

Obsessions and repetitive behaviour

Advice & Support for:

Overview

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Obsessions and repetitive behaviour - a guide for all audiences

Intense interests and repetitive behaviour can be a source of enjoyment for autistic people and a way of coping with everyday life. But they may be obsessions and limit people's involvement in other activities and cause distress or anxiety. Find out what you can do to help.

Intense interests

"My mind was constantly whirring with thoughts, worries and concerns. The time spent with my intense interest was the only time in which I had a clear mind - it gave me that much sought-after relaxation." Autistic young person

Many autistic people have intense and highly-focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong. It can be art, music, gardening, animals, postcodes or numbers. For many younger children it's Thomas the Tank Engine, dinosaurs or particular cartoon characters.

Autistic people might also become attached to objects (or parts of objects), such as toys, figurines or model cars - or more unusual objects like milk bottle tops, stones or shoes. An interest in collecting is also quite common.

Autistic people often report that the pursuit of such interests is fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness, and many channel their interest into studying, paid work, volunteering, or other meaningful occupations. The interest can:

provide structure, order and predictability and help people manage the uncertainties of daily life

provide structure, order and predictability, and help people manage the uncertainties of daily life

give someone a way to start conversations and feel more self-assured in social situations

help someone to relax and feel happy.

Is it an obsession or a hobby?

It is the intensity and duration of a person's interest in a particular topic, object, or collection that marks it out as an obsession.

Is the person unable to stop the activity/interest independently?

Is the interest impacting on the person's learning?

Is the interest limiting the person's social opportunities?

Is the interest causing significant disruption to other people, eg parents, carers and family?

If your answer to any of the questions above is 'yes', then their interest may have become an obsession which is affecting them, you and/or other people in their life.

Repetitive behaviour

Repetitive behaviour may include arm or hand-flapping, finger-flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning or twirling, head-banging and complex body movements. This is known as 'stimming' or self-stimulating behaviour.

The reasons behind it include:

for enjoyment

an attempt to gain sensory input, eg rocking may be a way to stimulate the balance (vestibular) system; hand-flapping may provide visual stimulation

an attempt to reduce sensory input, eg focusing on one particular sound may reduce the impact of a loud, distressing environment; this may particularly be seen in social situations

to deal with stress and anxiety and to block out uncertainty.

Ask yourself if the repetitive behaviour restricts the person's opportunities, causes distress or discomfort, or impacts on learning?

For instance, a behaviour that is perhaps acceptable in a young child may not be appropriate as they get older, eg stroking other people's hair, copying people's accents, or collecting shiny things - meaning they collect change that people leave around. If it is causing difficulties, or is in some way

unsafe, they may need support to stop or change the behaviour, or reduce their reliance on it.

Strategies to use

Understand the function of the behaviour

Think about the function of the repetitive behaviour or obsession. What does the person get out of it? Does it reduce anxiety, or block out noise?

Modify the environment

Does the person always seem to find a particular place like a classroom, hard to cope with? Is it too bright? You might find that modifying the environment (eg turning off strip lighting) can help to reduce sensory discomfort. If the behaviour is a way of getting sensory input, look for alternative ways of achieving the same sensation.

Increase structure

Make the world a more structured and predictable place. A more structured environment could reduce boredom, which is sometimes a reason for repetitive behaviour. You might prepare a range of enjoyable or calming activities to re-direct the person to if they seem bored or stressed.

Try using visual supports (such as daily timetables), social stories™, or pre-plan strategies to prepare for change or events that might be stressful, or daily transition times. Egg timers or time timers can help someone to understand abstract concepts like time, plan what they need to do, in what order, and understand the concept of waiting.

Find product suppliers and picture symbols in our Autism Services Directory or find out about apps that you can use to structure time or build social stories™.

Learn more about how you can help with change, sequencing, transition and school break times.

Manage anxiety

Self-regulation skills are any activities that help a person to manage their own emotions and behaviour.

If you can help the person to identify when they are feeling stressed or anxious and help them learn alternative strategies to use, you may, in time, see less repetitive and obsessively habitual behaviour. Strategies to consider might be relaxation techniques such as taking 10 deep breaths or squeezing a stress ball, as well as finding ways to communicate their need for support either verbally or, if that is too difficult, by showing a red card or writing a note.

Many autistic people have difficulty with abstract concepts such as emotions, but there are ways to turn emotions into more 'concrete' concepts, eg stress scales.

You can use a traffic light system, visual thermometer, or a scale of 1-5 to present emotions as colours or numbers. For example, a green traffic light or a number 1 can mean 'I am calm'; a red traffic light or a number 5, 'I am angry'.

Develop other strategies to [manage anxiety](#), such as introducing the [Brain in Hand app](#). Consider contacting a counsellor experienced in working with autistic people.

Intervene early

Repetitive behaviours and obsessions are generally harder to change the longer they continue. Behaviour that is perhaps acceptable in a young child may not be appropriate as they get older, eg obsession with stroking other people's hair. Autistic people should be encouraged to reduce or stop the behaviour before they reach an age where it's not acceptable.

Set boundaries

If you need to, set clear, consistent limits - for example, ration an object, the time a person should spend talking about a subject, or the places where they can carry out a particular behaviour. Behavioural change is most likely to be successful and the person less likely to be distressed if you start small and go slowly. Increase time restrictions and introduce other limits gradually.

Decide together a realistic target and put together a plan to reach that target over a period of time. It is important to set small, realistic goals to help build on success and increase confidence.

Think about whether the person would find it easier to engage in the interest for shorter periods throughout the day or for longer periods but less often.

Consider what needs to be changed. Are they unable to stop doing the activity? Work on reducing the time spent on it. Is the issue that they constantly start the activity throughout the day even when they are trying to focus on other things? Work on reducing the frequency. If it is a mixture of both, focus on one aspect to change at first, to increase the chance of success and reduce anxiety.

Example

Week 1: decide on the plan and target, creating a visual support explaining the change.

Week 2: Jane is allowed to talk about her favourite TV programme for 15 mins, every hour.

Week 3: Jane is allowed to talk about her favourite TV programme for 10 mins, every hour.

Week 4: Jane is allowed to talk about her favourite TV programme for 10 mins every two hours.

Continue in this way until you meet the goal, which is to find a balance between enjoying the interest and doing other activities.

Provide alternatives

Think of alternative activities the person could do. For example, if they have spoken to family about their interest for the set amount of time that day, consider directing them to record their thoughts on their phone or write them down in an interest book. While the family are no longer engaging in the activity, the thoughts are still expressed, hopefully meeting the person's need and therefore lowering their anxiety. If they want to express their thoughts about their interest again before their next allotted time, they could write things down and let them know you will talk to them about their notebook thoughts later. You could use visual supports to explain these additional activities.

It might be possible for the person to engage in their interest in new ways, perhaps joining a club or group, or studying or working in a related area.

Where the activity relates to sensory needs, provide an alternative activity that has the same function, eg:

someone who puts inedible objects in their mouth could have a bag with edible alternatives (that provide similar sensory experiences) such as raw pasta or spaghetti, or seeds and nuts

a person who smears their poo could have a bag with play dough in it to use instead.

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