

## Section 3: Physical and Mental Health

### Information for adults following diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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This pack has been put together from information available from specialist autism services, autistic people, and professionals working with autistic people.

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This leaflet may be made available in a larger print, Braille or your community language.

Resource Pack created by NHS Lothian Adult ADHD and ASD Resource Team

## Health and hospital appointments

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others.

Some autistic people become very anxious about attending health appointments. Health centres, dental surgeries, opticians and clinics are usually happy to make reasonable adjustments to make the visit less stressful for you. Reasonable adjustments could include the following:

- **Speak to your GP practice, dentist, optician or clinic in advance**

You can telephone the GP practice in advance to discuss any special requests or you can give consent to let the GP speak to a family member or another person who might also support you when you attend the appointment.

- **Ask the health professional about any adaptations they can make to help with sensory differences**

For example, you may ask to use a quiet, uncluttered room with natural lighting and to switch off strip fluorescent lighting where this is possible.

- **Let the clinic know if you require extra time to absorb information**

You can request to have information written down.

Your doctor or other health professional may be able to provide additional visual aids, diagrams and/or photographs.

**Scottish Autism** has a fact sheet on when an alert card might be useful to carry and an alert card service which you can register for and order online.

[www.scottishautism.org/services-support/support-individuals/autism-alert-cards](http://www.scottishautism.org/services-support/support-individuals/autism-alert-cards)

**Autism Rights Group Highland (ARGH)** is a group run by and for autistic adults which is based in the Scottish Highlands. They have developed an autism alert card which you can order online to help with communicating your needs in situations where you may find this difficult.

[www.arghighland.co.uk/arghcard.html](http://www.arghighland.co.uk/arghcard.html)





## Mental health

Many people experience times of low mood, anxiety or stress at one time or another and these are just part of typical human experience. However, sometimes these feelings become severe and start to take over a person's thinking and behaviour to the extent that they struggle to manage their day to day life. This can be a sign that someone is suffering from a mental illness. Mental illnesses are common and are known to affect around one in four people in the population as a whole.

Although many autistic people are mentally well, people on the autism spectrum are at greater risk of developing mental health problems than the general population. It is important to remember that treatments do exist for mental illnesses, so you should seek help from your GP if you think you need it.

Some mild mental health problems can be managed with changes to lifestyle and stress management techniques. You may need help to organise these.

If you are...	You could try this...
Stressed and anxious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try and establish a regular routine for everyday activities.</li><li>• Reduce unexpected changes to your routine as much as possible</li></ul>
Low in mood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Plan regular activities that you enjoy to help you feel better</li><li>• Exercise regularly which has been proven to benefit mood and anxiety levels</li></ul>
Feeling worse in the morning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have a plan for each morning with specific activities to get up for</li></ul>
Frustrated that you are not sleeping well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try and follow a regular bedtime routine</li><li>• Don't use smartphones or tablets in bed</li><li>• Avoid exercising or eating a big meal before bed time</li><li>• Cut down on tea, coffee and caffeinated drinks, especially after 6pm</li></ul>

If these things do not work, or you are not able to manage them, then you may need specific treatment. Usually, the first step is to arrange an appointment with your GP. GPs can often treat mental health problems, usually by recommending some form of talking therapy or self-help and/or by prescribing medication. Sometimes they will refer you to specialist mental health services if they think that you need it.

Number 6, the One Stop Shop, in Edinburgh runs a course called 'Living Life to the Full' which can be helpful for mental health problems.

Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems people experience. Some specific information about anxiety and depression is given below.

