

Section 3: Physical and Mental Health

Self Help Resource Pack for autistic people

This pack has been put together from information available from specialist autism services, autistic people, and professionals working with autistic people.



Self Help Resource Pack created by NHS Lothian Adult ADHD and Autism Resource Team.

Physical Health and hospital appointments

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others.

Some autistic people become very anxious about attending health appointments. Health centres, dental surgeries, opticians and clinics are usually happy to make reasonable adjustments to make the visit less stressful for you. Reasonable adjustments could include the following:

- **Speak to your GP practice, dentist, optician or clinic in advance.**

You can telephone the GP practice in advance to discuss any special requests, or you can give consent to let the GP speak to a family member or another person who might also support you when you attend the appointment.

- **Ask the health professional about any adaptations they can make to help with sensory differences.**

For example, you may ask to use a quiet, uncluttered room with natural lighting and to switch off strip fluorescent lighting where this is possible.

- **Let the clinic know if you require extra time to absorb information**

You can request to have information written down. Your doctor or other health professional may be able to provide additional visual aids, diagrams and/or photographs.

Scottish Autism has a fact sheet on when an alert card might be useful to carry and an alert card service which you can register for and order online.

Website: [Home - Scottish Autism](#)

Autism Rights Group Highland (ARGH) is a group run by and for autistic adults which is based in the Scottish Highlands. They have developed an autism alert card which you can order online to help with communicating your needs in situations where you may find this difficult.

Website: [ARGH Autism Alert Card – ARGH Scotland](#)



If you need to go into hospital

A hospital passport can help autistic people communicate their needs to doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals. The National Autistic Society has developed a proforma that you can fill in online and print so you have your own copy.

The 'Passport to individual autism support' is a simple document which can help you explain your communication, sensory and support needs.

You can fill in the passport and take it with you to your appointment with social, health or employment professionals. It will help them make the necessary adjustments for you.

Recommended websites and further reading- health and hospital appointments.

- **Autism alert cards**

For help with communicating your needs

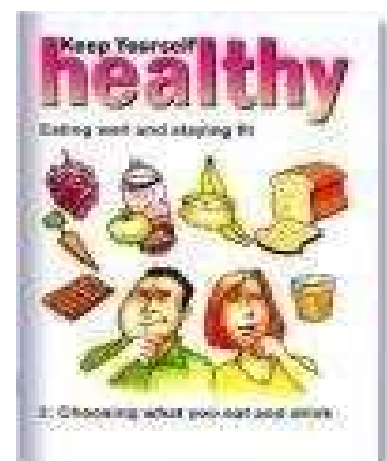
Website: [Home - Scottish Autism](#)

Website: [ARGH Autism Alert Card – ARGH Scotland](#)

Hospital passport

For help with communicating your needs to health professionals

Website: [_ My health passport](#)



My Health Passport
For autistic people

National Autistic Society

! Healthcare staff, please consult this passport before you assess me or carry out any interventions.
Hospital staff, please keep this passport with my notes at the end of my bed and return to me when I am discharged.

Please look at the guidance notes before filling out your health passport the notes are at www.autism.org.uk/health_passport

Personal information

Name: _____

I like to be called: _____

Date of birth: _____

NHS number: _____

If I am admitted to hospital, I would like the following person to be contacted:

Name: _____

Relationship: _____

Phone number: _____

Other people I would like you to contact in connection with my treatment and care:

Name: _____ Relationship: _____ Phone: _____

Name: _____ Relationship: _____ Phone: _____

I have an Advance Directive: Yes No

Mental health

Many people experience times of low mood, anxiety, or stress at one time or another and these are just part of typical human experience. However, sometimes these feelings become severe and start to take over a person's thinking and behaviour to the extent that they struggle to manage their day-to-day life. This can be a sign that someone is suffering from poor mental wellbeing or a mental illness.

People on the autism spectrum are at greater risk of developing poor mental wellbeing or mental health problems than the general population. It is important to remember that treatments do exist for this, so you should seek help from your GP if you think you need it.

Some mild mental health problems can be managed with changes to your environment and/or lifestyle and with stress management techniques. You may need help to organise these.

If you are...	You could try this...
Stressed and anxious	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try and establish a regular routine for everyday activities• Reduce unexpected changes to your routine as much as possible
Low in mood	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plan regular activities that you enjoy to help you feel better• Exercise regularly which has been proven to benefit mood and anxiety levels. This can be simple as a local walk. Many people find walking in nature helpful
Feeling worse in the morning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a plan for each morning with specific activities to get up for. Ideally have something pleasurable or satisfying to look forward to each day
Frustrated that you are not sleeping well	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try and follow a regular bedtime routine. Most importantly get up at a regular time in the morning. This can be hard if you have not slept well, but it will help you to eventually feel tired in the evening, which is important to sleep• Don't use smartphones or screens in bed• Avoid exercising or eating a big meal before bedtime• Cut down on tea, coffee and caffeinated drinks, especially after 6pm.

If these things do not work, or you are not able to manage them, then you may need specific support. Usually, the first step is to arrange an appointment with your GP. GPs can often treat mental health problems, usually by recommending some form of talking therapy or self-help and/or by prescribing medication.

Sometimes they will refer you to specialist mental health services if they think that you need it.

Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems people experience. Some specific information about anxiety and depression is given below.

Anxiety

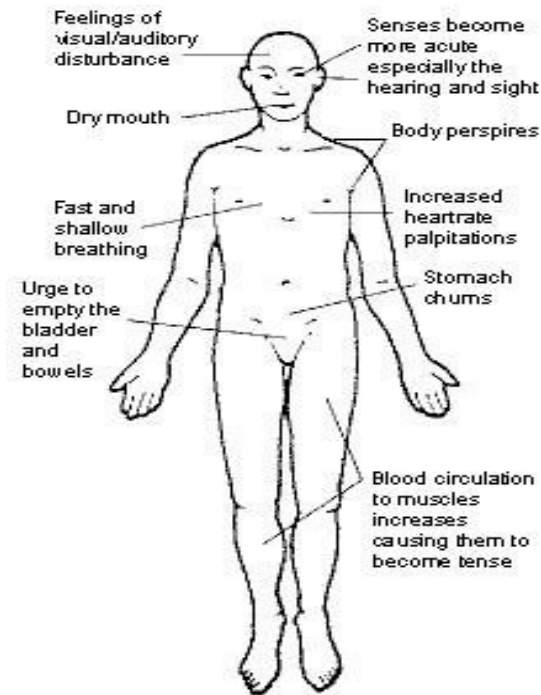
What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal feeling and a common reaction to certain situations; indeed, a moderate amount of anxiety can be helpful, such as making a sportsperson feel more alert before a big event. In anxiety disorders this feeling becomes too severe to be helpful and/or too long lasting and can occur in the wrong context.

How do I know if I am becoming anxious?

Sometimes autistic people can find it hard to recognise when they are becoming anxious, instead just noticing that they 'don't feel quite right'. The symptoms of anxiety can be both mental and physical. The early symptoms of anxiety include, difficulty concentrating, fear, negative thoughts or worry, physical tension, nausea and feeling constantly tired. People can sometimes develop a strange feeling that either they or the world around them looks and feels 'unreal'.

Some physical signs of anxiety	To promote wellbeing you could try...
Dry mouth Churning stomach Eyesight becomes disturbed Feeling faint Feeling panicky Getting hot and sweaty Trembling Heartbeat feels fast and strong Breathing feels fast and shallow Feel like you need the toilet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit down and sip a glass of water • Try to concentrate on your breathing and count each breath slowly in and out. Breathing out slowly in a sigh is most important in helping relax • Try to remember that this feeling will fade away shortly • Notice that your mind is worrying about the past or future and what might happen. Bring yourself back into the moment by noticing different things around you that you can 1. touch 2. hear 3. feel 4. smell and 5. taste.



What can I do about anxiety?

Other strategies that may help	You could try...
Relaxation techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressive muscle relaxation: begin practice when you are least anxious. It is heard to learn when you are at your most anxious • Breathing exercises: Again practicing regularly and when you are not anxious can help a lot, so that it is more natural when you need to use the technique • Practice imagery of a place you feel most calm and safe – you can use other senses to help memory like touching something or smelling something, which reminds you of the place • For guidance and links for these see Mental wellbeing NHS inform
See your GP if your anxiety is severe or persistent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some medication may be helpful you may be referred to a specialist



Depression

Everyone feels down or unhappy sometimes and this is a normal experience. The illness depression is when a person feels unhappy almost all the time for more than two weeks.

How do I know if I am depressed?

As well as persistent low mood or feeling unhappy for more than 2 weeks, people with depression often feel that they have no energy and don't enjoy things that they used to find fun. Sometimes people feel very negative about the future and think about hurting themselves or even ending their life. Physical symptoms of depression can include trouble sleeping and a loss of appetite.

If you might be feeling...	You could try...
Not enjoying things anymore Low energy levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to have a regular structured daily routine • Try to keep active (Keeping active NHS inform) • Get a good nights sleep (Sleep hygiene NHS inform) • Make sure you are eating regularly and have a healthy diet (Food and nutrition NHS inform)
Feel like hurting myself or ending my life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit your GP who may give you medication or refer you to a specialist for talking therapy
Feel socially isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular social contact might help improve your mood. Consider talking to someone in your existing social network. If there isn't anyone available then services like No6 can provide social opportunities.

You may need support from another person to put these things in place.

Recommended websites and further reading- mental health

- **NHS Advice**

Website: [Get help with low mood, sadness or depression - NHS](#)

- **Counselling**

Free counselling or Psychological Therapy can be offered through referral by a GP. There may be a waiting list for services. You may find counselling via your workplace.

- **Crossreach Counselling**

Email: info@crossreach.org.uk **Tel:** 0131 657 2000

- **Changes East Lothian**

Free counselling and access to support groups and training sessions.

Email: Infor@ChangesEastLothian.org **Tel:** 0131 653 3977

- **Private counsellor or psychotherapist**

Website: [Counselling Directory - Find a Counsellor Near You](#)

The University of Edinburgh's **Website:** [Centre for Psychological Therapies | Health in Social Sciences](#)

This centre offers time limited CBT and counselling for people under 26 in Lothian. It is accessed through self-referral. The waiting list times may vary. You may be invited to make a small donation.