

Scottish autism

WHERE AUTISTIC PEOPLE
ARE VALUED

Stress and Coping

This resource aims to provide a short overview of stress and coping, and can be used by anyone. However, some of the information has been adapted to increase the relatability to an autistic person's stress experience.

1. Understanding stress
2. Understanding my stress
3. Responding to my stress

1. Understanding stress

Stress is a physiological and psychological response to demands in our environment. We call these demands "stressors".

Stressors can be acute or chronic. Acute stressors are momentary and cause a stress response during the event, but results in relief when the stressor has finished. An example of this could be: being stuck in a traffic jam, being unable to find your keys, or having a difficult conversation. Chronic stressors are those which are long-term pressures, such as debt, a high-intensity job and family pressures. Chronic stress can also be caused by experiencing many acute stressors over a space of time.

Chronic stress can lead to long-term physical health problems, it can also result in a person becoming more sensitive to minor stressors. For example, a person may not usually become distressed if they lose their favourite mug. However, if the person is experiencing chronic stress, losing this mug may result in an acute stress reaction.

Signs and symptoms of stress:

Physical

Gastrointestinal problems
Headaches, muscle aches, or chest pains
Increased heart rate
Increased sensitivity to, or awareness of noises, touch, smell, or sights.
Increased incidences of common colds
Low libido
Lack of appetite, nausea, or feelings of uneasiness in the stomach

Behavioural

Eating too much or too little
Sleeping too much or too little
Less engagement with social relationships
Difficulty initiating a task or routine (e.g. making dinner)
Actively rearranging the environment to ensure structure and order
Increased repetitive movements

Emotional

Negative emotions becoming intensified or overwhelming
Agitation or anger
Increased sensitivity to emotional information
Greater difficulty in inducing positive emotion

Cognitive

Forgetfulness
Poor concentration or reduced ability to switch attention
Disorientation
Increased difficulty in problem solving
Increased incidences of finding certain types of information or scenarios confusing, even if you would normally not become confused by them

2. Understanding my stress

What does stress look like for me?

Stress can present itself differently in people. Understanding your own unique presentation of stress can allow you to identify when you are stressed, or are becoming stressed, much quicker. It can also help you identify patterns of stressors, which can allow you to identify when you might be more likely to reach the point of an acute stress reaction. You can also share this with people close to you, so they can understand when you are becoming stressed, and can support you with your personal stress plan.

The examples below of John and Claire highlight what stress might look like for some people, and the chain of events that can result in an acute stress reaction.

Stress scenario - John

John has been experiencing chronic stressors for approximately three months. He is planning an outing with his friends at the weekend using a group text messaging service. John has a preference for detail-oriented planning in most cases. However, he understands his friends do not. He usually is very accepting of his friends leaving details and preparations to the last minute. His friends decide that they should go for dinner. John asks the group where they feel they should go. Several people post messages with different suggestions, and the conversation begins to drift away - with a decision not being made.

John prompts them to make a decision. A decision is made that they will go to a local Mexican restaurant, and John finally feels at ease. However, 20 minutes later, one friend sends a link to another restaurant that is offering a better deal. Another discussion arises about whether or not they should attend that restaurant instead. John says they should simply make a decision. Another friend then identifies, that they can get an even better deal if they change the date of their outing. Some friends then suggest changing the date. John becomes overwhelmed by the prospect of the date changing, and he informs his friends he is no longer going – leaving the conversation.

How stress looks for John:

- Asking more detail-oriented questions
- Requirement for more structure and order
- Withdrawal from social conversations
- Removing oneself abruptly from a situation

Stress scenario - Claire

Claire has finished her day at college and is heading home. She found the day exhausting, as her class involved role play, and she finds this intense level of interaction difficult. She goes on the bus to find that her bus pass was not working correctly. She required to find money in her purse to pay for the fare home. The situation has resulted in her becoming disoriented and she struggles to navigate her fingers inside her purse, taking some time to pull the correct change out. A person behind her shouts “what’s the hold up?” pressuring her to find her money quicker. Claire walks to the top of the bus, to find someone is sitting in the seat that she prefers. She releases a loud sigh, throws her bag on another seat, and sits down abruptly. She places her earphones in and listens to white noise.

