

Ambitious about Autism family information sheet

Managing anxiety

It is natural and normal to experience anxiety in response to COVID-19. A certain level of anxiety is useful and helps us remember to take additional care, but it is important to try and prevent feelings of anxiety from becoming overwhelming. Here are some suggestions for supporting yourselves and others with keeping anxiety at a healthy level.

Model calmness

The most important and impactful form of support for those that are anxious is your own behaviour. If you are acting and behaving calmly and rationally, you send a clear message that there is no need to panic. To do this, you need to monitor your own feelings and reactions.

Share balanced information

The nature of the information being reported can make it difficult to keep sight of the fact that family members and loved ones are likely to remain safe. It is important that you separate what is fact-based (from a reliable source) and what is feelings-based so you don't present your fears as facts.

Listen actively

Listen to family members' feelings, worries and fears; many people are worrying that the worst may happen to them and/or their friends and loved ones. Ask questions in a non-judgmental and understanding manner, letting them know that you are available and interested in hearing their thoughts and feelings. This will make it easier for them to approach you when they are struggling.

Validate feelings

Be careful not to dismiss, invalidate, or reject feelings, this is easily done when wanting to help (e.g. "don't be silly, you're not going to die"). Instead, let others know that it is understandable to feel anxious or angry. It is very powerful in helping people feel understood and calmer, enabling them to process their thoughts and feelings in a healthy way.

Avoid seeking to bury or ignore anxiety

Encourage family members to practice tolerating and working through feelings of anxiety rather than continually doing something to relieve it or distract from it. 'Sitting with' anxiety may be challenging but it is doable and allows feelings to pass and no longer overwhelm. If anxiety comes over in waves, scheduled 'worry sessions' whereby time is set aside to address anxieties can help family members balance the need to achieve goals and engage in productive tasks whilst dealing with emotions so they do not become overly burdened by them.

Comment on positives

There is a lot going on in society that is positive and heartening and it is important to focus on this as much as on the challenges. In addition, family members will still have their skills, strengths and unique character to contribute to family life so make sure these are brought to the attention of everyone and appreciated.