Autism ONTARIO

Growing Together

Supporting Autistic Teen Mental Health

Mental Health and Autism

Autistic children and youth are more likely to experience mental health challenges than their peers.

This is often because daily life can feel stressful or overwhelming. Stress can build up over time. When this happens, it may be harder for a young person to manage their emotions. This can create a cycle where stress leads to big feelings, and those feelings can lead to more stress.

22.5%

of autistic individuals have an **anxiety disorder** (such as generalized anxiety, phobias, OCD, or panic disorder). [1,5]

6%

of autistic individuals have a **mood disorder** like depression or bipolar disorder. [1,5]

Sometimes, mental health needs are missed. This can happen when people focus only on autism and not on the whole person. A helpful way to understand autistic youth is to learn what is typical for them. When you know how they usually feel and act, it is easier to notice changes and respond early.

Masking

Many autistic youth live in a world that is not always designed for them.

Loud spaces, busy schedules, and social expectations can feel overwhelming. To cope, some youth may "**mask**." Masking means changing how they act to fit in or feel accepted. Masking can look different for each person.

Some examples include:

- Copying how others talk or move.
- Planning what to say ahead of social interactions.
- Hiding feelings.
- Forcing eye contact.
- Pretending to be someone they are not.

Masking can take a lot of energy. While it may help a child fit in, it can also lead to stress, burnout, and feeling disconnected from who they are. It may even affect their physical health, like causing headaches or extreme tiredness. [2]



Tip: As a caregiver, you can help by creating a safe space where your child can be themselves. Listen with care, show understanding, and remind them that they are valued just as they are.

Caregiving Strategies to Promote Mental Wellness

Your role as a caregiver is to offer support, encouragement, and connection.

Here are some ways to help:



Listen and Validate

- Be patient and open.
- Show that you care about your child's experiences.
- Work together to find helpful strategies.



Support Identity and Interests

- Encourage your child's strengths and passions.
- Let them lead activities they enjoy.
- Learn what matters most to them.



Support Sensory and Emotional Needs

- Offer tools like headphones or fidgets.
- Give space when they feel overwhelmed.



Create Routine and Structure

- Keep a predictable daily routine.
- Break tasks into smaller steps.
- Plan regular downtime to prevent burnout.



Plan Ahead Together

- Build independence over time.
- Support self-advocacy at school and in the community.

When to Seek Mental Health Support

You may want to look for extra support if you notice these changes in behaviour, such as: [3]

- Less interest in activities they used to enjoy.
- Feeling sad or hopeless.
- Changes in sleep or eating habits.
- Low or very high energy.
- Changes in thinking or focus.
- Physical complaints like headaches.
- Thoughts or expressions about harming themselves or others.

Tip: Mental health care can help maintain wellbeing and build skills for the future. If you're thinking about seeking support, visit: Learn More About: Mental Health Services



Mental Health Support Options

Once you have your caregiver strategies in place and you determine it is time to seek mental health support, there are a few options to explore.

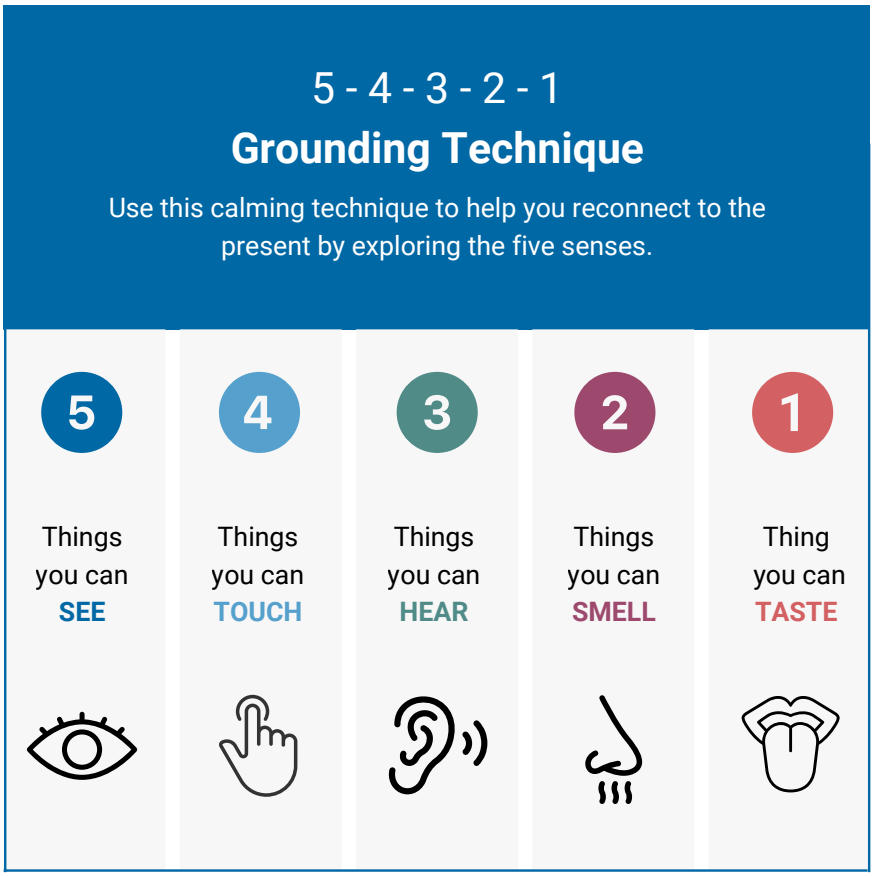
Mindfulness

Mindfulness helps children and youth slow down and focus on the present moment. It can help them notice their body, feelings, thoughts, and senses. For many neurodivergent youth, mindfulness can support calm and focus.

