

# *Navigating festivals with autism*



Festival season is here to bring people together to celebrate arts, music, culture, new experiences, and all the wonderful communities we belong to. For those of us with autism, or who care for someone with autism, festivals can be such an incredible experience, but they do also pose a few challenges.

We've put together these practical tips to make it a bit easier and a bit more enjoyable.

### **Going to a festival with an autistic individual**

Going to a festival can be an unforgettable experience – it really is like nothing else. There's so much to explore, and the sense of togetherness can be something quite unique.

For people with ASD, this is all true too. It's a place you can not only stimulate the senses while experiencing the arts in all their forms, but also interact with others.

Music, in particular, is so powerful – there's something about its non-verbal qualities that means we can all instinctively connect to it and use it as a means of identifying emotions and expressing ourselves. For children (and more grown-up people) with autism, that is an amazing thing.

Of course, festivals can also be a bit, or a lot, overwhelming for anyone with autism. Crowds, noise, visual overload, lighting effects, unfamiliar environments, lack of routine, and so many social interactions are just some of the sensory triggers that can cause anxiety or distress for people who experience hyposensitivity or hypersensitivity.

### **Tips for getting the most out of a festival**

With a little planning , people with autism can experience all the fun and vibrancy of festivals while reducing any potential stress factors.

#### *Plan ahead*

Do your research into the event, its facilities, accessibility policies, and the site layout. Maps and visual schedules/timelines can also help to provide a sense of structure and familiarity.

#### *Get packing*

Items that regulate sensory processing can come in really handy along with all the usual festival essentials. Earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones, sunglasses and fidget toys/stim tools are all useful to carry around in a daypack.

### *Factor in quiet times and breaks*

Schedule regular time in quiet areas to rest and recharge. A rest day before and after a festival can be useful too and mean you have more energy to enjoy the fun while you're there.

### *Make use of facilities*

Many festivals have a disability platform, which can provide a safe space to enjoy performers without feeling crowded or overwhelmed. Also, consider disability campsites, which are far quieter and less crowded, to reduce anxiety and sensory overload.

### *Help with communication*

Role-playing social situations and practising communication techniques before the event can help boost confidence. When you're there, you can use visual aids and communication apps, and some people find it helpful to wear badges or bracelets indicating they're autistic, which can help remind others to be mindful about how they communicate.



## **Festival organisers can play their part too**

Festivals can be enriching experiences for everyone, and organisers can play their part in promoting accessibility by fostering an environment of empathy and inclusivity.

Providing autism-friendly facilities and spaces, along with appropriate training for festival staff and volunteers can enhance the offering and provide support for people with ASD. Engaging with festivalgoers to promote understanding and challenge preconceptions surrounding autism can also help create a more welcoming experience.

Embracing inclusivity and understanding can go a long way to creating memorable and enjoyable experiences for everyone.

