

Dealing with change

Advice & Support for:

Overview

IN THIS GUIDE

Routines and difficulties with change

Dealing with change - a guide for all audiences

Autistic people can find any kind of change difficult, but there are many things you can do to support them. Read our top tips on preparing for changes.

Routines and difficulties with change

“Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights... Set routines, times, particular routes and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life. Trying to keep everything the same reduces some of the terrible fear.”

Jolliffe (1992) in Howlin (2004), p.137.

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people, who often prefer to have a daily routine so that they know what is going to happen every day. They may want to always travel the same way to and from school or work, or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

Rules can be very important for some autistic people. It may be difficult for an autistic person to take a different approach to something once they have been taught the 'right' way to do it.

Sometimes minor changes such as moving between two activities, can be distressing; for others big events like holidays, starting or changing school, moving house or Christmas, which create change and upheaval, can cause anxiety.

Some autistic people have daily timetables so that they know what is going to happen, when.

However, the need for routine and sameness can extend beyond this. You might see:

changes to the physical environment (such as the layout of furniture in a room), or the presence of new people or absence of familiar ones, being difficult to manage

rigid preferences about things like food (only eating food of a certain colour), clothing (only wearing clothes made from specific fabrics), or everyday objects (only using particular types of soap or brands of toilet paper)

a need for routine around daily activities such as meals or bedtime. Routines can become almost ritualistic in nature, followed precisely and with attention paid to the tiniest details

verbal rituals, with a person repeatedly asking the same questions and needing a specific answer

compulsive behaviour, for example a person might be constantly washing their hands or checking locks. This does not necessarily mean they have [obsessive compulsive disorder \(OCD\)](#) but if you are concerned about this, speak to your GP in the first instance.

People's dependence on routines can increase during times of change, stress or illness and may even become more dominant or elaborate at these times.

Unexpected changes are often most difficult to deal with. Autistic people may not be comfortable with the idea of change, but may be able to manage it better if they can prepare for changes in advance.

Strategies to deal with changes

Find out about the change

As a parent or carer, you can be proactive in finding out what is involved in a specific change. For example, you might know that a teacher is leaving your child's school, but might not have been given any further information about new staff or new timetables. Find out when the changes are going to take place and what is involved.

Describe the change

Mark the day of the change on a calendar and encourage the person to count down to that day. Use clear language when describing the change, giving the person time to process what you say, and limit your use of gestures and facial expressions.

Use visual supports

Visual supports can help you to explain what will be happening.

Show the person photos of a new place (eg a hotel room), person (eg a new support worker) or

activity (eg swimming). Make a book of photos, or a collection of images on their device, so they can look at it before and during the change.

Use visual supports to show the outcome of certain activities. For example, if you are going on holiday, just showing them a picture of an aeroplane may make them reluctant and nervous to go on a plane - they may not see the relevance of the plane. Show pictures of the whole process instead, including your destination. This will help them to understand the whole situation better. Reverse the series of pictures to show the return journey.

On the day of the change, or during a holiday, a visual timetable can be useful to explain exactly what will be happening.

Read more of our information about visual supports.

Involve the right people

If the change is because of a move to a new school or care service, staff from both settings should be part of the preparations. The autistic person must be central in any decision making, and staff need to know about the things they need support with, what they get anxious about, and how they communicate.

Read our information about person-centred planning and our transition advice for school and college staff and for mental health workers.

Moving from one activity to the next

Sequencing can be difficult for an autistic person - that is, putting what is going to happen in a day in a logical order in their mind. Abstract concepts such as time aren't easy to understand, and autistic people may find it hard to wait. You may find their behaviour changes when transitioning between activities, for example becoming anxious. Unstructured time, such as break times at school, which can be noisy and chaotic, may also be difficult to deal with.

You could:

- use a visual timetable showing the day's activities, or a now-and-next board

- use a timer to indicate when an activity is finished

- encourage the person to put the activity into a finished tray or to put the symbol for the activity into a finished box to signal that the activity is over

- use visual supports to show the steps leading up to each activity

- make the waiting time between activities as short as possible

- have a visual, concrete representation of how long the person needs to wait before the activity is going to begin - this might be an electronic timer, sand timer, or stickers on a clock face

consider making enjoyable activities available during transition times - a transition box, containing a number of different activities, could keep the person focused during these times, making an unstructured timeframe much more structured.

Be aware of anxiety

Look out for signs of anxiety and support the person to express how they are feeling. Give them a chance to ask questions about the change. You could offer a worry book or box where they can write or draw any concerns they have. Explain the good things about the change, for example if you are moving to a bigger house or going on holiday. Create a social story™ to explain what they could do if they are anxious. Consider using our Brain in hand autism support app.

Common changes

We have information for you about some common changes.

[Bereavement](#)

[Going on holiday](#)

Article sources

Share guide:



Last reviewed and updated on 14 August 2020

WAS THIS PAGE HELPFUL?

Yes

No

Submit