

*Embracing
Autism*



Mental Health & Well-Being

Post Diagnosis Workshop 4



Objective of the Day



To develop a fuller understanding of:

- The importance of mental health and well-being surrounding Autism Spectrum Condition



Good Mental Health



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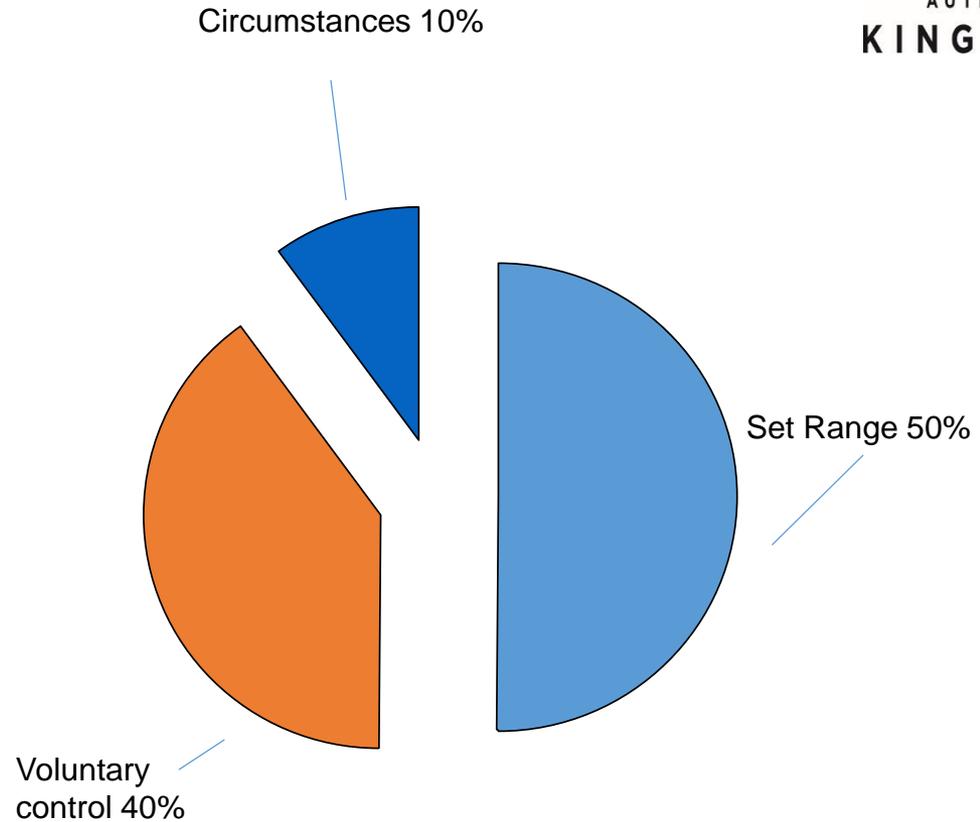
- Good mental health and well-being are associated with improved outcomes for ALL people in many areas:

- Life span
- Physical health
- Criminality
- Education
- Relationships
- Employment
- Productivity
- Maintaining a home



Subjective Well-Being

- Satisfaction with life (cognition) + affect (emotion)
- Voluntary control = intentional and effortful practices of choice



What promotes well-being?



Seligman (2011) argues that people flourish by building:

- **P**ositive emotion
- **E**ngagement (flow)
- positive **R**elationships
- **M**eaning
- **A**ccomplishment



Flourishing – maintaining well-being



- Stop and think - how can you build:
 - positive emotion?
 - Enjoyment, fun, feeling good about something
 - engagement?
 - Getting into flow in an activity, totally wrapped up in it
 - relationships?
 - One good relationship, someone you can talk to
 - meaning?
 - A purpose in life, a reason to get up each day
 - accomplishment?
 - No matter how small, what have I managed to achieve today?





When mental health and well-being are not so good.....



