

# A resource pack to support autistic children to cope with anxiety and change particularly during and after COVID related restriction

T-Res Project



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## Introduction

We have developed this resource pack to allow you to work with your child or student to understand anxiety, to understand the relationship between anxiety and change and to work to avoid or reduce feelings of anxiety.

- i) identify anxious behaviours
- ii) understand some causes of anxiety
- iii) work to support children experiencing anxiety
- iv) and work to reduce the experience of anxiety.

The information and tools included will support children of different ages and skill levels.

## About T-Res

The T-Res Project is funded by the Health Research Board (HRB) under the COVID-19 Rapid Response fund. It is led by Dr Sinéad Smyth for the Dublin City University School of Psychology.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is something that is extremely commonly experienced. It is even more common among autistic children, young people and adults. It is quite likely that feelings of anxiety have increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic or that anxiety may be directed at or triggered by different things. Anxiety may manifest in feelings or behaviours. It may be specific to objects or events or it may be more generalised. Given that we all feel anxious sometimes, it is important to recognise that it is a typical or expected response to certain events or situations.



## Signs of anxiety

Everybody expresses anxiety differently. This list includes some common signs of anxiety in autistic children and teenagers, but it is not exhaustive. If your student or child is experiencing anxiety, they may display some of these or other behaviours:

- Increase in repetitive behaviours
- Trembling / shaking
- Sweating
- Increase in stimming
- More meltdowns or strong emotions
- Pacing
- Sleep problems
- Intolerance of uncertainty
- Self-harm, eg. head-banging, unexplained injuries.

## Anxiety and autism

Anxiety is not considered to be a feature of autism, but it is commonly experienced by autistic people. This anxiety is important to address because it can cause distress, and interfere greatly with daily life. Anxiety in autistic children and adolescents can be triggered by many things like noise, crowds, sensory stimuli, and change. The common feature here is that many of these things are very often not things that we can control.

## Anxiety and change

Taking change for example, there is a known relationship between anxiety and change. What do we mean by change? This might include changes to the daily routine, worries, and fears surrounding uncertain or unpredictable situations, environmental changes, unfamiliar situations, life transitions. The impacts of change on anxiety levels may be because things that are different or unpredicted can make us feel uneasy or that we lack control. The relationship between anxiety and change in autistic children is strong and well-established. Numerous studies have shown that change is a large source of anxiety for children with autism and many parents of autistic children and young people themselves feel like this reflects their lived experience.

## Change, COVID-19 & Anxiety

Sometimes we can predict change or a time of transition and when we can it is possible to prepare for it and in doing so lessen anxiety. However, frequently, it isn't possible to predict change - a clear example of this is the impact that COVID-19 restrictions and closures have had on our lives. These changes are rolling and so the current situation of tightening and loosening restrictions, of changing our routines and living differently than before may result in additional anxiety. The very idea of these guidelines, restrictions, and the impact of COVID-19 may elicit an anxious response. This can also be triggered by seeing people not following the guidelines outlined by the government.

## Addressing change in order to avoid or ease anxiety

Although it is not possible to avoid change, there are some things that we can do to reduce its impacts

1. Preparing for new situations
2. Developing coping skills
3. Reflecting on past changes.





## 1. Preparing for new situations

Providing certainty and predictability where possible will make change less challenging and overwhelming than if we have no predictability or limited predictability. What does this mean? Well, working on a routine, and keeping the things we can control consistent is one thing that we can focus on. However, change is a natural part of life and so planning for the integration of new situations or activities is important. How can we do that?

1. Give time to planning
  - Identify new activities and prepare to integrate them.
  - Breaking the activity down into steps will help you to identify any aspects that your student or child may find challenging.
2. Communicate the message to your student or child
  - Giving advance warning of new activities and embedding them into the routine is a really useful way of preparing for change. Use the child's schedule or first-then board.
  - Use visual stories to communicate messages about change.
  - Overall, making sure that communication is timely is important and by giving time to planning, you can integrate this early.

## 2. Developing coping skills

You can't always predict change! Things will happen that are unexpected for both you and your child or student. This is why supporting emotional regulation skills in both familiar and unfamiliar situations is an important part of increasing tolerance of uncertainty. This does not have to consist of skills that are difficult to master and should be pitched at a level that is appropriate for your child or student. Helping a child to navigate change in the moment, may mean

1. Developing a balanced routine, making sure that activities focusing on your child or student's wellbeing are included in it like:
  - Leisure activities
  - Relaxation or quiet time
  - Social contact
  - Time outdoors.
2. If your child or student is ready, build flexibility into their routine.
  - We've already mentioned planning, and you can use that to incorporate change occasionally
  - You may want to think about adding "surprise" elements into a child's schedule.
3. Planning for and incorporating change provides safe opportunities to you to support your child or student to practice skills that can help when change happens unexpectedly. These skills might include:
  - Practicing asking for a break, asking for quiet time, saying "I don't like this"
  - Practicing communicating levels of emotion like "I feel angry".
  - For other children, calming techniques like breathing, squeezing fists, using a distractor or counting may be useful.



### 3. Reflecting on changes

When something unexpected happens, de-escalation of any heightened emotions and behaviours is important. However, afterwards it is useful to take time to reflect on the situation;

What happened? How did your child react? How did you react? What worked well? What didn't work so well? What could you do differently next time to support your child or student in this situation?

When your child is calm, some children will be able to reflect with you on the situation and the outcome. Conversations like this can often help in preparing to deal with unpredictable situations in the future. Simply pointing out how your student or child was able to express that they did not like the noise/lights/heat and saying well done is important or perhaps formulating a plan together for what you can do next time something like occurs would be helpful.

### Top tips for coping with change

1. Let your child or student know about the change ahead of time.
2. If possible, you can plan changes for when your child is usually less stressed.  
Eg. a dental appointment could be scheduled after some relaxation time.
3. Establish expectations. Explain what change will occur and what behaviour is expected of them. Allow them to ask questions if necessary.
4. If your child is particularly anxious about a new situation, allow them the opportunity to practise any new behaviours at home, ahead of time. This will give them the opportunity to develop confidence in their new skills.
5. Don't rush the change. Your child needs time to process the new information. If implementing a big change, introduce small changes first and work up to the bigger changes.
6. Use supports like your child's schedule, a first-then board or even a timer to indicate when the current activity is over and that it is time to move onto the next task.
7. After a change has occurred, praise or reward your child for being flexible and with changes.



## Resource pack

We have created a resource pack to help you as you support a child to deal with change.

This includes:

- A change planning template
- A template for reflecting on how a new situation was experienced.
- A communication passport.

You can also find other resources on our website including:

- **A visual narrative for coping with change.**

## Planning for change

My name is: \_\_\_\_\_

My favourite activity is: \_\_\_\_\_

I enjoy spending time with: \_\_\_\_\_

I like going: \_\_\_\_\_

New things coming up for me soon include:: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Things I might like about these new activities: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I enjoy spending time with: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Things I might not like about these new activities: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Supports I might need during these activities: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Skills I already have to help me deal with change are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Skills I can work on to help me deal with change are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Reflecting on a new situation

My name is: \_\_\_\_\_

Today I experienced something unexpected.

It was: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Before this happened I was: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

When this happened I: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

When this happened my grown up: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Afterwards I: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Next Steps:

How did the situation go? \_\_\_\_\_

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What might we do differently next time? \_\_\_\_\_

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What can we work on before then? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Communication Passport

Date:

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Who is writing this note:

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How did today go?:

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What I am working on:

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What I am finding challenging:

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What I need support with:

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Date:

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Who is writing this note:

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How did today go?:

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What I am working on:

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