

Emotional and Mental Health

Advice and Thoughts from the Autistic Community

'I have learned to totally accept myself and I manage my own anxieties in many ways. I can be easy on myself, cosset myself, laugh at myself ... communicating with friends and family gives me a huge amount of support, and if needed I will give myself a big (figurative) kick up the butt, or get someone else to!!!'

'I know when I am feeling at all dodgy, a thing I can do is complete a 'feelings check sheet'. I do this three times a day where I have my own scale. Ranging from 5 - 'operating fully', down to 0 - 'not wanting to be here'. It just helps me see how I am and also enables me to let myself be a bit kinder to myself when I am feeling down. If at the lower end for too long, I might seek a doctors help.'

'Finding out about Ambitious About Autism's 'Know your normal' (that's 'your', not 'you're'!!!!) campaign helped me to realise the importance of knowing when my mental health is reducing; something that I'm not very good at identifying. I simply logged my 'normal' as a benchmark to check in with from time to time (for me, this includes how I'm thinking; behaving; processing information; concentrating; responding to others; my hypersensitivities; my sleep...). I'm finding this very useful during the Covid-19 outbreak.'

'I think day to day, my routine hasn't changed much. I didn't go out much anyway, but I've found that the kind of mild anxiety I get about the whole thing has me on edge. Meanwhile I'm just trying to find something to fill all the time I've got now...trying to find a project...'

'Getting stuck into something and achieving lifts my mood. I may aim very low if I'm feeling very low, so that I can't 'fail'.'

'Physical exercise is my number one mood lifter. Although I may detest it at the time, I always feel better afterwards. As a bonus, the more stressed I am the more the cortisol/adrenaline in my system helps me to run!!!'

'I adore flowers and photograph them and post them on social media. It's nice getting comments of appreciation back, although I make sure I like/comment on others' posts too so that it's not all just one way.'

'Turn your fear into a fact finding mission! I've turned my apprehension of Covid-19 into a project, mapping its impact across countries and using this to estimate what may happen in the UK. Somehow this helps me detach from the fear of the reality of what is happening.'

'I try to focus on the present and not the infinite, frightening, possibilities that Covid-19 is throwing up. Focussing on the present is quite easy for me currently as I have so much to do. If this wasn't the case I'd have to try to generate lots of practical things to do to keep me focussed on the present.'

'I often need to remind myself that others don't know how I'm feeling unless I tell them; this is hard when I'm feeling very low/negative but sometimes necessary. Spelling it out to others may be even more important now as it's probably harder for them to infer how much I'm actually struggling when they can't see me face to face.'

'Making a positive impact on others helps me. This may be reaching out to someone on Facebook and receiving appreciation back; passing on some useful information or having a chat with the neighbour's children over the fence; I often may not feel like doing this, but do feel positive afterwards.'

'Trying to find humour in things and sharing with online friends.'

'I can't get into 'mindfulness meditation'; I seem to share this with many autistic friends (there is some research reflecting this in the autistic community too). However 'flow activities', I've found, are what I have always done naturally and this helps me detach from my stressors. My main flow activities (skiing; rock climbing; indoor climbing; mountaineering) are forbidden during lockdown, which is incredibly upsetting, but for now, luckily, I can still get 'lost' in gardening. I seem to need physical flow activities more than ever at present as can't focus in this way on reading or aspects of my work that I normally love.'

'I have been listening to podcasts by people I like: Eckhart Tolle (he is a spiritual teacher - not religious - and talks about "being in the moment") and Russell Brand. Not for everyone, I know, but it helps me.'

'It's fair to say that even little tasks during the day are difficult for me to keep on top of, so tasks such as sorting in the house I break down into 'half-dozens'. Clearing a room, which would be a single thing on my daily activity list, is done by a process of chipping away at it by doing six relatively minor things (e.g. putting away 6 things), and then a mini break of a few minutes. Starting a large task is often the thing that's difficult for me. The way this works for me is that if I feel like doing more than the six things, I can do and usually that's what happens. If however, I don't feel like doing more then I know I am time limiting (perhaps to only five minutes) what I need to do before having a few minutes break. This method enables me to start the activity which I otherwise might find a bit overwhelming.'

"I'm finding that my concentration difficulties are magnifying under this stress (mono-focussing so not seeing essential information that isn't right in front of me/not 'getting' what people are 'really' meaning by what they say; memory gone down the drain). It's easy to get even more stressed by this so I am trying, when I feel strong enough, to let people know this (at work especially). It does of course help that I am understood in my organisation as an autistic person; I do realise I am in a very fortunate situation due to this.'

'Watch uplifting films or read stories that are uplifting.'

'Building in proper relaxation time is so difficult for me. My ideal is being able to read or watch a film and not feel guilty about it. I feel I have succeeded a little on this on most days recently, but the feeling that I am not accomplishing while relaxing is difficult!'

'Keep your environment tidy. I feel so much happier when I am not looking at clutter.'

'I'm trying to put to one side what I cannot do without lots of stress, energy & time. I'm trying not to dwell on these things.'

'Try not to feel guilty about what you cannot achieve just now.'

'My partner (also autistic) lives a long way away. A supportive level of communication that we've finally worked out in just the last week that suits us best, by providing routine and predictability, is a daily hour long phone call while we do something like going for a walk. It doesn't feel too conspicuous to be talking to a phone hands-free set while walking in public, everyone's doing it these days! And I tend to get off the beaten track as soon as I can for some privacy. I'm a bit more flexible than my partner, but for his sake I will never phone him before the allotted time, although he's fine with the calls being a bit later, if necessary.'

'I wasn't able to think of any particularly useful tips, other than a reminder to be kind to ourselves.'