# Anxiety disorders

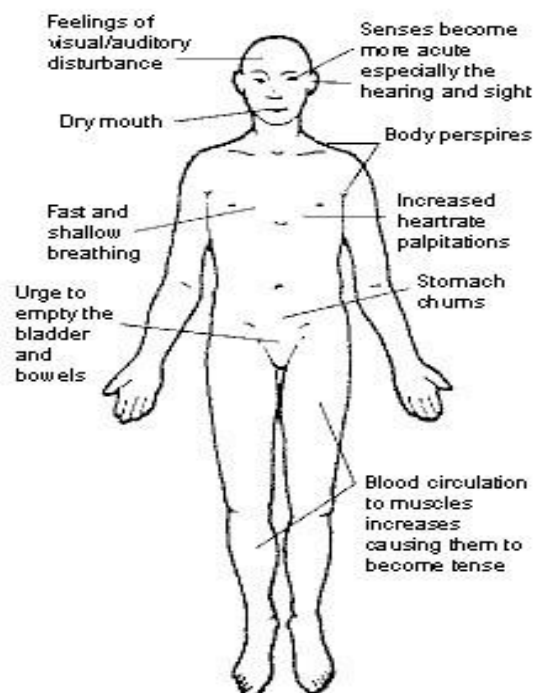
## What is an anxiety disorder?

Anxiety is a normal feeling and a common reaction to certain situations; indeed a moderate amount of anxiety can be helpful such as making a sports person feel more alert before a big event. In anxiety disorders this feeling becomes too severe to be helpful and can occur in the wrong context.

## How do I know if I am becoming anxious?

Sometimes autistic people can find it hard to recognise when they are becoming anxious, instead just noticing that they 'don't feel quite right'. The symptoms of anxiety can be both mental and physical. The early mental symptoms of anxiety include feelings of tension, fear, negative thoughts or worry and feeling constantly tired. People can sometimes develop a strange feeling that either they or the world around them looks and feels 'unreal'.

Some physical signs of anxiety:	You could try...
Dry mouth Churning stomach Eyesight becomes disturbed Feeling faint Feeling panicky Getting hot and sweaty Trembling Heart beat feels fast and strong Breathing feels fast and shallow Feel like you need the toilet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sit down and sip a glass of water</li><li>• Try to concentrate on your breathing and count each breath slowly in and out</li><li>• Try to remember that this feeling will fade away shortly</li><li>• Concentrate on a helpful word or phrase and say it slowly to yourself e.g. 'harmony' or 'wide blue ocean'</li></ul>



## What can I do about anxiety?

Other strategies that may help	You could try...
Relaxation techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/anxiety#treatment">www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/anxiety#treatment</a></li> <li>• Breathing exercises: <a href="http://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress/">www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress/</a></li> <li>• Progressive muscle relaxation</li> <li>• Practice imagery of a place you feel most calm and safe – you can use other senses to help memory like touching something or smelling something which reminds you of the place</li> <li>• Practicing regularly and when you are not anxious can help a lot when you need to use the technique</li> </ul>
See your GP if your anxiety is severe or persistent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some medication may be helpful</li> <li>• You may be referred to a specialist</li> </ul>



# Depression

Everyone feels down or unhappy sometimes and this is a normal experience. The illness depression is when a person feels unhappy almost all the time for more than two weeks.

## How do I know if I am depressed?

As well as persistent low mood or feeling unhappy for more than 2 weeks, people with depression often feel that they have no energy and don't enjoy things that they used to find fun. Sometimes people feel very negative about the future and think about hurting themselves or even ending their life. Physical symptoms of depression can include trouble sleeping and a loss of appetite.

You might be feeling...	You could try...
Not enjoying things anymore Low energy levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Try to have a regular structured daily routine</li><li>• Take regular exercise</li><li>• Get a good night's sleep</li><li>• Make sure you are eating regularly and have a healthy diet</li></ul>
Feel like hurting myself or ending my life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Visit your GP who may give you medication or refer you to a specialist for talking therapy</li></ul>

You may need support from another person to put these things in place.

## Recommended websites and further reading- mental health

- **Counselling**

Free counselling or Psychological Therapy can be offered through referral by a GP. There may be a waiting list for services.

- **Crossreach Counselling**

Free clinics across East Lothian

**Phone:** 01368 865 218

- **CHANGES**

Free counselling and access to support groups and training sessions

**Phone:** 0131 653 3977

- **Private counsellor or psychotherapist**

[www.counselling-directory.org.uk/](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/)