

Anxiety Management Strategies

A list of strategies to support students is provided below.

(Please remember that not all strategies will be effective with every student. Try to give time to observe the triggers of the student's anxiety and those strategies which are effective/helpful)

Remove the source of anxiety

If possible, remove the factor which is creating anxiety for the student, for example:

- If a specific activity creates anxiety and it is not mandatory, excuse the student and consider if the aims of the activity can be achieved through an alternative option.
- The student may be able to access a differentiated timetable in which they are excused from subjects which increase anxiety. The student then attends a different class, completes outstanding homework or goes to the library.
- The source causing the anxiety in certain environments could be removed/adapted e.g. sensory issues ie fluorescent lighting, the smell of an air freshener in the school toilets, busy transition times in school etc

Reduce the source of anxiety

It may not always be possible to eliminate the source of anxiety but it is usually possible to reduce the anxiety triggers, for example:

- **If a specific activity creates anxiety** (e.g. assembly, the playground), limit the amount of time the student is expected to participate in the 'trigger activity' and gradually increase the time over a number of weeks. Provide supports if the trigger is sensory e.g. noise.

- **If the student becomes anxious in certain subjects, differentiate the work** expected in the trigger subject to reduce the demands placed on the student
- **If social interactions are a source of anxiety for the student**, limit the amount of paired and group work in which the student is expected to participate. Remember that if the student has participated in group work in class, he/she may need quiet alone time at break or lunch to calm down.
- **If homework is causing anxiety**, reduce the expectations and ensure deadlines are spread over a reasonable time. Opportunities to complete homework at school may help the student.

Desensitisation is a way of very gradually introducing the student to the source of their anxiety and increasing their tolerance of it, for example:

Desensitisation

- Gradually increasing the time the student spends in the environment/activity which causes anxiety e.g. playground, dining hall, assembly, messy play activities. Use a visual timer and very gradually increase the time over several weeks or months.
- Allow the student to wear ear defenders, headphones or ear plugs in noisy environments, but ensure the student removes these for the last minute in the environment, and then the last two minutes, the last three minutes etc, and gradually work backwards until he/she can tolerate the full required time in the noisy environment.
- In Home Economics and Art, if the student does not like the texture of some materials (e.g. paint, clay, wet food items), allow the student to work with alternative materials and then very gradually introduce other textures.
- When using desensitisation methods, always monitor the student's reaction and stop the activity if he/she is showing signs of distress. Ensure the student has a way of communicating anxiety and then follow with a calming activity.

Calm breaks

Calm breaks are a way of ensuring the student stays regulated throughout the day.

- **Introduce calm breaks at regular intervals** throughout the day and include on the timetable/visual schedule to assist the student in coping more effectively with challenges.
- Calm breaks should be a consistent part of the student's daily routine and should be given even when the student is having a 'good' day.
- Identify the potential trigger points for the student's anxiety and schedule calm breaks **before** these trigger points.
- Calm breaks can also be scheduled for times **after** an activity to allow the student to calm and regulate.
- Calm breaks are not a 'reward' and therefore should not be used as a contingent which can be removed the student. The student will need calm breaks even more on a challenging day.
- Students with adequate self-awareness, can request calm breaks when they require them. These students will need to have insight into what anxiety feels like and relate this to a need for a break.
- The frequency and duration of calm breaks will be dependent upon the individual needs of the student. The key is to be flexible as some days the student will require more and longer breaks than on other days.
- The decision about where to have the calm break will depend on several factors, including the individual student's needs, school policies and space available. Some students need a space containing calming resources while other students simply need a quiet space with minimal stimulation. Some ideas for calm areas include:
 - A room specifically allocated as a calm room
 - A screened off corner of a classroom
 - A quiet office in school
 - A quiet classroom e.g. while the student's class is participating in



<https://theartofeducation.edu/2019/01/21/how-to-create-a-calm-down-corner-in-5-easy-steps/>

- Engagement in 'heavy work' activities (the input to the muscles can be calming) e.g. wiping benches, carrying books, stacking chairs, setting out P.E. mats
- Reading a favourite book or comic
- Listening to music
- Going for a short walk e.g. taking a message to the school office
- Drinking water through a bottle with a sports cap



Image from Secret Agent Society Social Skills Programme
<https://www.sst-institute.net/>

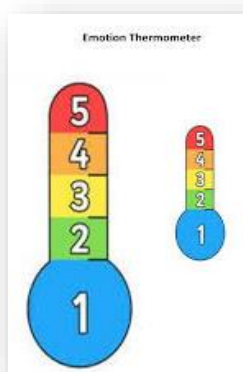


- Chewing e.g. a chewy tube/pendant, dried fruit

Image from Witherslack Group Training: Understanding the stress response (Emma Weaver May 2020)

Visual communication supports

When students with autism experience anxiety, it is often difficult for them to communicate how they are feeling. The visual communication supports remove the need to communicate verbally and ensure that the student has a way of conveying anxiety. It is important to **teach the use of these visual supports when the student is calm**. The **use of the supports should first be taught in a one-to-one setting** before generalised to the real setting of the classroom.



