

## Supporting autistic learners with social anxiety

### Strategies to support an anxious learner:

- Ensure all plans and strategies are shared with all staff coming into contact with the learner and are used consistently.
- Show understanding - recognise there isn't necessarily one trigger
- Anxiety may be the reaction to a number of low level stressors that have cumulatively built up over time - it is important to review the learner's whole experience.
- Allow for 'bad 'days. Expect less on a 'bad' day. Just because a learner managed to tolerate a writing task on the previous day doesn't mean they will cope on a day when things have 'built up'.
- Respect the learner's experience. We should not refuse to accept how big a worry is for a child or young person, instead try to understand how they feel. Autistic learner's might find it hard to grade how big or small a 'worry' is or to match their reactions to the size of the problem. They may misinterpret social expectations or intentions of others and may perceive things other people do as deliberate and therefore more of a problem to them than we may think it is.
- Be aware of the 'coke can phenomenon' . The learner may 'hold it together' in school, but show their distress at home. Changing the physical and social environment at school and making reasonable adjustments, which in turn increase predictability and desirability in their day, often has a positive impact at home. This can also work the other way around, with experiences at home leading to reaction whilst at school.

## **Social Environment**

- Reduce Language - As anxiety rises, reduce language demands. Language that can be processed by the learner in low stress situations can become impenetrable when the learner is more anxious.
- Key adults - Ensure the learner has two key adults who know them well and with whom they can build trust. This should provide consistent points of contact for the parents and learner, allowing for staff absence or one adult being unavailable
- Provide predictability Use visual timetables consistently. Even when a learner does not seem to need or use them on a regular basis, knowing they are there, accurate and available can be reassuring. They can be helpful for days when anxiety is rising.
- Make expectations and requirements explicit and clear.
- Plan for change and minimise surprises; disrupted expectations can be very unsettling.
- Review and adapt the sensory environment taking account of the individual needs and preferences
- Offer planned, regular breaks from any stressful environment. Don't wait until the learner is showing signs of stress; these scheduled breaks should be proactive.
- Provide a consistently available individual safe space.
- A calm or quiet area of the classroom is important.
- Timetable planned movement breaks. The learner should have opportunities to use the safe space when they are not anxious, to get used to the experience of being in the space. This space should be a place they can go to when they feel the need to exit their current setting. Going there should always be the learner's choice.

- Older learners may be able to use a 'pass card' which allows them out of class (with safety protocols considered). Simply having the card may reduce anxiety, even if the learner rarely uses it. Note that some autistic learners may find it difficult to initiate or to ask for help. A system may need to be developed where the learner can leave a class without having to show or use a pass.

### **Sensory Environment**

Autistic learners are likely to process sensory information in a different way which may make them more susceptible to anxiety. Their everyday environments can at times overload their senses, making an ordinary environment such as a classroom or playground feel like a place of 'threat'. School can be particularly challenging as the learner may not feel they have any control over their sensory environment or any means of escape.

It has also been suggested that sensory sensitivities may additionally make the experience of the physiological symptoms of anxiety (e.g. stomach aches or discomfort) more extreme in autistic people than in the general population.

### **Structures and Routines**

When a person feels anxious, decision making can become stressful and working out what to do and not to do can be a challenge. Clear, predictable routines can provide predictability and reduce stress.

- Breakdown tasks
- The learner may be overwhelmed by what seems an impossible task. Break the tasks into smaller, potentially achievable goals. Give instructions one at a time and in the order that they are to happen, e.g. "Put on your shoes. We are going outside." rather than "We are going outside so put on your shoes."
- Motivation

- Ensuring that an autistic learner knows what they are expected to do and understands the purpose of a task or activity will support them to engage and be more likely to succeed.
- An autistic learner may have idiosyncratic motivators.
- Finding out what they are interested in and, where appropriate teaching through these can be helpful.
- Learning is likely to be more meaningful where 'rewards' are intrinsic to the task rather than something that happens on completion of a task, e.g. counting washing machines in maths or being in the green group and using green equipment in PE.

## **Skills**

Once the environment has been adapted, routines and structures provided and motivation taken into account, it may be appropriate to consider direct teaching and support. This is only appropriate for children and young people at conversation partner stage.

## **How to use a safe space**

Simply creating the space is not enough. Learners need to be taught how and when to go to the safe space in a calm moment and they need to learn to trust that adults will use it in a consistent way.

Teach individual anxiety reduction strategies (self-regulation)

Give the opportunity to experience a range of strategies to decide which ones are calming or alerting. Learners may wish to create a personal self-regulation keyring or toolkit to support them in selecting an appropriate strategy at the correct time.

Self-regulation strategies might include:

- Chair press ups
- Playing with blu tac
- Going for a walk

- Going to their safe space
- Self-talk
- Having a drink of water

Teach that other people can be a source of support and comfort (mutual regulation):

- Support the learner to learn the names of the people around them
- Provide visual cues or a form of words to ask for help and model using this
- Ensure a predictable response when they seek mutual regulation or help from another person
- Create opportunities for them to be with another person when they need this

Mutual regulation strategies might include:

- Playing row, row your boat (provides movement, routine and predictable social contact)
- Touch (a squeeze of the hand or shoulder can be calming for some, at the right time)
- Careful listening
- Offering self-regulation strategies or signposting to calming activities
- Time to talk (if the individual seeks this out).

### **Scaling levels of emotional regulation**

There are a range of branded approaches used to help learners to identify and grade their current emotional state, in order to identify strategies to keep them feeling good or to get back to that feeling if they are under or over aroused. Helping learners to understand how to scale their worries can be helpful.

### **Emotion coaching**

Be very wary of teaching emotion vocabulary without understanding and context. Simply learning to label pictures of emotions can be unhelpful. For those at a conversation partner stage, learning about how your body feels and how this signals

different emotions by labelling them in the moment, or linking them to personal experiences is a better way to start teaching about emotions.

### **Social stories**

Social stories, can help conversation partners to reduce anxiety in some circumstances. They can help plan for change and support new experiences to feel more predictable. They can also help in work over fears or phobias (e.g., strategies if I see a dog in the park).

Carol Gray's social stories website can be found [here](#).

- Expected/ Unexpected

There are some useful strategies described on the [socialthinking.com](https://socialthinking.com) website including teaching about behaviours using the concepts of 'expected' and 'unexpected'. It can help individuals to understand that they might find unexpected things anxiety provoking.