Feelings



- For many autistic people recognising, naming and coping with feelings can be very difficult
- Learning to recognise when you are starting to feel 'not good' or have negative feelings is key
- Once you have noticed the negative feeling starting you can try to do something about it



Feelings



- Learning to know yourself is key:
 - What do you find particularly difficult?
 - What situations/people/environments upset you?
 - How do you know you have had enough?
 - What makes you feel better?
 - How can you let others know you have had enough?
 - How can you make sure you can do the things that help?

- Different strategies work for different people



Therapy

- For some autistic people individual therapy can help you learn to cope with and manage your feelings better
- **Any therapist you see must understand about autism and how it affects you**
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy works for some, but not all. Often it does not take into account the root cause of difficulties being the autism
- Some traditional therapies are unhelpful for autistic people:
 - Psychodynamic/psychoanalytic
 - Exposure and response prevention for OCD (part of CBT)



Therapy

- Expect it to be a slow process of learning about yourself, not a quick fix.
 - 8 sessions of CBT are unlikely to be enough.
- Look for a therapist you trust and feel comfortable with who knows about autism
 - trust your gut feelings on this



Anxiety



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- Undiagnosed and/or underlying problems associated with autism may make some people with autism more prone to mental health problems
- A high level of anxiety is common in people with autism
- Anxiety increases with age and IQ
- Most common disorders:
 - Phobias
 - Generalised anxiety disorder
 - OCD



What happens during increased anxieties and meltdowns



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- When a stressful situation occurs the body produces more of the hormone adrenaline
- This increases the heart rate which, in turn, increases the blood flow and oxygen to the muscles – making you ready to run away (flight) or fight
- Even more stress leads to the 'freeze' response
 - Many autistic people jump straight to freeze
- After the stress has subsided, adrenaline's effect can last for up to an hour
 - Can leave you shaky and exhausted



How might anxiety show?



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- Difficulty recognising emotions in yourself and others
 - Can result in anxiety in social situations because it is so hard to 'read' other people, making other people seem unpredictable
 - Feeling overwhelmed by feelings you don't like but can't control
- Sensory sensitivities
 - Autistic people may have additional sensory processing difficulties like with sounds, touch and smell
 - Feeling like you are being constantly bombarded by sensory experiences can be extremely overwhelming and anxiety provoking



How might anxiety show?



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- **Difficulty with uncertainty**
 - Having sensory sensitivities and being unsure if you will stumble across these sensory triggers in new situations may make you less able to manage change or uncertainty
 - The uncertainty of not knowing what to say, or what someone is going to say to you and how to reply
 - Not knowing for sure how the day/meeting/activity is going to go
- **Performance anxiety**
 - Having high expectations of yourself and being unsure about whether you can do things well enough can lead to a lot of worry and avoidance
 - Fear of failure may result in a reluctance to try new things or complete tasks



Burnout

- Autistic burnout is a period of long-term gradual overload that becomes intolerable.
- Autistic people have a much smaller amount of energy to spend because coping with the everyday, social demands of the world has already drained it.
- That means they run their energy down to zero much more quickly when doing the same things. People with reduced energy thresholds can still exert themselves once they've run out – like an overdraft. But borrowing from tomorrow's energy can have extreme negative consequences- like eventual burnout.