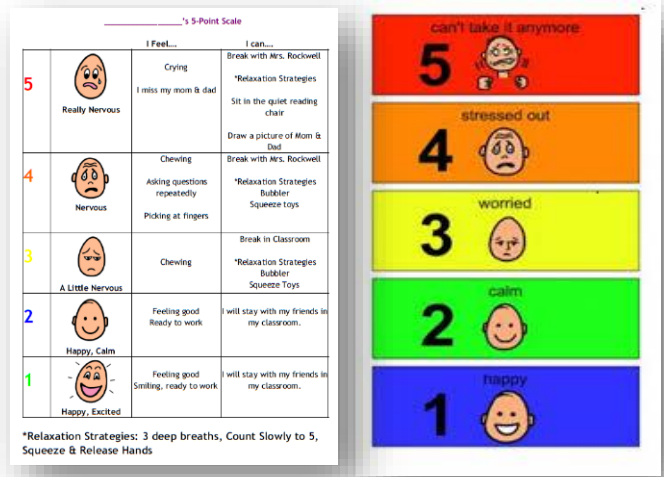
- **Emotion thermometers:** these can come in a number of formats; some use numbers to rate emotions while others use colours, words or symbols. It is important to choose the format which the student can best relate to.

Images from:

<https://best-practice.middletonautism.com>

<https://www.greengates.horizonstrust.org.uk%2Four-academy%2Fbehaviour-and-rewards%2Fincredible-5-point-scale&psig>

The thermometer is usually printed and laminated and kept on the student's desk or in their pocket/schoolbag. The student uses the thermometer to indicate if he/she is becoming anxious. Depending on the level of anxiety indicated, the assistant or teacher gives the student access to an appropriate calming strategy.



- **Calm tokens:** the student can use a calm token to request a calm break. The number of tokens available to the student each day can be limited but ensure an adequate number is provided to meet his/her needs and increase the number of tokens available on more challenging days.



For older students, a more discrete sign can be used to indicate the request for a calm break eg a specific coloured crayon placed on the desk, a blank post-it note placed on the work area, an unzipped pencil case etc

- **Self-regulation prompt cards:** The student can be given a card with options for calming activities to remind him/her what to do when feeling anxious.

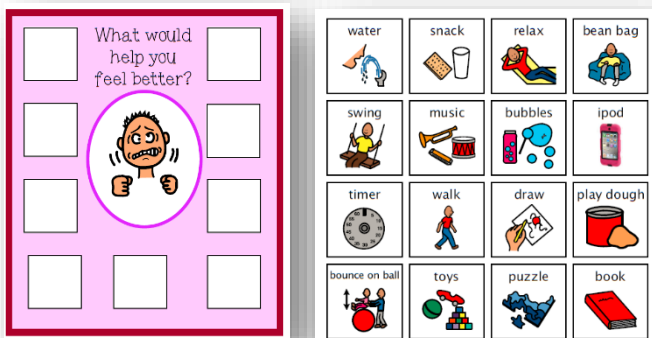


Image from:

<http://www.autismadventures.com/how-to-set-up-calm-down-kit-in-your/>



Image from:

<http://sensory-processing.middletonautism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/11/12-Calm-down.pdf>

Stress kits

Stress kits are individualised kits containing resources which are calming for the student. The contents of the kit will depend on the specific needs and preferences of the student. The student accesses the kit when feeling anxious. Some examples include:

- Photograph of a favourite pet
- Plastic figure of a favourite cartoon character
- Comic
- Fidget object
- Pen and paper for drawing/doodling



Image from:

<http://www.perfectionpending.net/2016/11/10/15-smart-ideas-help-kids-calm-manage-anger-anxiety/>

Progressive muscle relaxation

This is a relaxation strategy which involves tensing muscles, holding for several seconds and then releasing. The student works through different muscle groups e.g. clenching fists, tensing arm muscles, tensing leg muscles, curling toes. It can be carried out in a calm area or while the student is seated in the classroom. It will need to be taught in a one-to-one setting at a time when the student is calm before being transferred to a more stressful scenario. The student is likely to benefit from a visual prompt to guide him/her through this process.

