



Stress and anxiety

Sadly, stress and anxiety are a common experience in the lives of autistic adults. There is a higher rate of mental health difficulties associated with autism, in comparison to 'neuro-typical' or non-autistic individuals. Simonoff et al. (2000) highlight a higher rate of mental health difficulties in autistic individuals, with 80% of their participants having one co-existing disorder and 40% having two or more. Such difficulties with mental health, are thought to contribute to reduced quality of life in autistic individuals (Robertson, 2009).

First-hand accounts from autistic adults:

The propensity for anxiety is exacerbated by living in a world that is:

"Often terrifyingly chaotic and unpredictable" (Sainsbury, 2000, p. 227).

"I had no stress tolerance. In two seconds, stress would consume all the energy I need to get through the whole day." (Gerland,, 2003, p. 227).

So, what are the contributing factors to such high levels of stress and anxiety?

Sensory stimuli:

"Feeling like one is being constantly bombarded by sensory stimuli can be extremely anxiety provoking" (Wigham et al., 2015)

"We often spend most of our day perilously close to sensory overload. Like computers overloaded with information and required to process too much at one time, we often 'crash'. Some people shut down and 'tune out' completely." (Sainsbury, 2000, p. 51).

According to Boucher (2009), even the anticipation of sensory stimuli can be extremely stressful.

Inaccessible environments:

Madriaga (2010) reports that a contributing factor to these struggles can be higher education institutions not eliminating barriers that are disabling to the autistic student. Many aspects of the environment can be “anxiety provoking” (Madriaga, 2010, p. 48)

As stated by Breakey (2006, p. 22):

“The barriers to inclusion for autistic people have been seen to be located within the person themselves”.

Lawson (2001), an autistic adult describes how it is a lack of understanding of autism that is disabling, rather than his autistic identity. This is supported by the Aspect Consultancy report (Beardon and Edmonds, 2007.) 83% of autistic adults felt that others not understanding them directly contributes to their mental health difficulties.

Many autistic individuals report that the world is not designed to meet their needs, feeling that they have to pretend to be non-autistic. In terms of university spaces being accessible, participants described how inadequate understanding and recognition of autistic differences impacted negatively on accessibility Cage and Howes (2020)

“The anxiety related to the course and the stress related to the course was affecting my ability to function day-to-day in all aspects of my life”. (Arya, in Cage and Howes 2020, p. 1669

Autistic individuals often mask or camouflage in an attempt to fit in. This is a key factor in poor mental health outcomes. Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) investigated the cost of camouflaging, the reasons behind it and the varying contexts. “Low” camouflagers had less stress and anxiety symptoms compared to “high” camouflagers and those that switched between not camouflaging and camouflaging sometimes. Camouflaging therefore = a cost to stress and anxiety. Masking in some situations but not others is as costly as all the time.

“I did okay initially, going out once or twice, but I was only masking, and I could only do that for so long, so it wasn’t long before I started to become isolated within the group and an outsider, where I would remain for the rest of the year.” (Alexander, in Cage and Howes, 2020, p. 1669).

However, the onus should not be put on the individual to reduce the amount of camouflaging and masking that they do. Many autistic individuals are unaware when they are doing it. Inclusive environments where individuals feel valued, able to be themselves are vital in this regard. The West Cheshire Autism Hub is close to campus and is a warm welcoming social space that embraces diversity!

[West Cheshire Autism Hub](#)

The double empathy problem

Milton (2012) highlights how a lack of understanding exists on both sides. There is a mismatch of communication between autistic and non-autistic individuals, rather than the autistic person being seen as 'deficient' in this area.

"It appears that autistic people invest a significant amount of time and energy into understanding and trying to fit in to the neuro-typical world (often to the detriment of their mental health), rather than neuro-typical people attempting to understand autistic people's world and adapt accordingly." (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019, p. 1908).

