



## ***Why do people with Asperger's experience high levels of anxiety?***

Anxiety is really common for people with an autism spectrum disorder, it is almost like a constant companion for many, impacting on just about every area of the person's life. Why is this the case?

There are a number of reasons:

- Research has identified that there is a higher than expected prevalence of mood disorders, especially anxiety disorders, in family members of people with an ASD.
- Neuroimaging technology of children and adults who have autism has shown both structural and functional abnormalities in the amygdala, which is a part of the brain associated with anxiety and fear.
- There is also evidence that shows the neural connections between the amygdala and the frontal lobes are not as well integrated, which means that there is less capacity for the person to use problem-solving skills and manage their emotions whilst they are experiencing them.
- There also seems to be a mind/body disconnect for people on the autism spectrum, that is they are not aware of the early signs of anxiety in their body. Without this early warning system, they are less able to avert an 'emotional meltdown,' as they do not notice the signs of escalating emotion until it is too late.
- Heightened sensory sensitivity increases the background stress level, increasing anxiety.
- People who have an ASD are more likely to be the victims of bullies, both at school and in the workplace. As a result they experience hypervigilance and high levels of anxiety.
- A different learning profile can mean higher levels of stress within a learning environment like a school or university, which can lead to development of performance anxiety.
- People with an ASD have difficulties with perspective taking, including being able to reflect on their own perspective, which affects their capacity to monitor and manage their own emotions.
- Many people with ASD also experience alexithymia, that is, they have difficulty putting their own thoughts and feelings into words. Not being able to talk about their own feelings can interfere with effective emotion management.
- Some people on the autism spectrum experience heightened empathy skills, or 'empathy over arousal,' leading them to strongly experience the emotional states of others, and become adversely affected by these. As one person on the spectrum said, "it is like walking around with no skin on I feel everything so keenly." This experience can lead to very high levels of anxiety.

A person with Asperger's syndrome who is experiencing high levels of anxiety will be able to cope better with these feelings in an understanding environment, with a safe escape route to quiet, solitude and activities that will help, for example certain physical activities, relaxation strategies, music, the quiet company of an understanding friend, being in nature etc.