One simple activity is the “Five Senses” exercise. Ask them to take a few slow breaths and notice:

You can change this activity to fit their needs. It’s okay to focus on just one or two senses, whatever feels easiest and most comfortable for them.

For more information on mindfulness, visit Mindfulness.



Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a type of support that helps youth with anxiety. It looks at how thoughts, feelings, and actions are connected. In CBT, youths can learn to face worries step by step, at a pace that feels safe for them. They also learn how to notice and question unhelpful thoughts. [6]

For example, if they want to attend a family event but feels anxious, you can plan small steps together. This might include visiting quieter places first, making a clear plan for arriving and leaving, and talking through worries like "I can't do this." Over time, these small steps can help build confidence and reduce anxiety.

For more information on CBT, visit Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a type of talk therapy that helps people learn how to accept their thoughts and feelings instead of struggling against them. It combines mindfulness and behavioural strategies to help individuals stay present, connect with what matters most to them, and take meaningful action in their lives. ACT has been shown to help improve social and organizational skills, build independence in daily activities, and reduce challenges such as anxiety, depression, and disordered eating in autistic individuals. [7]

For more information on ACT, visit Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) is a type of talk therapy that focuses on helping people accept and understand their emotions and make positive changes in their life. It helps to learn skills and strategies that support understanding, managing and regulating emotions, improving relationships, and building a meaningful life. Research shows that DBT can help autistic youth with anxiety and/or depression, building social skills, supporting academic skills, reducing harmful behaviours and addressing severe mental health concerns such as self-harm and suicidal thoughts. [8,9,10]

For more information on DBT, visit Dialectical Behaviour Therapy.

Creative Arts Therapies

Art can help children and youth feel better about themselves, build coping skills, and reduce stress.[4] Art includes many forms like drawing, painting, music, dance, drama, photography, and more. For some autistic youth it can be hard to put feelings into words. Art can offer another way to express thoughts and emotions in a way that feels easier and less stressful. There are trained art therapists in some communities who provide structured support. However, joining a regular arts program can also be very helpful. The goal is not skill level, it's about expression, enjoyment, and feeling safe while creating.

For more information on the creative arts, visit Understanding Creative Arts Therapies.

Game-Based Interventions

Game-based activities can be a motivating and low-pressure way for autistic youth to learn and grow. This can include video games, board games, or role-playing games. These activities provide structure and clear rules, which many find helpful. Games can also support social skills and emotional regulation. They give youth a safe space to practice problem-solving, make decisions, and explore feelings like stress or sadness. Games can also help build confidence by offering small wins and a sense of control. For some, it can feel easier to talk or connect with others while doing something they enjoy, rather than only talking face-to-face. [11, 12]

References:

1. Public Health Agency of Canada. (2022). Autism spectrum disorder: Highlights from the 2019 Canadian health survey on children and youth. https://www.canva.com/link?target=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.canada.ca%2Fen%2Fpublic-health%2Fservices%2Fpublications%2Fdiseases-conditions%2Fautism-spectrum-disorder-canadian-health-survey-children-youth-2019.html&design=DAHLvBim7lA&accessRole=owner&linkSource=comment

2. National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT). (2022). Guide to autistic masking for parents and carers. Third Space. https://www.thirdspace.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NAIT-Guide-to-Autistic-Masking-for-Parents-and-Carers-2022.pdf

3. SH Ameis, Corinth E, M Henze, C Kassee, MC Lai, J Lake, Y Lunsky, R Lyon, S Pascoe, S Pind, C Putterman, A Shugar, M Spoelstra, R Sarbajna, A Tint (2022). Depression in autism: A youth to youth guide on coping and getting help. https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/cundill-centre/depression-and-autism-full-pdf.pdf

4. Schweizer, C., Knorth, E. J., & Spreen, M. (2014). Art therapy with children with autism spectrum disorders: A review of clinical case descriptions on “what works”. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 41(5), 577–593.

5. University of British Columbia. "Mental health conditions alarmingly high among children with autism, study finds." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 19 January 2021. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/01/210119114358.htm

6. Ung, D., Selles, R., & Small, B. J. (2014). A systematic review and meta-analysis of cognitive-behavioral therapy for anxiety in youth with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders. Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 46(4), 533-547.

7. Petersen, J. M., Ona, P. Z., & Twohig, M. P. (2024). A review of acceptance and commitment therapy for adolescents: Developmental and contextual considerations. Cognitive and Behavioural Practice, 31(1), 72-89.

8. Bemmouna, D., Coutelle, R., Weibel, S., and Weiner, L. (2022). Feasibility, Acceptability and Preliminary Efficacy of Dialectical Behavior Therapy for Autistic Adults without Intellectual Disability: A Mixed Methods Study. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 52, 4337–4354.

9. Huntjens, A., van den Bosch, L. M. C. W., Sizoo, B., Kerkhoff, A., Huibers, M. J. H., and van der Gaag, M. (2020). The effect of dialectical behaviour therapy in autism spectrum patients with suicidality and/ or self-destructive behaviour (DIASS): study protocol for a multicentre randomised controlled trial. BMC Psychiatry, 20(127).

10. Miller, A.L., Rathus, J.H. & Linehan, M.M. (2007). Dialectical Behavior Therapy with suicidal adolescents. New York: Guildford Press.

11. Black, M. H., Lilford, A., Nguyen, V., Walker, E., Wee, H. H., Falkmer, O., & McGarry, S. (2025). Gaming in the intervention and support process: A realist evaluation of a gaming-based programme. Autism : the international journal of research and practice, 29(7), 1688–1699.

12. Gao J, Song W, Huang D, Zhang A and Ke X (2025) The effect of game-based interventions on children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Front. Pediatr. 13:1498563.