

Managing Social Anxiety

Autistic adults frequently report challenges with social anxiety in new or unfamiliar environments, situations, or when meeting new people.

This can lead to the avoidance of new experiences that are required to form relationships and find fulfillment at work or college. The following steps can be taken to minimize social anxiety in unfamiliar situations or when meeting new people.

Step 1: Normalize anxiety

Educate your client about the nature of anxiety. Encourage your client to remember that many other people are anxious in unfamiliar situations and when meeting new people. It is very human to have concerns about the unknown.

Step 2: Identify quiet spaces in new places

If your client is planning to visit a new place or is undergoing a major life transition, like changing jobs or going to college, encourage them to find quiet places they can use to take a break when needed. These include quiet rooms, libraries, gardens, or parks.

When facing social anxiety, the client can retreat to a quiet place for a few minutes and take the next two steps.

Step 3: Using a stim or fidget toy

Many autistic adults find it helpful to fidget with a stim toy they can carry in their pocket, attached to their phone, or keyring. Stimming helps to distract the mind from uncomfortable thoughts that arise as a consequence of social anxiety while discharging tension.

Step 4: A breathing exercise for relaxation

A variety of breathing exercises can be used to regulate the nervous system; however, one of the most effective and simple ways to stimulate a relaxation response is the 'physiological sigh'.

This mimics the normal way our breathing changes when we are crying and need to regulate the nervous system.

- Take two breaths in through the nose, and then exhale slowly through the mouth.
- You can also place your hand on your belly to help ground you as you breathe.
- Repeat as many rounds as necessary until you feel calm and safe.