

Emotions and Autism Worksheet

This worksheet is designed to be your own emotional wellbeing resource.

Some of the ideas shared are things that you can do in the moment when you don't know what you feel, or when things feel too much. Other ideas are for you to use in the longer term.

Together, these things aim to help you understand your psychological wellbeing. These ideas have come from many different viewpoints, including autistic people and mental health clinicians and researchers working with them. The autistic community is a broad and heterogeneous group, with different experiences, challenges and identities. So please consider what works for you.

Use this worksheet to help you: you can print it, copy it, draw on it or write on it. You might want to look through it with somebody who knows you well who can help you.

On the following pages you will find information about eight strategies.

The final page is a worksheet for you to complete.



1) Notice your emotion signals

Are you feeling emotions? What signs tell you that you are feeling difficult emotions? You might call this overwhelm, or things feeling 'too much'. It might feel like a tangle of things all at once. Some people notice their body telling them that they are too tense, their heart might be racing, or they notice that they are gripping their hands, or shutting their eyes, or feeling faint. The underlying emotions might be fear, or embarrassment, or anger, or many others. You might not have words to go with what you are feeling, which is OK. Knowing if you are feeling things too strongly is the most helpful first step. You can then choose to do something about it. It is OK not to feel the same emotions or experience emotions in the same way as other people, or use the same words to describe them.

Can you notice the earliest signs of emotions? What would 5/10 intensity feel like? Or have you found yourself feeling 10/10 without warning, as if being caught out of nowhere? This can be common for autistic people. If you feel too much right now, know this will pass. Some people rate their emotions without using numbers, by thinking of a scale or a metre. Whatever the early signs, can you look out for them?

What are your signals of feeling difficult emotions?



2) Check your sensory world

Autistic people can have different sensory experiences, which can feel like living a more muted, more intense, or a different reality. This can be extremely difficult for non-autistic people to imagine, just like trying to imagine seeing infrared light or perceiving ultrasonic vibrations. You have your own landscape, depending on how much sensory information floods in or gets gated off - which means how much low-priority or stressful information you are able to tune out. Sensory information can come from light, sounds, smells, tastes or textures, sensations on your body or within your body, how you move or how you feel pain. These things can add up, sometimes outside of your awareness, to feeling pressured or overloaded. Sensory demands can be very important to your emotional wellbeing. Later in this worksheet you can think about sensory experiences that bring comfort or positive emotions. For now, what sensory things cause you the most stress? Are any of them happening now?

What are your sensory stressors?



3) Take away stressors

When you feel things too strongly, or when you are uncertain about your feelings, prioritise the stressors that you can take away. Even a short break from a stressor can help you to recharge. This could be something simple, such as covering your ears (with headphones, or your hat or scarf) to shut out background sounds, or wearing sunglasses. If being around lots of people is getting too much, can you take a break or find a space that you feel calmer in? These will be personal to you. Some people feel better knowing they could sit in their car if they wanted to, or visit the bathroom, or take a break in a chosen space. It might help you to know what you can do later in the day as well, to take time for you. It is a good idea to plan for what you can do ahead of time, before, during and after activities, to make them more manageable. Write a short-list of things you can do to take away stressors. There will be times when you have much more capacity to be in stressful environments.

What can you do to take away stress?



4) Find comfort

Feeling overwhelmed, or fearful, can be constant for some people, and less so for others. There might be times in your life when emotions appear stronger, more constant, or more difficult to manage. It is important to know what you can always do to give yourself some respite. What sensory things bring you comfort? Can you find any of them now? You might want to think about music, moving, rocking, rubbing, squeezing, tastes, chewing. Some people find comfort in repetition or rhythm, such as moving in a rhythmic way or playing a repetitive game. There might be something you like to listen to or watch repeatedly. You could choose to wear something comforting or carry something comforting. These things are designed by you. You may have previously been discouraged from doing comforting activities. If something feels good and doesn't cause harm to you or others, choose what you want to do.

What are your comforts?



5) Ask for what you need

Can you ask other people for help? Some people say they need somebody to reassure them that this difficult feeling will pass. Some ask to be reminded of calm breathing exercises. You might want to ask for a short time of being alone, without talking and without touch. You might need something practical, like help taking away a stressor, or you might need to be reminded of something that brings you comfort. Think about who is meaningful to you. It is OK to choose one person you want to ask for help from. Choose a person ahead of time before you need support. Plan with them to agree what you both are comfortable with. For example, if you use one word in a supermarket, you both understand that you need to leave. At school or work, do you have somebody who you can let know that you need to take time away. You could ask for what you need in different ways, such as writing something down, or using pictures. This can be a difficult strategy, so don't worry if you want to focus on other strategies.

What do you need? Who can you ask? How can you ask?



6) Masking and unmasking

Some autistic people make efforts to learn social behaviours that they think are expected by other people, even though some seem unclear or dishonest. These can include all sorts of things. For example, looking at people's eyes, making your face more animated, planning how often to message a friend, or preparing questions ahead of conversations. Other people stop doing things that they need to, like moving. These adjustments to your behaviour can be called masking or camouflaging or morphing. Some people describe these being done by choice, and for some people there is no choice. We know that making these extra efforts for prolonged periods is a strain. Try to notice when this is happening, when you are beginning to feel strained or burnt-out. You might notice lower tolerance of sensory stimuli, need to withdraw, increased irritability or fatigue. Then, plan times for when you feel most yourself, when you can relax. With people you trust, you could agree some 'etiquette' - which is what you expect of each other. You might say 'Honesty is important to me, and doesn't mean I am trying to be rude or that you are being rude.' What do you expect from other people - what things do they do that don't make sense, or cause misunderstanding?

Notice your fatigue signals.

Which situations do you feel more comfortable in?



7) Find your meaningful relationships

You will have ways in which you belong. Relationships can be important to many people, which look very different depending on what is meaningful to you. Meaningful relationships might look different from what has been expected of you in your past. You might prefer not to socialise in person or in real-time, or in overwhelming environments. You might feel most connected with one person or a few people that you choose. You might prefer to write or message when you connect with others, or interact in games where there are rules and roles. You might feel most connected to animals, or when you are in nature. Being alone does not mean the same as feeling lonely. For some people, aloneness is a positive coping strategy - it offers time for fewer demands, to have a quieter mind and to process and make sense of the day. Choose which relationships are meaningful to you.

In what ways do you feel connected, where you belong?



8) Behave like you

Self-acceptance and self-compassion come as you learn about yourself over time. They also come as society learns more about autism. These help with reducing negative emotions. Being autistic will likely cause you some challenges, in some circumstances. This is probably because the expectations of you and the demands on you in your environment don't always fit for you. It is important to take time to notice the things about yourself that you are proud of. When can you feel this way - in what places, within which activities, with what people or things? Schedule these in. We know that focused interests, immersion in our own world or daydreaming often take away social and sensory demands, and give us time to relax, where the world makes sense. Autism can also bring a number of strengths, such as loyalty, attention to detail, a methodical approach, and many others.

Where do you flourish?

1) My signals of emotion



2) My sensory stressors



8) Where I flourish



3) Actions to take away stress



7) How I connect and belong



4) My comforts



6) My signals of fatigue



5) I need you to...



1) My signals of emotion



2) My sensory stressors



8) Where I flourish



3) Actions to take away stress



7) How I connect and belong



4) My comforts



6) My signals of fatigue



5) I need you to...