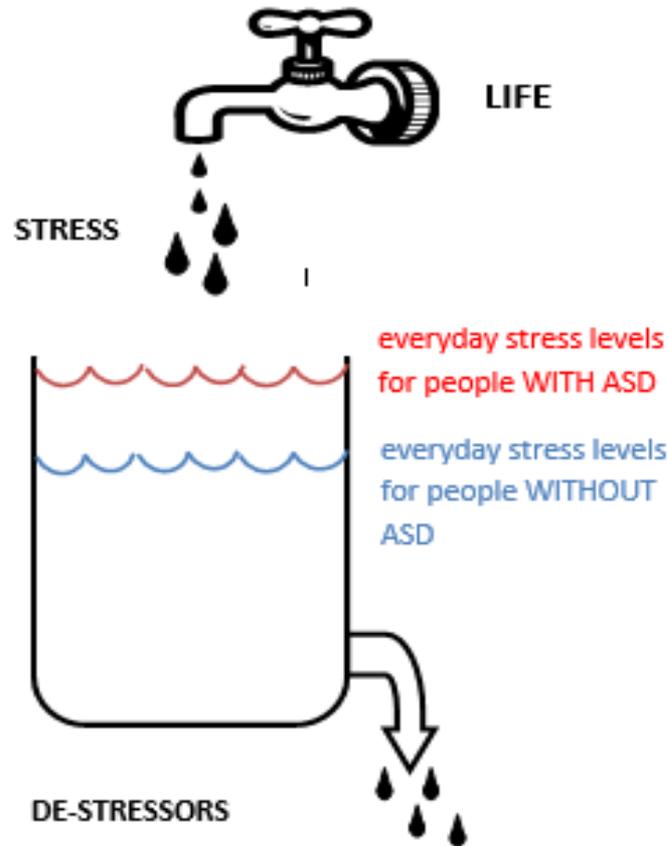
Burnout

- Burnout is a type of meltdown that effectively stops the overload – but one that occurs over a much longer timescale.
- It's the brain's last resort, an extreme emotional release (meltdown) as a result of overload or a total shutdown and withdrawal.
- The aftermath is an unavoidable period of rest to pay back that energy debt.



The more anxious you are, less able you are to cope with the demands of life

THE STRESS BEAKER





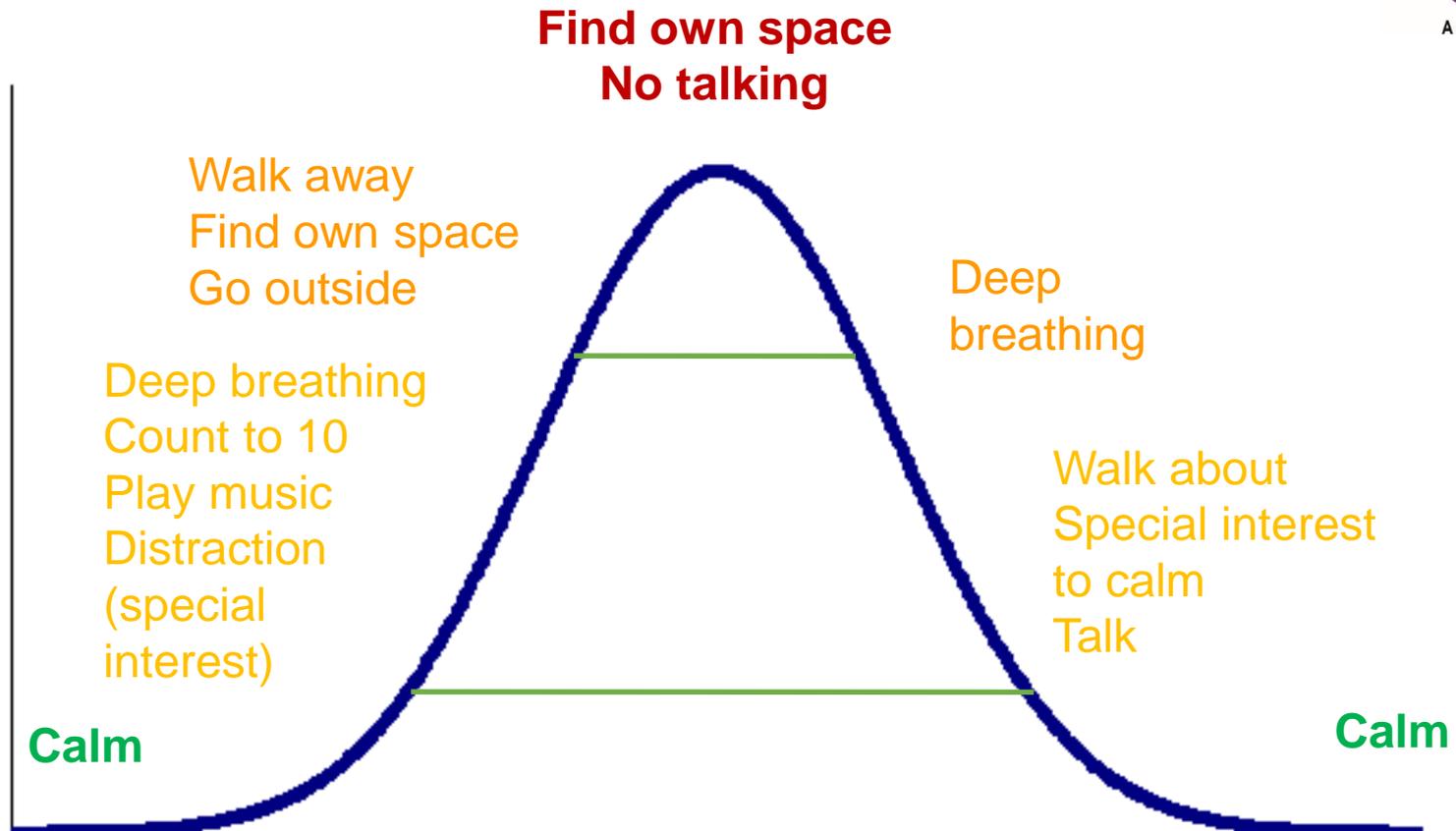
Can you think what might be
your de-stressors?