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/RG67hhNkw3Q>



Image from:

http://mindfulnessatmc.weebly.com/uploads/6/8/3/9/6839277/8269185_orig.jpeg

Breathing exercises

The student can be taught how to control breathing when feeling anxious to help reduce stress. The student is taught this skill in a one-to-one setting and when calm before generalising to a stressful scenario. Visual supports can be used to remind the student how to breathe when anxious, for example:



<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/20-relaxation-cards-for-children.pdf>

- Visual prompt cards of 'smelling a flower' (breathing in) and 'blowing out a candle' (breathing out)
- Play Therapy NI resource: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/bf/c8/49/bfc8493f8e85093f09acd84cacbc58e0.gif>

How to teach emotional regulation

11. How to teach Emotional Regulation

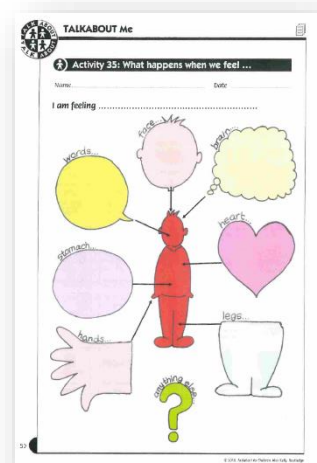
Adults can monitor when a student is feeling anxious and how to support the student in calming down. An important life-long skill, however, is to teach the student to independently recognise the signs that he/she is becoming anxious and what strategies to access to help return to a calm state. There are 3 stages when teaching regulation:

TEACH:

It is important to teach these skills when the student is in a calm state and in a quiet one-to-one setting. The student is taught 3 skills:

- **How do I know I am becoming anxious?**

Teach the student to recognise the signs of anxiety relevant to him/her (e.g. breathing more quickly, feeling flushed or



warm, sweating, loss of concentration, irritability, desire to escape the situation, nausea). This is often best taught using a diagram of the body and labelling the physiological signs of stress in different parts of the body. It is likely to be easier for a student with autism to recognise concrete signs of anxiety than to understand the emotions.

- **What triggers my anxiety?**

Facilitate the student to identify the triggers for his/her anxiety (e.g. a certain activity, specific sensory input, crowded environments). The student then knows to be alert for signs of anxiety in these environments/activities and to be prepared to use calming strategies.

- **What reduces my anxiety?**

Allow the student to try different strategies and then select what makes him/her feel calm.

REHEARSE

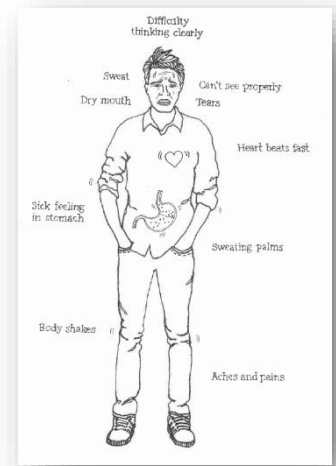
Give the student time to practise anxiety management strategies in a safe environment and when he/she is calm. Rehearse several times before expecting generalisation to real scenarios.

PROMPT

When the student is transferring skills to real scenarios, he/she is likely to initially require prompting from an adult to access the anxiety management strategies. Adult support can then be gradually phased out over time. Visual prompt cards as described in previous sections can act as long-term supports which the student can always access as reminder of what to do when feeling anxious.

Programmes and books to support emotional regulation

- 'How does your engine run?': The Alert Programme for Self-Regulation <http://www.alertprogram.com/>
- Take Ten <http://www.taketenteam.co.uk/>
- The Incredible 5-Point Scale (Burin & Curtis, 2013) <http://www.5pointscale.com/>
- Emotional Toolkit CAT Kit- developed by Tony Attwood <http://www.cat-kit.com/>
- Beating Anxiety (Davida Hartmann, 2017)



Images from:
Talkabout for children by Alex Kelly
Beating Anxiety by Davida Hartmann

Appendix

The following items are included in the Anxiety Management Resource Bundle :

- Breathing cards
- Breathing exercise – visual prompt
- Mindful minute activity sheet
- Stress buster exercises and Whole Class Happy exercises and senses (2 handouts)
- What happens when I feel ... body template (*Talkabout Programme*)
- Anxiety Body Signals Activity (*Secret Agent Society Programme*)
- Incredible 5-point scale example and blank template
- Break cards and visual supports
- Progressive muscle relaxation techniques
- Social story when I feel anxious example

Sources of information:

Centre for Autism: Middletown (2020) Best Practice Resources. Available at: <https://best-practice.middletownautism.com/approaches-of-intervention/anxiety-management/anxiety-management-strategies/> (Accessed 23/11/2020)