

# At Home Practices for Anxiety and Depression for Autistic Teens and Adults

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## What factors lead to increased anxiety in autism?

- Alexithymia (difficulty recognizing or labeling emotions)
- Biological Dysregulation
- Uncertainty – Rumination of the future
- Black and White Thinking
- Catastrophizing
- Sensory Needs Not Met

## What factors lead to increased depression in autism?

- Alexithymia (difficulty recognizing or labeling emotions)
- Biological Dysregulation
- Rumination on Negative Experiences
- Perceiving a Lack of Control in Life
- Reduced engagement in meaningful activities
- Social Isolation and Loneliness- Feeling othered or needing to camouflage

**REMEMBER: We cannot fix everything all at once!**

**Just pick one thing to work on until it feels more natural**

## What can I do to help with alexithymia?

- Increase emotional awareness and vocabulary
  - Big 5 emotions (Boredom, Sadness, Anger, Guilt, and Fear/Anxiety)
  - Feelings wheel
  - Non-Violent Communication list of emotions
    - <https://www.amazon.com/Nonviolent-Communication-Language-Life-Changing-Relationships/dp/189200528X>
- Practice labeling emotions for self and in others
  - Journaling or listening to music
  - Labeling emotions of characters in movie or TV show

### **How to help with biological dysregulation?**

- Food – consistent meals and snacks. Perhaps meeting with registered dietician
- Water – 11-15 cups of water per day; doesn't have to be exact but encouraging hydration is really important
- Moving the body – pacing, dancing, walks around the mall or store
- Medication management – consult with medical provider
- Sleep and practicing good sleep hygiene - <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-hygiene>

### **How to help with future directed rumination, past directed rumination, catastrophizing, or black-or-white thinking?**

- Help redirect attention to the present moment
  - mindfulness, deep breathing exercises, 5-senses grounding activities, Butterfly taps
  - <https://thinkingautismguide.com/2024/08/mindfulness.html>
- 5 Minute Rule: Consider if this is something we need to solve within the next 5 minutes, and if not, try to redirect our mind somewhere else
- Help person consider the “greys” of a situation by examining alternatives
- A lot of the time, the person engaged in rumination will need someone else to 1) validate their feeling is uncomfortable and 2) remind them that this anxiety is not something we need to solve this moment

### **How to help with Uncertainty?**

- Front load information as much as possible
- For a new or unfamiliar task (both positive and negative), Explain, model, and walk through (physically if possible) what they can expect
- Introduce a method for gathering more information when the unexpected arises

### **How to work with sensory concerns?**

- Make environment as sensory friendly as possible
- If we cannot control immediate environment, explore how to modify sensory experience for individual (e.g., allow sunglasses inside, wearing earbuds or headphone, comfortable clothes, etc.)
- Remember: we don't “grow out” of our sensory concerns

### **How to work with Perceived lack of control?**

- Help them identify aspects that are in their control vs factors outside their control

- e.g., having a chronic condition is out of their control, but taking medication and moving towards values is within their control.
- 1) Validate how emotionally hard it is not to be in control and then 2) help them engage in behaviors that they can control

### **How to manage reduce engagement in meaningful activities?**

- Behavioral Activation
  - Brainstorm large list of activities that align with their values and interests
    - Their special interests count
    - Social activities are typically more effective
  - Create a schedule of activities.
    - Remember, engaging in behavioral activation is just as important as other responsibilities
  - Have loved ones check on progress on behavioral activation and offer support, not criticism or judgement. Celebrate wins and encourage forward movement
  - <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-video/behavioral-activation-video>

### **How to help with social isolation and loneliness?**

- Allow space for them to “unmask” with trusted others
- Where possible and appropriate, engage in the interests of the autistic individual.
  - E.g., watch a show together; Read the same book so you can discuss it
  - 30-60 min bonding time once or twice a week where you just try to join them in their special interest, no strings attached
- Always invite them to things you are doing, even if they have repeatedly declined in the past

