

Mental Health Guide for Autistic College Students

Tips to help you feel less
overwhelmed & improve well-being

When should I seek help?

Mental health services

How to access services

Additional resources & tips
for parents

What problems may come up?

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What can I do to promote my well-being?

- Eat 3 nutritious meals a day and snacks when needed
- Get a good night's rest
- Practice time management techniques (setting timers, taking quick breaks)
- Schedule regular breaks (length and timing of needed breaks may vary and should be based on individual needs)
- Keep your environment clean
- Make sure you always have clean laundry
- Shower regularly (several times a week)
- Work out / go for walks
- Make time to see/talk with the people who make you feel safest and most comfortable
- Make sure you have time to do things you enjoy (art, video games, watch TV)

What can I do if I am overwhelmed?

- Meditation and/or creating a mantra
- Get Help / Talk to someone
- Do a hobby or something you enjoy to temporarily distract yourself -
[set a timer if you have difficulty with time management]
- Sew/Knit/Crochet/Draw
- Color [Google adult coloring pages for free images to color]
- Do a puzzle
- Play calming video games (e.g., Animal Crossing, Stardew Valley)
- Play an instrument
- Watch a funny TV show, video, YouTube / Listen to music
- Use earplugs or headphones to find quiet in loud environments when you cannot leave so easily

Other methods to distract yourself

- Look at a picture of your favorite place: think about what you would do there, what it smells like, what are the sounds, what do you enjoy about it
- 5-4-3-2-1 (look around the room for 5 things you see, 4 things you touch, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, 1 thing you taste)
- Count objects in a room (e.g., all the red things, everything curved)

Breathing exercises

- Exhale for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, inhale for a count of 4, hold air in your lungs for a count of 4, repeat for 3-5 minutes
- Inhale normally, then exhale for 3 seconds. Inhale normally, exhale for 5 seconds, then 7 and so on. When you get to a number you can't do, start the cycle over.

Physical Activity

- Go for a walk, do push-ups, jumping jacks, planks
- Stretches, yoga, pilates

When should I seek help?

Thoughts you may be experiencing:

- I feel sad, upset, or angry more often than I feel relaxed or happy
- I am spending more time than usual in bed or I am not able to do my work or see friends
- I feel like I am failing and not studying or working hard enough
- A lot of things are happening at once and I feel overwhelmed
- I've stopped trying to do activities I enjoy, etc.

Seek help when:

- When you notice several of the thoughts mentioned above
- When you feel distressed
- Seek emergency help:
 - If you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others

Why should I seek mental health services?

- Mental health is as important as physical health to your overall well-being
- Seeking mental health services is a good way to practice self-care
- Everyone needs help getting through life sometimes and asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength.

What can mental health services provide for me?

- Help with managing feelings
- Coping with changes
- Problem-solving strategies for issues with roommates, changes in schedule, feeling overwhelmed
- Strategies & scripts for having difficult conversations
- Ways to keep you safe and safety planning
- Navigating any challenging situation in your life

What types of services exist?

Services your school may have

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)

Psychology Clinic

Autism Programs

Disability Services

*CAPS may provide weekly therapy, walk-ins (no appointment), resources and referrals, crisis planning, or other services. Check your school's website for more information (**see search terms on page 10 for finding your school's psychological services**)

Resources if You Occasionally Need to Talk to Someone

National Alliance on Mental (NAMI) - Helpline [non-emergency]

<https://www.nami.org/help>

Phone call: Health Helpline: 800-950-NAMI (6264)

Online chat: [Nami.org/help](https://www.nami.org/help) (10am to 10pm EST)

Email: info@nami.org

Emergency Services (if you are having thoughts of harming yourself or someone else)

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Crisis Text Line: - Text HOME to 741741

Call: :800-273-8255

Chat: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>

- The Trevor Project (LGBTQ) -

Text START to 678678

Call: 1-866-488-7386

Chat: thetrevorproject.org/get-help

- Jed Foundation: Crisis Services

Text: Text START to 741741

Call: 1- 800-273-TALK (8255)

How do I access services?

