

# Positive Mental Health Strategies

Autistic children and young people

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**We do not want autistic children to have to reach crisis  
point before they receive our help**



**4 out of 5 autistic children will experience mental health  
problems**



## This session:

- What is good mental health, and how do we know when it is deteriorating?
- Strategies for preserving good mental health in autistic children.
- Strategies for restoring good mental health
- Creating kit bags
- Importance of taking time out for well being



# What do we mean by 'good mental health'?

It is not just the absence of mental disorder.

It is a state of well-being.

Feeling able to reach your potential.

To be able to cope **with the normal stresses of life.**

To be able to work productively.

To contribute.

 WHO

# Signs that mental health is deteriorating



# Barriers to identifying deteriorating mental health

1. Communication barriers (generally)
2. Difficulties in communicating about emotions (specifically)
3. Difficulties in recognizing emotions - alexithymia
4. Differences in expressing emotions \*
5. Masking
6. Difficulties in distinguishing anxiety and depression from autism



*‘With hindsight a massive barrier was that I just don’t show emotion the way other people do, so aside from when I was very anorexic no one believed there was anything wrong with me or that I needed help. There are specific things depressed people are supposed to do, but I don’t do them’.*

(Camm-Crosbie et al 2018)





# Barriers to identifying deteriorating mental health

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# Symptoms of high anxiety

- difficulties concentrating
- poor sleep patterns
- poor eating habits
- quick to anger, outbursts/meltdowns
- constantly worrying
- complaining of feeling unwell
- difficulty making decisions
- repetitive behaviours
- retreating from others



40% autistic children have anxiety at any one time.

# Deteriorating mental health



**If a child can't tell us and we can't see it –  
how will we know?**



**We do not want autistic children to have to reach crisis  
point before they receive help**



# How am I feeling right now?

- Vital to prioritise teaching skills to identify and communicate emotions
- E.G. Zones of regulation, 5 point scales, alert scale, mindfulness
- Can also drawing, music etc. to help explore feelings
- Remember expressing your emotions to others is important.
- May be necessary to link to physical signs
- Importance of monitoring over time

The **ZONES** of Regulation®

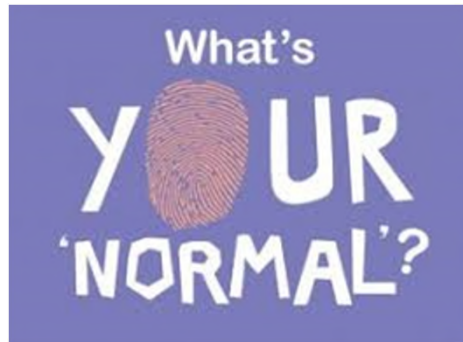
    	    	    	  
<b>BLUE ZONE</b> Sad Sick Tired Bored Moving Slowly	<b>GREEN ZONE</b> Happy Calm Feeling Okay Focused Ready to Learn	<b>YELLOW ZONE</b> Frustrated Worried Silly/Wiggly Excited Loss of Some Control	<b>RED ZONE</b> Mad/Angry Mean Terrified Yelling/Hitting Out of Control

# Know your normal

*What's your normal toolkit asks:*

- what is normal for this autistic child or young person?
- what is their normal sleep pattern, eating patterns, how do they normally spend their time?
- are these changing? (This could signify a change in mental health)
- What might this mean?





Toolkit can be downloaded  
from Ambitious About Autism  
Website!

# Preserving good mental health





**How do we support autistic children to cope with the  
normal stresses of life?**



# Creating the right environment for positive mental health

*'Supporting the autism will lead naturally to reduction in the crippling and miserable anxiety that many of our autistic children and young people face simply at the thought of going to school'.*

**Sarah Hendrickx 2015**



Sound and light  
sensitivities

**Making decisions**

*Delays*

**Communicating with  
others**

# Anxiety

Social situations

*Diagnosis*

*Understanding social  
rules*

*Friendships*

**Unexpected  
change**



Unexpected change



# Embedding in everyday practice



**1 Page Profile**

- What is important to me
- What I need to have a good day
- How to know when I am struggling
- How to help me
- Never....

# Restoring energy and mental health



# Life is full of stressors...

Daily life can be overwhelming for many autistic people for many different reasons.

*“Everything new I encounter – even if it is simply  
the beginning of another week – is seen  
through the prism of fear.”*

*Laura James, 2017*



# Managing stress (resilience)

- Coping with stress takes energy.
- Over time, this energy depletes.
- What happens when it is gone?

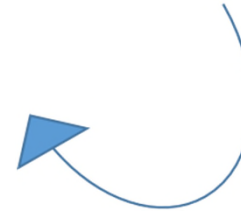






### Deposit:

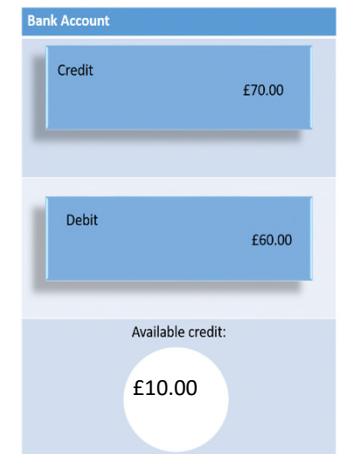
30 minutes special  
interest = £30.00



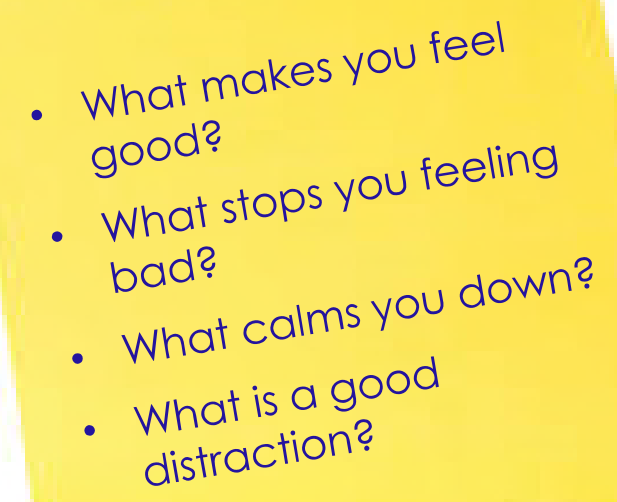
- £10: Dealing with noisy school entrance
- £30.00: Unexpected change in teaching assistant
- £20.00: Confusing social interaction
- £10.00: Having to wait for laptop

