

# ABOUT AUTISM AND ANXIETY



Anxiety is not considered a core feature of autism, but research shows that anxiety is more common in learners with autism. While it is believed that around 10 to 15% of the general population have an anxiety disorder at some point in their life, 40% of autistic children, adolescents and adults are thought to have at least 1 and often more than 1 anxiety disorder (Gaigg, Crawford and Cottell, 2018).

Each learner with autism and anxiety is a unique individual and adjustments to their educational program and learning environment should be tailored to their needs. When you understand the impact of autism and anxiety on the individual learner, you'll be better able to adjust to their needs.

## Understanding anxiety

Anxiety can present as internalising behaviours such as shutdown, withdrawing from peers or staff, or externalising behaviours such as anger with yelling and outbursts or refusing to follow instructions or complete a task. It is important to note that sometimes there will be no clear signs or symptoms of anxiety.

## Causes of anxiety for autistic learners

Causes of anxiety can include:

- small disruptions to routines
- unexpected changes such as a relief teacher
- unfamiliar or unpredictable social situations
- situations where it is hard to know what other people are thinking or feeling
- processing of sensory information, for example loud sounds in the environment
- their own thoughts and feelings, especially unfamiliar or unpleasant physical symptoms or sensations in their bodies.

## Impact of autism and anxiety on learning

In a learning environment, a learner with autism and anxiety can experience:

- difficulty concentrating in class or completing homework
- feeling self-conscious or avoiding certain situations
- physical symptoms such as racing heart, fast breathing, tense muscles, sweaty palms, a queasy stomach and trembling hands or legs
- inability to hold information in their minds long enough to do something with it.

## Strengths of learners with autism and anxiety

The strengths of learners with autism and anxiety can be:

- attention to detail and observational skills
- spontaneity and a willingness to try new things
- unique thought processes that support innovative solutions that are both creative and inventive
- expertise in particular areas of interest
- being hyper focused
- integrity, tenacity and acceptance of difference.



**Government  
of South Australia**

Department for Education

# AUTISM AND ANXIETY ADJUSTMENTS



## EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENTS



### Setting tasks and activities

- Limit the number of choices for a particular activity to reduce decision making anxiety.
- Allow the learner to observe rather than talk or read in front of the group.
- Provide clear start and finish points.
- Use interactive activities.



### Homework

Give extra consideration to homework requirements:

- break down homework tasks into a series of steps that are more manageable
- prioritise homework tasks by deciding what will benefit the learner and leave out what is less essential
- provide a printed copy of homework instructions or email a copy to both the learner and the parent or carer
- allow homework to be presented in a variety of formats such as handwritten or typed.



### Communication

- Follow up general or group instructions by checking for understanding and an acknowledgment of the order of steps that need to be taken.
- Keep instructions simple and short.
- Express 1 idea at a time when giving instructions.
- Allow time for information to be processed and stay quiet during this time.



### Breaks

- Create a simple structure for break times to reduce anxiety and increase a feeling of control.
- Check in with the learner after breaks. Allow time to discuss their experiences and support them to process information.



### Social development and emotional wellbeing

- Identify triggers and plan strategies in advance.
- Allow the learner to start the transition to a new activity or location 2 minutes early so they can make that transition without the busyness and noise of other learners.
- Allow the learner to carry a comfort item to provide a sense of security.
- Partner the learner with a familiar peer to provide comfort – both in the learning space and in the yard.
- Incorporate physical activity choices as part of the learner's daily schedule because exercise is a proven strategy to reduce anxiety symptoms.