- Think about if you want weekly services or just need someone to talk to once in awhile
- Think about where you want the services (at your school, online, community) and the environment of the therapy space.
- Think about what you are looking for (e.g., coping strategies, managing mood/anxiety, time management, etc.).
- Think about qualities in a provider that you are looking for and will connect with.
- Consider what the commute is like to get to therapy (e.g. walk, drive, bike, bus).
- Write a script for the phone call (see page 8 for examples)

1. Check your school's website for mental health or psychological services OR go to Google and use the terms on page 10 under "Other Resources"
2. Locate the phone number or email address of service providers
3. Come up with a script for making that phone call - It may help to ask parents or friends for help with this (see page 8 for some sample scripts)
4. Have your schedule in front of you when you call to schedule an appointment
5. Schedule an appointment when it works for your schedule
6. Go to the scheduled appointment

* Sometimes things get in the way of accessing services - see page 7 for working past these barriers

What problems or barriers might I encounter?

- *They don't have any openings that work with my schedule*
 - While you wait for an appointment to become available: use coping skills, talk to friends and family, try a different mental health service in the meantime
 - Call back on a weekly basis to inquire about openings
- *It is difficult to find contact information for resources*
 - Ask a relative or friend for help finding the contact info
 - Use the terms and resources on page 10
- *I don't know which resource will be most helpful to me*
 - Ask other neurodiverse students if they have recommendations
 - Pick out one or two services to begin with
 - Reach out to a warmline for guidance on resources
- *I have tried to access mental health services previously and they said they couldn't help me*
 - Contact a different service, or a service that specifically provides support to autistic individuals
 - Reach out to a warmline for guidance on what resources may be able to provide more support
- *I get anxious making phone calls OR I don't know what to say*
 - Start with an email or chat - see page 8 for example scripts
- *I don't know what to say once I'm receiving the services*
 - Ask your provider to help guide you through what typically happens during a session
 - Let your provider know if you are feeling nervous or concern
- *I can't afford to pay for mental health services*
 - Talk with your parents or caregivers - can they help? If so, how much?
 - Start with services at your school, which are typically free for students
 - Look for services with sliding scales
 - Call your insurance company - ask if they will reimburse out-of-network services
 - Ask them how this process works

What should I say when contacting a service?

Below are examples of scripts to use that may not address all barriers that might come up when reaching out to a service. Consider creating your own scripts specific to you, prior to contacting services.

Contacting Services at Your School

Hi, my name is _____, and I am a current student here. I am feeling _____ (e.g., overwhelmed, stressed, etc.) and I am hoping to learn some coping strategies. Can I make an appointment to talk to someone about this?

Hi, my name is _____, and I am a current student here. I have been feeling _____ (e.g., lonely, sad, etc.) and would like to talk with someone. Do you provide therapy for students?

Contacting Services Outside of Your School

Hi my name is _____. I am a college student looking for therapy for _____ (anxiety, stress management). Are you taking new patients? I have _____ insurance; do you take that?

Optional for all services: add something such as, *I have a diagnosis of autism, do you have experience working with autistic people or neurodiverse adults?*

What can parents do to help?

- Validate the stress of college life
- Recognize signs of mood changes
 - More time than usual in bed/alone in their room
 - Reduced interest in friends, activities, work
 - Your child is calling more frequently saying they are stressed or overwhelmed
- Work with them to create a plan for tackling difficult tasks
- Help them recognize and name emotions and potential sources of stress
- Suggest potential services - be as specific as possible
- Help identify & find relevant community or school mental health services
- Help come up with a script for contacting services
- Help come up with troubleshooting tips for challenges that your child may encounter in accessing services

Additional Resources

Jed Foundation - <https://jedfoundation.org/i-want-to-take-care-of-my-mental-health/>

- Provides resources based on HOW you are feeling and WHAT you are going through

Looking for a local psychologist - <https://locator.apa.org/>

Navigating New College Life -

<https://researchautism.org/resources/a-guide-for-transition-to-adulthood/>

Google - use terms such as:

- Therapists near me / Psychologists near me
- Therapists adults autism / Psychologists adults autism / Mental health services autism adults
- [Your School Name] counseling and psychological services / student therapy / student
- Counseling services / student psychological services