

Understanding Autism & Emotions



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Emotions can be hard for all of us. We struggle to understand them and to control them in some circumstances at least. We can be unsure whether it is best to let our emotions show, and risk being labelled as over-emotional, or to try to show little or no emotion and risk being described as cold. The middle ground, if it even exists, is extremely hard to find and stay within.

What are emotions anyway? There is no universally agreed definition amongst scientists. They are one of those things that we all think we know about but can be very hard to describe in words. One possible definition is the way our bodies and minds respond to certain events or information.

Emotions often feel outside our control – most of us will have experienced times when we burst into tears or laughed uproariously in response to something and there is little or nothing we could do to change our behaviour, at least in the first instance.

Most of the time, we can manage and regulate our emotions to stop them from taking complete control of our outward behaviour.

Some autistic people, however, find it much more difficult to manage their emotions. As with other areas of autism, this is not a weakness or disability but just a difference.

Autistic people experience and sense the world differently. They can find much in the world very confusing as things are not designed for how their brains work.

Accordingly, because they sense things differently, their responses, including their emotional responses, may be very different from those of neurotypical people, and very strong emotions may be triggered by things that seem unremarkable to others.

This resource is intended to give an overview of how emotions can impact autistic people and their lives, and how you can help and support them in managing and processing their emotional responses.



Why individuals with autism are more likely to experience mental health problems

Links between autism and mental can occur for a variety of reasons, and, just like the impact of autism, will be different for every individual. There are, however, several broad areas where autism may lead to mental health issues.

Firstly, the world is not designed for autistic people. Their brains work differently to the thinking behind almost everything they encounter in their lives every day, be it the way places are designed, the way processes are supposed to work, or the way information is conveyed. Effectively, many autistic people are constantly translating everything they encounter to try and make sense of it in their own terms.

Living full time in a place that does not make sense to you is overwhelming, and inevitably takes a toll on your mental health. Many autistic people struggle to understand how much of the world works, and this is nothing to do with lack of intelligence. You could be the most intelligent person in the world, but if you have not learned to speak Japanese you will still not understand a word said to you in that language.

If you don't understand how things work, it is much harder to predict and prepare for what may happen in the future. This in turn can lead to heightened anxiety, a condition that many autistic people struggle with.

While being different is a strength, very few people like to always be the one that stands out from the crowd.

Given this, some autistic people may try to suppress their emotions on some occasions to try to blend in more. This is an aspect of the masking that many autistic people feel driven to practice for much of their lives, where they attempt to respond to situations as they think a neuro-typical person would rather than being their true selves. This is exhausting and very bad for mental health in the long term.

Autistic people may also struggle greatly to understand and respond to emotions in others. Part of this is the difficulty with understanding tone and body language, and part of it is the difference in which autistic brains may process things. But autistic people are not without empathy - if anything, they may feel empathy more acutely than many other people and, once they are aware of a problem, do all they can to try and resolve it and support the person affected.

Where they may struggle is identifying the emotional response someone is having and linking it to the cause. As with all communications with autistic people, clarity and explicitly stating something can be hugely helpful – they may well not just “get it” even if you think they should.



The impact emotions can have on autistic people

Just as many autistic people are hypersensitive to senses such as sight and sound, they may also be hypersensitive to emotions, so may be much more significantly affected by emotional triggers than others. Their other areas of hypersensitivity can also contribute to a strong emotional reaction.

Just as with other senses, an overload of unmanageable emotions can lead to an extreme reaction - either a complete shutdown while the autistic person attempts to work through their feelings and emotions and becomes unresponsive, or a meltdown with extreme emotions or behaviour on display as the over stimulation leads them to lose control.

No autistic person enjoys or seeks out either reaction. It is debilitating and can be embarrassing, particularly when seen by others who do not understand. As they grow older, autistic people learn to identify what may trigger such reactions so that they can take steps to avoid being in situations when they may occur - this is a form of self-protection that should be respected.

Even when they do not have an overload, autistic people may need to devote more time and energy to managing and understanding their emotions than others, just as doing anything hard takes more effort. This can impact their focus on other things and leave them very tired as a result.



How to help individuals with autism manage and regulate emotions

The very best thing you can do to help an autistic person who struggles with their emotions is to help them avoid situations which will trigger an extreme response. For an autistic adult, this means listening to them and respecting their wish to avoid certain situations or find alternatives even if it makes no sense to you. For autistic children, parents and carers can try to identify potentially difficult situations to avoid as well as signs of emotional overload building and know when to try and intervene.

That is not to say that autistic people should be sheltered from anything which might provoke an emotional response.

Expressing emotions is healthy and necessary, and preventing someone from grieving over the death of a loved one, for example, can be very damaging. But unnecessary exposure to difficult situations can and should be avoided where possible.

If an autistic person does suffer a shutdown or meltdown, the best thing you can do is to support them by giving them time and space to recover, making sure they are safe and protecting them from harsh words and actions from people who do not understand, particularly in the case of children who others wrongly think are just misbehaving. This is covered more fully in another resource.

Autistic people that have had an extreme emotional episode in front of others may later be embarrassed, and reassurance and a non-judgmental response will likely be appreciated.

While we may all struggle to understand and manage our emotions at times, this can be a daily struggle for autistic people. Prevention may well be the best strategy, with plenty of support and love when breakdowns do happen.

When you sense the world differently, as autistic people do, you will also respond differently, and that applies to an emotional response just as much as to words and actions.