## Universal feelings list (partial)

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### When needs are met

adventurous	engaged	loving
affectionate	excited	moved
alive	fascinated	peaceful
calm	friendly	playful
confident	glad	relaxed
content	happy	satisfied
curious	hopeful	tender
delighted	interested	thrilled
energetic	joyful	warm

### When needs are not met

agitated	embarrassed	nervous
alarmed	exasperated	overwhelmed
ambivalent	flustered	protective
angry	grief	sad
annoyed	heartbroken	scared
anxious	helpless	stressed
confused	hopeless	suspicious
despairing	impatient	tense
devastated	irritated	terrified
disconnected	lonely	torn
discouraged	longing	troubled

## Universal needs list (partial)

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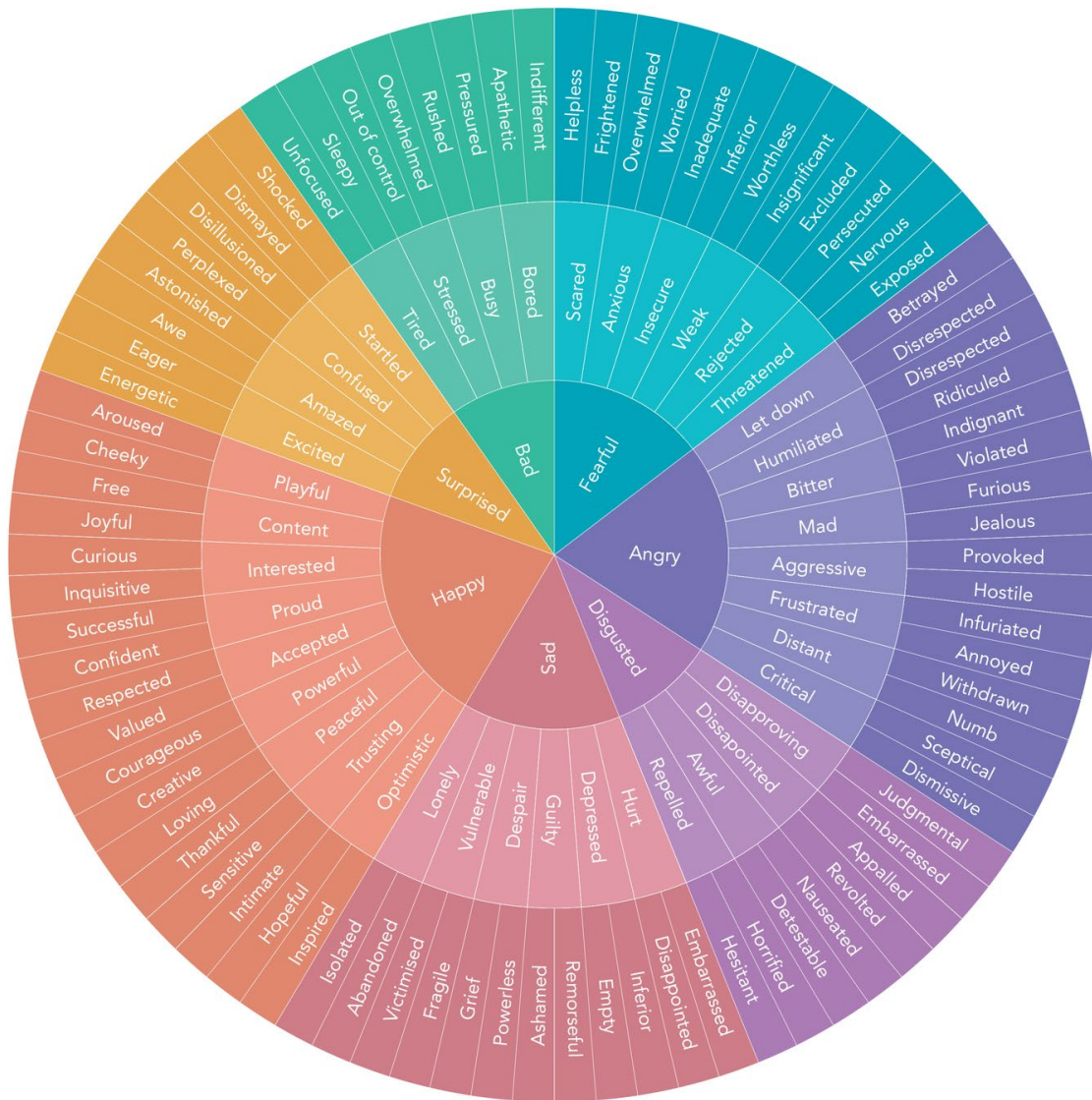
Connection	Interconnection	Competence
Acceptance	Belonging	Effectiveness
Affection	Consideration	Efficiency
Clarity	Community	Growth
Communication	Cooperation	Learning
Confirmation	Dignity	Power
Compassion	Mutuality	
Intimacy	Support	Honesty
Understanding	Trust	Authenticity
Love		Integrity
	Meaning	
Autonomy	Contribution	Basic Survival
Choice Space	Creativity	Shelter
Spontaneity	Hope	Food & Water
	Inspiration	Rest
Peace	Purpose	Safety
Beauty		Security
Ease	Celebration	Touch
Harmony	Joy	
Order	Mourning	
Wholeness	Play	