Arousal curve



What works when?



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5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washing hands • Rush outside • Run up road • Push someone • Shout 	VERY TENSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to someone • Space in my room
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washing hands • Mum and Dad away • Collapse on floor and go to sleep 	QUITE TENSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space in my room • Go for a walk
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washing hands • Go to the toilet more • Pacing 	LITTLE BIT TENSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep breathing • Relaxation dvd • Go for a walk
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ring Mum more 	OK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxation dvd • Watch TV
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch TV • Watch Relaxation dvd • Be on own 	CHILLED	

Anxiety 5 point scale- example



Conserving Spoons – units of energy

<https://musingsofanaspie.com/2014/10/15/conserving-spoons/>



Social Spoons

Language Spoons

Physical Activity Spoons

Sensory Spoons

Executive Function Spoons

My Spoon Drawer



Spoons (or energy accounting)



- A spoon equals an amount of energy
 - (mental or physical)
- Ideally we have just enough spoons to get through the day and do what we want/need to do

BUT

- Autism steals some of your spoons before you even start the day
 - Stresses from interacting with others, planning, anxiety, stress from the day before etc



Conserving Spoons



- Think about your spoon drawer on a given day
 - your spoons represent the energy used in different tasks
 - aspects of your day and can be affected by autism
- Understand where your spoons go – what uses up your spoons?
 - Spoons within each category are used up with each energy-consuming activity
- Ask for help by borrowing from someone else
 - Asking for help is an important self-care tool, especially when the spoon drawer is looking empty.



Conserving Spoons



- If you have a lot to do, you need to conserve your spoons
 - Ration your spoons out throughout the day
 - Timetable in rest periods
- What gives you spoons?
 - Structure into your day activities which you know restore you and give you energy.
- Say 'No' or reduce activities you know steal your spoons
 - Be kind to yourself – reduce workload, go part-time, be aware that you can do whatever it is you want to do - but you will need to borrow spoons from tomorrow. So tomorrow needs to be an easy day to recover.



Rating	What I do	Called	I need or can try to
5	Shout Threaten to hurt staff Swear Kick, break or throw things Phone ambulance or Police	Very angry	Go home or to my room - have space Leave the place that is difficult Take time to calm down
4	Being rude to staff Voice goes higher and louder	Quite angry	Listen to calming music Watch TV Put pink light on
3	Get repetitive and talk about something a lot	Annoyed	Count to 10 Deep breathing Use relaxation dvd Put pink light on Use fluffy gloves to soothe self
2	Refuse to talk to staff	Irritated	Count to 10 Deep breathing Use relaxation dvd Listen to story on CD in bedroom
1	Watch TV Talk to staff	Chilled	Enjoy myself!