Monotropism

Lawson (2001) suggests that one cause of anxiety is being singularly channelled (monotropic) in a world that is not designed that way:

"For me, being monotropic in a multi-channelled world, can lead to anxiety. I am so often expected to process more than one thing at any one time." (Lawson, 2001, p. 98).

Having to work hard to navigate the world

The social world is governed by numerous unwritten rules that the autistic individual can struggle to navigate. To compound this, these skills seem to come naturally or intuitively to the neuro-typical individual. Autistic individuals often use their cognition to work out the social rules. This reliance on cognition rather than intuition, often scripting conversations as an example, can lead to:

"An almost constant state of 'alertness' and anxiety, leading to risk of mental and physical exhaustion". (Attwood, 2007, p. 170).

Feeling like an outsider

An autistic student in research carried out by Cage reporting feeling on the periphery of university life:

“Looking in at everyone else having the time of their lives, having the best experiences they were ever going to have. I just wondered when that was ever going to happen to me.” (Angelica in Cage and Howes, 2020 p. 1609)

A sense of community can help with this...

See information on West Cheshire autism hub.

Resources and top tips:

- The evidence-based guide to Anxiety in Autism from the City University of London

[Anxiety-in-Autism-A5-guide.pdf \(city.ac.uk\)](#)

- An individual's capacity to cope depend on whether the demands exceed their capacity (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984b). What activities and strategies can you use to operate your 'tap' in order to stop your bucket overflowing.
- Promoting flow for better mental well-being. Psychological flow (Czikszentimihalyi, 1990) is a mental state of being, where you are completely absorbed or in the zone. 'Flow' has been shown to be related to wellbeing (Fritz and Avsec, 2007). Flow is more likely to be experienced when the activity is neither too demanding or too easy, when there are clear goals and feedback. Any activity can lead to flow as long as there is balance between challenge and skill, clear goals and feedback. Music, sport, hobbies, even work (Pearce and Conger, 2005) or gaming (Pilke, 2004) can lead to a flow state.
- Create an emotional toolbox including *“different types of tools to fix the problems associated with negative emotions, especially anger and sadness.”* (Attwood, 2007, p. 160). The West Cheshire Autism hub recommends the resource below, a helpful guide on how to create a hope or self-soothe box.

[HOPEBOX resource \(papyrus-uk.org\)](#)

Top tips include using the senses. Include items from each of the core sensory groups. You could include a playlist of favourite sounds and music, perfume/candles or oils that you find relaxing, items that you like the taste of, or which stimulate or calm the sensory system, items to touch that

provide sensory input such as a stress ball, blue tac, popping boards etc, photos of loved ones or place to provide visually relaxing items.

- Create structure using daily, weekly and termly schedules. This helps to make the world a less chaotic and confusing place.
- Engage with other autistic individuals! *“Having the opportunity to engage with others who are like minded and to develop one’s sense of belonging is thought to be important to the well-being of autistic adults.”* (Milton and Sims, 2016 cited in Cage et al. 2018, p. 474).
- Seek out help from the West Cheshire Autism hub to cultivate a positive autistic identity!

“Identifying with autistic identity positively mediates the relationship between self-esteem and mental health difficulties”. (Cooper et al., 2017 cited in Cage et al., 2018, p. 474).

- Spend time in environments and with people where you can be yourself and don’t feel the need to mask and camouflage. *“Autistic space is so validating compared with the outside world”* (Crompton et al., 2020, p. 1445).
- Focus on your strengths using the adult strengths survey.

[VIA Character Strengths Survey & Character Reports | VIA Institute](#)

- Look for 3 good things in every day

[What is #3GoodThings and why is it worth a go? - YouTube](#)

- Make an appointment at the West Cheshire autism hub to see how we can help with autism specific strategies. Email our admin assistant at Jessica.ellams@dialwestcheshire.org.uk to request an appointment. We can also send you further information to prepare you, so that you know what to expect.

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