She is feeling calm and is enjoying the journey, until the bus driver comes over and taps her shoulder. She jumps, and feels her heart pounding heavier. The driver informs her that all passengers require to move to the bus behind. When alighting, people are moving very closely together, and a young child is moving horizontally across the street, nearly tripping Claire up. She holds back and allows everyone else to walk in front. A gentleman stops at the door of the bus and invites Claire to go in front. Claire politely declines, but the gentleman insists. Claire mutters “For Goodness sake” and walks in front and on to the bus. Other passengers murmur about her “being a rude little girl”.

When she arrives home, she is doing her homework whilst her little sister is sitting on the couch and kicking her feet on the coffee table. The kicks are loud, heavy, and Claire can feel them echoing in the room. She tells her little sister to stop, but her little sister finds the situation funny and continues to kick. She calls for her Mum to mediate in the situation, but her Mum is on the phone, laughing at a conversation with her friend. The laughing is becoming louder and louder in Claire’s ears, and the thuds are sounding heavier. Claire screams “just stop it!”, throwing her books across the room, and running to her bedroom where she begins to cry.

How stress looks for Claire:

- Disorientation and difficulty with fine motor movements
- Verbal expression of stress
- Increased heavy-handedness and abrupt movements
- Using low arousal audio stimulus
- Becoming more “on-edge”
- Becoming more overwhelmed with too many people around her
- Increased sensitivity to noises
- Asking for help
- Physical reactions indicating distress

Coping strategies and styles

A “coping strategy” is a personalised response to a stressor.

Examples include:

- Talking about the problem
- Crying
- Eating
- Action-planning for the problem

Many people find that, throughout their life, they tend to use similar coping strategies over time which relate to one another. Many academics have categorised these strategies into “coping styles”. A coping style is a rough indication of what types of coping strategies you are most likely to engage in when presented with a stressor. Reflecting on your own coping style can be helpful in understanding how you respond to stress, and how adaptive or maladaptive this may be for you.

Although people may engage in one form of coping style more often, they may also use strategies from other coping styles too. Additionally, some people may adopt different coping styles for different stressors. These styles are not thought to be definitive of how you cope with stress, but can give you an idea of your dispositional preference for coping style. There have been many different coping strategies and styles identified over time. The three most common categories are:

Problem-focused coping

This may also be known as “task-focused coping” or “solution-focused coping” This type of coping style focuses on finding a solution to the problem that is causing the stress response. The style of coping may be adopted by people who feel that the emotional experience is not important, or that the emotional experience will persist if the stressor is not dealt with. This style of coping may also be adopted by people who feel that ignoring the problem, or distracting one self’s from the problem, is maladaptive – or impossible to do.

Examples:

- Researching possible ways to solve the problem
- Action planning to solve the problem
- Attempting “trial and error” to fix the problem

Emotion-focused coping

This type of coping style focuses on the emotional experience of the stressor, and aims to reduce the emotions associated with the stressor. This style of coping may be adopted by people who feel that the problem cannot be addressed if they are overwhelmed with the emotional experience. It may also be adopted by people who feel that the problem is not resolvable, and trying to find a solution will make the problem worse.

Examples:

- Crying
- Talking about your feelings
- Attempting to find the positives in a situation
- Creating action plans to address the emotional experience, not the problem

Avoidance-coping

This style is considered to be the most maladaptive coping style in most situations, and can increase the impact of stress over time if used for too long. This style involves avoiding the stressor, and failing to attend to the emotions which accompany that. This type of coping may also be used by people who are aware that the problem, and their accompanying emotions, cannot be resolved at that moment in time. In this case, these strategies are used to relax in the interim.

Examples:

- Turning to alcohol or drugs
- Smoking
- Cognitive avoidance
- Behavioural avoidance of the problem
- Engagement in distraction techniques (e.g. prolonged engagement in video games or television)

There are several scales and measures you can use to provide you with some self-awareness about what kinds of coping styles or strategies you are most likely to engage in. This [webpage](#) can direct you to some of these scales.

Questions to ask yourself

1. What types of coping strategies do I normally engage in?
2. Do I find these strategies helpful, or do they make the problem worse?
3. Would a different type of coping strategy suit me better in different situations?

It is important to ensure that the strategies you use are right for you at that moment in time.

If you feel that emotion-focused coping is not a style that meets your needs, then you may find that suggestions which are geared towards emotion-focused coping (e.g. a listening service) may not be helpful for you. You may feel that pressure to talk about your emotional experience in early stages of the coping journey can make your problems worse, and it is okay to redirect people to supporting you to help you engage in a problem-focused approach first to see if a solution can be found.

