

Supporting an autistic person through Covid-19

Created by the Neurodevelopmental Service

This is an anxiety-provoking time for **everyone**. Autistic people may be finding this even more difficult for a number of reasons.

We've collected together some helpful information and resources to share with autistic people and their families

Some reasons why the current situation is particularly difficult for autistic people

1. So much information

There is so much information at the moment which is also changing rapidly. Autistic people can take information very literally and struggle to contextualise information or judge what is reliable. They may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information.

People should be advised to use the main government and NHS website which will always have the most up to date information:

[gov.uk/coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)

[nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19)

"Assess what is already known (and, believe me, we will already know things). Ground our understanding with facts...Prepare us for what's to come..."

2. Need for Communication

There is an increased need to communicate at the moment and communication that is usually routine has become more complicated (e.g. in shops or contacting GP).

"Help autistic people communicate in the best way for them to get their needs met...(help them prepare scripts, identify who to speak to, look at alternative ways of communicating, validate their differences and be flexible in your response / offer of help)"

3. Changes in social networks, routines and less control over social contact

Autistic people may not have the existing social networks that are essential for getting through isolation.

Isolation alone or being isolated with your family/housemates all the time is overwhelming on a social and sensory level. There is little opportunity to decompress and pace oneself socially. Autistic people may feel under pressure to camouflage their stimming or behaviours that help them regulate themselves. People around them may appear "different" because they are unusually worried or doing unusual things. Living situation may be more chaotic or noisy.

"Using social stories can make information easier to digest, especially if the story contains a lot of certainties - "What will happen...? Where we will be...? What we will see...? What we will do...? Who we will be with...?"

4. Changes in routine

Not just in terms of daily activities but sameness may be threatened (including preferred foods not being available and supplies to meet other sensory needs). Accessing basic supplies is a challenge for anyone at the moment. The anxiety of an overcrowded supermarket or having to visit new shops or see different staff (even using the phone to have medical appointments) are all very real stressors for autistic people. Planning and then changing plans can cause panic and meltdowns / shutdowns. Even the most "organised" autistic person may need support to put essentials in place. The risk of self-neglect (or alternatively health anxiety) may dramatically increase.

"Finding a new normal is essential and, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, it helps if this new routine contains some traces of the old one for example...Help the autistic person work out:

Sleep: *when to go to bed and when to rise and shine*

Clothes worn: *so even if someone isn't going to school they can still wear their uniform to study at home - equally, usual work clothes are acceptable to separate out "home" from "work at home"*

Diet: *what can you eat that is available?*

Maintaining interests - e.g. Shows watched: *recording favourite shows is never a bad idea, especially when 'breaking news' might break into daily viewing - how can you keep some of your interests going? **How else can you self-soothe?***

Stimming and Sameness: *Positive stimming is a good thing. Do you have a favourite sensory experience that you can use to regulate yourself (a heavy blanket); make it ok to use headphones even when others are around"*

5. Lack of certainty about the future

It must be acknowledged that there is no certain timescale or outcome from all these rapid changes. Autistic people can become overwhelmed by variables and struggle to reasonably predict the future (even in everyday circumstances). Autistic people have described trying to imagine the future like "looking at a blank wall" or feeling paralysed by everything that could possibly happen.

6. Autistic people may have physical health problems that increase their vulnerability to infections.

They may be less likely to notice subtle symptoms or forget activities that keep us well and healthy (like drinking fluids).

- *Reminders to self-care (visual prompts, for example) can really help.*
- *Helping the autistic person symptom-check whilst understanding that they may not feel pain or a fever is also really important.*
- *Autistic people may use ibuprofen because of associated joint pain - paracetamol may be a better choice at this time.*

Resources

Strategies to cope with uncertainty:

www.autistica.org.uk/what-is-autism/coping-with-uncertainty

Ideas for new interests and activities to build into a new routine

<https://chatterpack.net/blogs/blog/list-of-online-resources-for-anyone-who-is-isolated-at-home?fbclid=IwAR2ZsCHPbkcm5cq8nJkMUrm2ctOJgToeSzABTsgt8rXVA5dcAdmHv42zMY>

Lots of ideas about self-care activities

www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/

Social story about the changes caused by Covid-19. (It is written by autistic people in Canada but we feel the advice is also applicable here.)

<https://a4aontario.com/2020/03/20/we-are-heroes-a-plain-language-guide-about/?fbclid=IwAR2082pw4Q4tbkxxChZLYo9fTPQyXVkmXACi8mNKxAoUixsnOxxSVHAp6gc>

Social story for younger children

<https://resourcesforautism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Social-Story-COVID19.jpg>

National Autistic Society helplines

www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus.aspx?fbclid=IwAR2Rfiqf6hVDpUqFHx45u9L2IYbszNvEu7ssANVfLe4TSnMS6zMbNYNRSFo

A lot of resources for ADHD are also helpful for autistic people

www.additudemag.com/adhd-catastrophizing-coronavirus-fear/?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=adult&fbclid=IwAR1veHyzKyJME2GvE8vZGUu34V_sAmuBTBGJcwDC1Mfe5qUN2IbSYb8NmjU