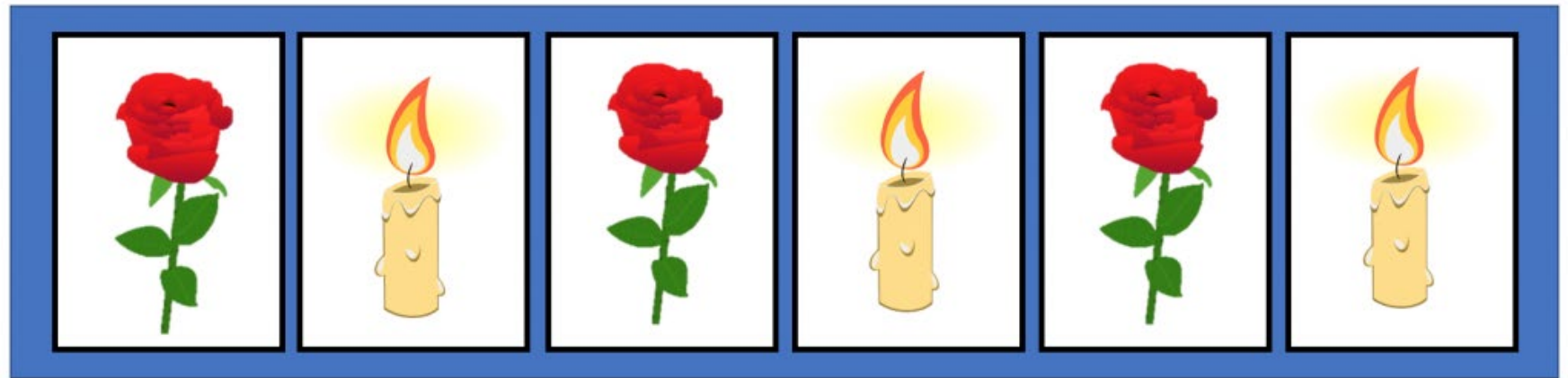
# Activities to Calm Your Mind

- Draw/color
- Think about a favorite topic
- Count to 10 slowly
- Practice mindfulness
- Recite a calming mantra



# Activities to Calm Your Body

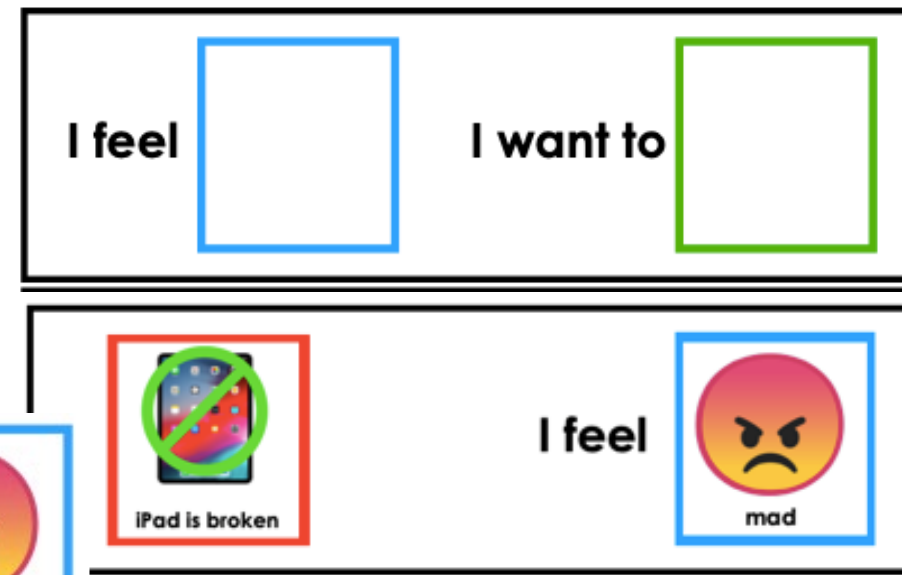
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Deep breathing (e.g., smell the flower, blow the candle)
- Exercise
- Sensory activity or fidget toy
- Deep pressure





# 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!



# 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"

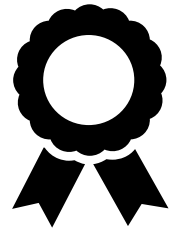
# ADHD in autism

- 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

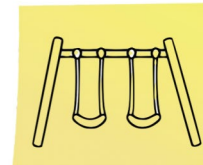
- Creating and following a schedule provides predictability and a sense of control – particularly during the uncertainty of COVID-19!
- Schedule self-care and high interest activities throughout the day
- If the news feels overwhelming, schedule "worry time" once per day to watch/read the news

## OBJECTS



First bathroom, then legos

## PICTURES



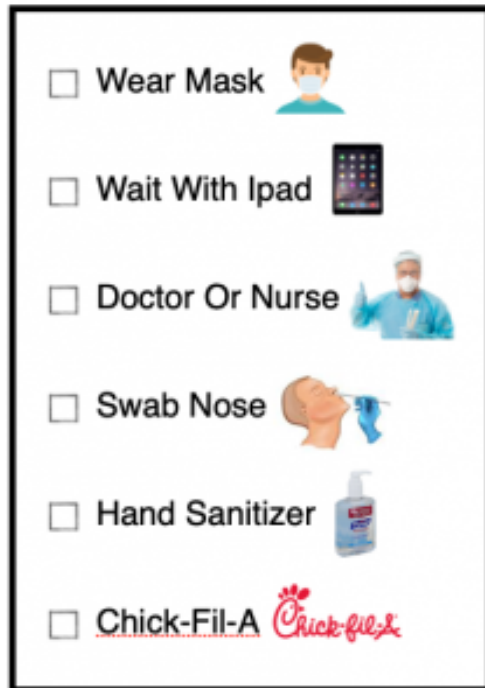
## WRITTEN

### Sally's Morning Schedule

- Breakfast
- Yoga
- Math at table
- Playtime
- Lunch

# 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!



- 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



# 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



Hold your camera up to this QR code to see this slide (with clickable links) on your phone

- Mental Health:
  - Contact your local mental health center
  - Use the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies "Find a CBT Therapist" Tool: [findcbt.org/FAT/](https://findcbt.org/FAT/)
  - Colorado Crisis Services - <https://coloradocrisisservices.org/> or [1-844-493-8255](tel: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>
  - Helping Children Thrive: The COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on Health and Well-being from NIHCM: <https://www.nihcm.org/categories/helping-children-thrive-the-covid-19-pandemic-s-impact-on-health-and-well-being>
  - Online Learning Resources from AFIRM: [https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/online-learning-resources?fbclid=IwAR3\\_W6-ZMnlX9itKL4pIQ3nOJvT\\_3MMwcb-\\_uj0O30Eg62RltgExXVtn3eU](https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/online-learning-resources?fbclid=IwAR3_W6-ZMnlX9itKL4pIQ3nOJvT_3MMwcb-_uj0O30Eg62RltgExXVtn3eU)
  - 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](mailto: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](https://thelivingspectrum.org/index.php) for more information



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