You may also find that you wish to speak about your emotional experience, and another person is redirecting you to find solutions to a problem. It is also okay to inform people that you need time to be able to express your emotions, and their redirection is not helping you. If a person naturally resorts to problem-focused coping themselves, they may feel that this is the best way to address the problem. Distraction techniques may be helpful to you in some situations, if you feel that your stress will take you to a place of crisis. Using these techniques in moderation is important. It is important to ensure you do not engage in these in excess, or to completely avoid addressing all problems.

3. Responding to my stress

Stress box

You may wish to create a physical box with tools that are in easy reach to you, filled with tools which you know will help you relax when stressed. By having these items located in the one place, you can reach them easily and do not have to use too much mental energy in identifying what you need to do when you are stressed.

Example items in a stress box:

- A sensory item or toy
- A mindfulness DVD
- A letter of reassurance written from yourself to yourself, or from a loved one/professional
- A bath bomb or bubble bath
- Numbers for organisations who you can talk to

Your rescue list (see below):

- Pen and paper for action planning
- A book, photograph, or item that induces calming or positive emotions

Rescue list

A rescue list is a list of calming strategies that you have used in the past that you know work for you. In periods of heightened stress, it can become difficult to think clearly about what steps you should take next to help you return to a calm state. By writing a rescue list when you are in a positive mental place, you can use this to help when you feel you may be reaching crisis. Your rescue list could include:

1. Messages of reassurance to yourself that you have collected when you are in a positive place
2. Things which you have used in the past to help reduce stress which have worked
3. Things which you may be tempted to do when stressed, but you know this will make things worse.

Below is an example of a rescue list:

This is my rescue list, I have reached for this because I am stressed. That is okay. I have been stressed many times before, and things always work out in the end. I have written this list to remind myself of the best ways to deal with stress when the time comes. Messages to myself:

1. Everything will be okay, I must use breathing exercises and use my headspace app before I do anything else. It worked the last time.
2. I am great at dealing with stress, but I just forget that when the time comes.
3. I have friends and family who want to help, and the helpline numbers I have are full of people who chose to go to work to help people like me.

Things which work:

1. Use my sensory items and listen to rainforest sounds to help me get to a place where I can think clearly about the situation.
2. Write down my thoughts and feelings on paper, I always feel better when I do that.
3. Phone my Mum to talk about the problem, she always helps me think rationally and has great ideas.
4. Go for a jog if it is quiet outside or the weather is nice. If not, go for a bath instead.
5. Play Tetris on the computer if I am not yet in the right place to deal with the problem. I will write the problem down on a piece of paper and come back to it later.
6. Write down every solution I can think of to help with the problem, even if they are silly. I will go back over it later and score out solutions which most likely will not work.

Things I should avoid:

1. I should avoid writing about the problem on social media, I feel worse after I do that.
2. I should avoid drinking alcohol, I always feel worse the morning afterwards.
3. I should avoid becoming upset and breaking things, I will feel worse afterwards.
4. I should avoid harming myself, I will feel worse afterwards.
5. If I have done any of these things before reading this list, I won't become upset or angry at myself. I will look back to "things which work" and try those.

Stress warning scale

A stress warning scale can be used to help people around you know when you are reaching peak level of stress, and may require less demands, increased sensitivity, and some help if things get too much. These scales can be put on your bedroom door if you live with others, placed on a wall in your office, or on your desk in a college or university setting. You can use a sticker or paper clip to mark which category you are in, or you can laminate it and mark your current state with a marker. You can make an agreement with others around you what type of support you need at what stage.

For example:

- If you are feeling fantastic, you may want people to interact more with you, and offer you challenges
- If you are feeling a little bit stressed, you may want people to interact with you, but only if it is important
- If you are feeling very stressed, you may want people to leave you alone completely, or to actively offer you support.



Other strategies which you may find helpful:

- **Mindfulness**

The Autism Support Team has created a resource on mindfulness which you may wish to use to support you in coping with your stress.

- **CBT-based self-help booklet**

NHS Moodjuice has developed a self-help booklet which you can use to help understand the cognitive-behavioural underpinnings of stress. This may be a more helpful approach for some people:

<https://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Stress.asp>

- **Local stress classes**

Some health boards and third sector agencies may run groups or classes to help support you understand and manage stress. An Autism Advisor can help you identify where your nearest classes may be.

- **Physical activity**

Physical activity is thought to have a positive impact on chronic stress, as it releases endorphins, otherwise known as “feel-good” chemicals in your brain.