# Energy Accounting

- Energy accounting
- Spoon theory
- Monitoring your energy levels, your 'reserves'.
- Have I got enough energy to successfully manage what might happen next?



# Personalise strategies for restoring energy

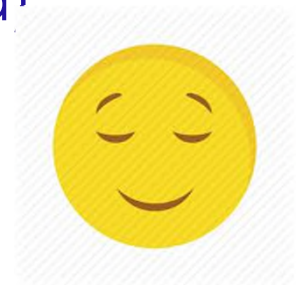
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- What makes you feel good?
  - What stops you feeling bad?
  - What calms you down?
  - What is a good distraction?

- General questions are not easy to answer!
- Try *specific* questions e.g. how do they feel before/after your cycle ride?
- Some students may need us to *read their behaviour* to find out the answers
- The answers explain how this child can replenish energy.

# Personalised strategies to promote wellbeing

## **E.G.**

- Special interest time, hobbies
- Getting active – gym, yoga
- Time to stim
- Being outside
- Music (ready stored on a playlist is good)
- Quiet space (individualised)
- Expressing worries – journal, art, music etc. (individualised)
- Mindfulness
- Time with animals
- And...



# Teaching energy accounting as a life skill

## Every day ...

- 7.30am ten mins yoga
- 8.00am time with dog
- 2 hour intervals: OT
- 4.00 pm music for 30 mins
- 7.00pm: favourite interest for 30



- Some autistic children can take ownership
- For others, a vital well-being passport
- A routine needs to be established, *before* mental health deteriorates
- Does not mean these activities cannot be used at other times!

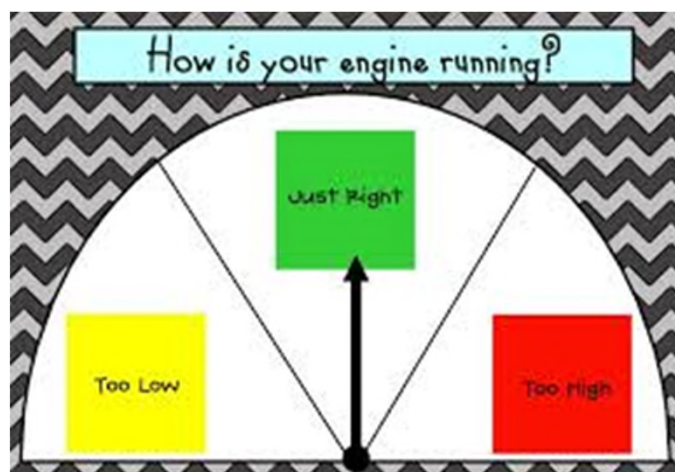
Well-being strategies *need* to be regularly scheduled  
in to daily timetables



# Creating kit bags



# Self-regulation strategies



CHECK IN

5	
4	
3	
2	
1	

## The ZONES of Regulation®

BLUE ZONE	GREEN ZONE	YELLOW ZONE	RED ZONE



# Responding to stress, recovering and...

## Every day ...

- 7.00am ten mins yoga
- 8.00am time with dog
- 2 hour intervals: OT
- 4.00 pm music for 30 mins
- 7.00pm: favourite interest for 30 mins



- Taking the time to recover energy as well as self-regulate
- Acknowledging that a child deserves recovery time after a hard experience
- Consider a chill out pass after a hard day

# Responding to stress, recovering and **working on wellbeing**

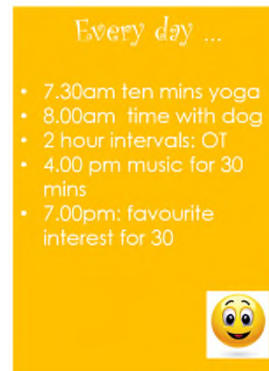
## *Every day ...*

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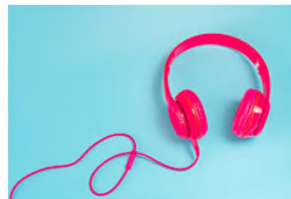


- Taking the time to do things which create a sense of well-being
- Every day
- Just because.

# Developing a kit bag (+ energy accounting)



Activity  
cards



# Developing a kit bag (teenage)



Activity  
cards



# Next steps – develop a kit bag for emergencies

Take advice  
from  
psychologist!



Physical  
activity  
prompts



Who to contact & how  
Website with online support




# Time out for mental health

- Assessing well-being
- What is working well?
- What could be developed further?
- Is the child, wherever possible, taking ownership?
- Do we need to seek more professional help?



## Summary

- Identify level of mental well-being (Know Your Normal)
  - Prevent anxiety and stress with good consistent autism practice
  - Respond to anxiety, stress and low mood with kit bags and personalised strategies
  - **Time** to plan, **time** to carry out, **time** to assess
  - Consider setting aside specific time each week for well-being and mental health
- 

**A statistic we can change.**

4 out of 5 autistic children will experience mental health  
problems