Anger - 5 Point Scale example

Learning to recognise an emotional build up



Depression



- Very common mental health problem in autism
- 20% of people with Asperger Syndrome experience depression (Bruggink et al., 2016).
- people with Asperger Syndrome may compare themselves to others and feel they are 'different' or not achieving, or missing out (negative comparisons)



How might depression show?

- Persistent low mood
- Increased withdrawal
- Decrease or increase in sleep
- Decrease or increase in appetite
- Crying spells
- Thoughts of self-harm
- Possibly some physical symptoms
 - headaches - fatigue
 - irritability



Strategies for depression

- Find one thing you used to enjoy doing
 - Engage the help of others to support you to do that one thing again
- Physical Exercise
 - Take a walk or go swimming
 - Being outside in nature helps
- Pets
 - Don't require talking to!
 - Give unconditional love



Recognising unhelpful thinking (negative automatic thoughts)



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- Mental Filtering
 - Focusing on the negative and filtering out the positive
- Jumping to conclusions/mind reading
 - Assuming we know what someone is thinking or means or will happen
- Emotional reasoning
 - Confusing fact with feeling....'something bad will happen'
- Catastrophizing
 - Imagining the worst case scenario
- Judging
 - Assigning labels to ourselves and others
- Personalisation
 - Taking 100% of the responsibility – its all my fault



Recognising unhelpful thinking (negative automatic thoughts)



- Discounting the positive
 - Minimizing own positive attributes and maximize those of others
- Overgeneralizing
 - Seeing a pattern based on a single event
 - Assuming everyone will do/think that.....
- Demand thinking
 - 'should', 'ought', 'must'- adds pressure
- Black and white thinking
 - Seeing only one extreme or the other
 - What is the compromise? In the grey area?



Challenge unhelpful thinking



- What would be the opposite (i.e. positive) version of that thought?
- Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?
- How will you feel about this in 6 months time?
- What would you say to a friend who had this thought in a similar situation?
- What would be an alternative explanation for what happened?
- What are the costs and benefits of thinking in this way?

Try to apply these questions to the unhelpful thoughts that you notice. It can help to reduce your distress.



Get out of your head and into your body



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- Where do you feel the emotion/distress in your body?
- Can you locate it and focus on it
- Breathe into the painful area with deep stomach breaths
- If it helps, imagine breathing a coloured light into the pain/distress
 - Choose a colour that represents comfort and calm to you
- Keep breathing deeply into the pain/distress for several minutes
- Notice any changes to the feeling



Reducing the power and emotion of thoughts



- Thoughts are just thoughts – NOT facts
 - You don't have to buy into them
- Tell yourself - 'I am having the thought that I am' rather than 'I am
- Sing the upsetting/difficult thought to a nursery rhyme until it no longer makes sense
- Say the upsetting thought over and over and over and over until it no longer makes sense



Meditation and breathing – calming the nervous system



- Mindfulness works for some in reducing anxiety and depression
 - Training the mind so needs to be a daily practice
- Guided meditation
 - If too many whizzing thoughts for traditional mindfulness
 - Listening and following adds focus
- Deep stomach breathing
 - Physiologically calms the nervous system



Prevention is better than cure



Build strength, safety and resilience

- Integrate physical and mental health
 - promote physical activity
- Aim for a balance by including:
 - physical and mental activity
 - relaxation
 - generating a positive outlook
 - creativity
 - purposeful activity



Self-Help Information



- <https://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anxiety.asp>
- <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/self-help-therapies/>
- <https://www.moodcafe.co.uk/free-online-behavioural-therapy.aspx>



Mindfulness, meditation and breathing



Apps and online:

www.Headspace.com

www.calm.com

www.meditainment.com

Breathe2Relax

<https://eddiestern.com/the-breathing-app/>

