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Stress and anxiety

Casey has such a strong dislike of large birds that she is fearful of going outside - ibises often land on the school oval.

Why does this happen?

- A child with autism may experience fear based on a connection made from a single frightening experience. A situation that has previously caused anxiety can trigger a fearful reaction, even an extreme over-reaction.
- Children with autism can be overly sensitive to certain sensory stimuli, such as sudden noises like applause.
- Children with autism can experience stress from the everyday challenges of coping with change and sensory input. Walking out of class can be a sign that the student is suffering from unbearable stress.
- Children with autism lack a strong coping mechanism to deal with stress. This is because they have difficulty identifying their own emotions.
- Children with autism respond to stress in the same way as anybody else; they find it very unpleasant and try to reduce or avoid it as it adversely affects their ability to learn and function
- When the child is stressed he is more likely to fail, this in turn leads to further stress.
- While we all experience stress it is a greater problem for people with autism because they experience severe stress far more frequently than most people do and they are less able to deal with it effectively.
- Children on the spectrum can be divided into two categories as to why they find it more difficult to cope with their stress. 1) They have a lack of recognition of their own stress in its early stages. 2) They lack the knowledge of what to do about their stress if and when they recognise it.
- Their lack of recognition stems from their general poor self-awareness. Children on the spectrum often have a less developed concept of their bodies and as such they find it difficult to know where parts of their body are in space without looking at them. They also find it difficult to copy another's movements.
- They also find it difficult to attend to, label and interpret the signals of their body and often do not recognise particular messages as feelings indicating their mental states (anger, fear) or sensations indicating the physical states of their body (headache, thirst).
- Feelings of stress may be so overwhelming that the student has to be physically removed from the situation. Difficult behaviours are often an attempt to reduce stress levels. These responses may be effective but inappropriate; running away, obsessive or self-stimulatory behaviour, withdrawal etc.
- Students with autism often don't have close friends that they can talk to and confide in about their fears.

- The student may have learnt ways of dealing with stress that are inappropriate but work for him, therefore he sees no reason for change. You will need to be supportive, reassuring and emphasise the use of relaxation techniques.
- A small number of students with autism may develop anxiety disorders, eg. panic attacks or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. This can be a sign that the student is having major difficulties with the social demands of school or experiencing sensory problems.
- In summary, children with autism experience the same feelings of stress and anxiety as everyone else does, but they have difficulty locating them, are unaware of them or do not understand what they mean.

What can you do

- If the child has a particular fear, choose a time when he is calm, perhaps in an activity that he enjoys. Progressively expose him to the source of the problem. Visualisation techniques can also be helpful, eg. help the student overcome a fear of spiders by visualising a dead spider in a far corner.
- When experiencing stress, the student's ability in most areas will be affected:
 - his understanding of language decreases,
 - his ability to adequately express himself decreases.
 - his awareness of others and the cues they give is reduced,
 - he is not able to concentrate as well,
 - he will have difficulty focusing on relevant information,
 - his sensory systems will be over-stimulated, so he won't cope as well with noise, visual stimuli and other sensations,
 - his ability to control inappropriate / anxiety-reducing behaviour decreases, and
 - it becomes harder for him to use constructive problem solving.
- **Teaching recognition of stress.** Learning to pay attention to and correctly interpret the messages of the body is vital. Help and encourage the child to label feelings and physical sensations. Use role play, find pictures, use music or scenes from TV programs to talk about why / what happened to produce different sensations and emotions in other people. Once he is able to label some feelings, help him identify situations when he might feel these emotions himself. This allows the student to start matching feelings and sensations to situations. Hopefully he will learn to identify situations that he finds difficult and then start to think about and be prepared to use coping strategies.
- Provide examples of a situation with accompanying physical sensations or emotion. Eg. "When I hear someone yelling, I feel funny in my stomach, this is *worried*." Or "Your face is red, you are frowning, your body is still - you're *angry*."
- Talk to the student's parents to find out if an occupational therapist has conducted an assessment and sensory profile. The information gained from this can be extremely helpful both at school and at home. It gives direction to the modifications that are necessary to reduce stress.
- It is important to develop awareness of the signs that the student is stressed. He may not reveal his stress the way that other children do. The cues may be very subtle. Look for triggers such as body posture, change in tone of voice, more or less talkative, resisting eye contact, becoming teary or restless. Or the stress may trigger challenging or repetitive behaviour. You can then prompt him by saying "You look worried, do you need help?" Talk through the feelings – "Do your shoulders feel tight? Do you have a funny feeling in your stomach? Is your face feeling hot?"
- Once the student is able to label some feelings, help him to identify situations when he might feel one of those emotions. Hopefully he will then learn to identify situations that he finds

difficult and then start to think about and be prepared to use coping strategies.

- Note signs of stress on the [Student Summary Form](#). This will help other staff and relieving teachers understand the child.
- Some students will appear quiet and compliant in class, but become aggressive the minute they get home. This indicates a high level of stress at school but is often misinterpreted as coping at school and poor behaviour at home. It is in fact a release of tension in a safe place. It is important to have open and regular lines of communication between parents and teachers to fully understand how the student is coping.
- Physical exercise (running, bike riding, jumping on a trampoline) is a good way of letting go of accumulated stress. Stress balls or a 'mad bag' that students can take their frustration out on, may also be useful.
- Allow for a short de-briefing session with a counsellor, teacher or an understanding peer to talk through the day's events or after a stressful incident. Use this time to explain in more detail why certain things happened and rehearse what to do next time it occurs.
- Allowances may need to be made regarding homework. The school day can leave the student so stressed that he need the evenings to unwind and relax. You might want to set aside some school time for the student to do his homework or reduce the tasks he is required to do at home. See also Homework.
- Children with autism may need a clear distinction between home and school; ie. that 'school is for learning, home is for relaxing'. Imposing homework on a child under great stress can be more than they can bear.