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Feeling Wheel from <https://www.calm.com/blog/the-feelings-wheel>



## Behavioral Activation Worksheet:

<https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/schedule-behavioral-activation>

### Weekly Schedule for Behavioral Activation

Create a schedule of activities that will lead to you having positive experiences in your day. If you are feeling depressed or unmotivated, it might be difficult to complete large or complex tasks. If this is the case, start with simple goals and work your way up to more challenging activities.

DAY	MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
<i>Example</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wake by 8 AM</li><li>• Eat a full breakfast</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Go for a 15 minute walk</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Call a friend</li><li>• Practice guitar</li></ul>
<b>Monday</b>			
<b>Tuesday</b>			
<b>Wednesday</b>			
<b>Thursday</b>			
<b>Friday</b>			
<b>Saturday</b>			
<b>Sunday</b>			

Behavioral Activation list of activities:

<https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/activity-list>

## Activity List

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- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Write in a journal | <input type="checkbox"/> Go out for coffee      | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch a movie              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watch the sunset   | <input type="checkbox"/> Go stargazing          | <input type="checkbox"/> Go swimming                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go rock climbing   | <input type="checkbox"/> Go to the beach        | <input type="checkbox"/> Do a puzzle                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Draw or paint      | <input type="checkbox"/> Play a sport           | <input type="checkbox"/> Play an instrument         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cook a meal        | <input type="checkbox"/> Go to the library      | <input type="checkbox"/> Work in a garden           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go to a play       | <input type="checkbox"/> Visit neighbors        | <input type="checkbox"/> Listen to a podcast        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go to a concert    | <input type="checkbox"/> Call a friend          | <input type="checkbox"/> Bake a dessert             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Visit a friend     | <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer              | <input type="checkbox"/> Visit a tourist attraction |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Start a blog       | <input type="checkbox"/> Explore somewhere new  | <input type="checkbox"/> Play a board game          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Practice a dance   | <input type="checkbox"/> Rearrange a room       | <input type="checkbox"/> Make origami               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read a book        | <input type="checkbox"/> Visit a museum         | <input type="checkbox"/> Go for a bike ride         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Take photos        | <input type="checkbox"/> Knit                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Visit a park               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do yoga            | <input type="checkbox"/> Write a poem           | <input type="checkbox"/> Discover new music         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lift weights       | <input type="checkbox"/> Hike on a nature trail | <input type="checkbox"/> Care for a pet             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go for a walk      | <input type="checkbox"/> Play cards             | <input type="checkbox"/> Write a letter             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meditate           | <input type="checkbox"/> Have a picnic          | <input type="checkbox"/> Try a new food             |