

Autism, Anxiety and College

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We...

- Assess college readiness
- Recommend gap year and support programs
- Help with college lists, essays & applications
- [Maintain a list of autism-friendly colleges](#)



Join our Facebook group!

Parents of College Bound Students with Learning Disabilities, ADHD and ASD

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/parentsofcollegeboundstudentswithld>

Over 3,500 members!



Why is applying to college stressful for autistic teens?

- Researching colleges/identifying options
- Identifying and accepting support needs
- Managing anxiety about writing and tests
- Meeting application deadlines
- Deciding whether to disclose their diagnosis



What skills do students need in college?

- **Self-awareness:** their strengths & challenges
- **Self-advocacy:** find resources, schedule/attend appointments
- **Self-management:** time, motivation, emotions



Keys to Emotional Readiness

1. How do you react to **stress**?
2. What are the “**red flags**” for you?
3. What are your **healthy** go-to strategies?
4. Where can you get more **help** if needed?



What is anxiety?

- Part of the normal range of emotions
- *Fear* = response to imminent danger
- *Anxiety* = false alarm (“what if...”)
- Anxiety impairs decision-making
- Anxiety involves:
 - thoughts
 - feelings
 - behaviors



Types of anxiety

- Panic disorder: frequent panic attacks
- Agoraphobia (extreme version=housebound)
- Specific phobias (e.g., childhood fears)
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)



Types of anxiety (cont.)

- Social anxiety disorder/social phobia
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Separation anxiety disorder



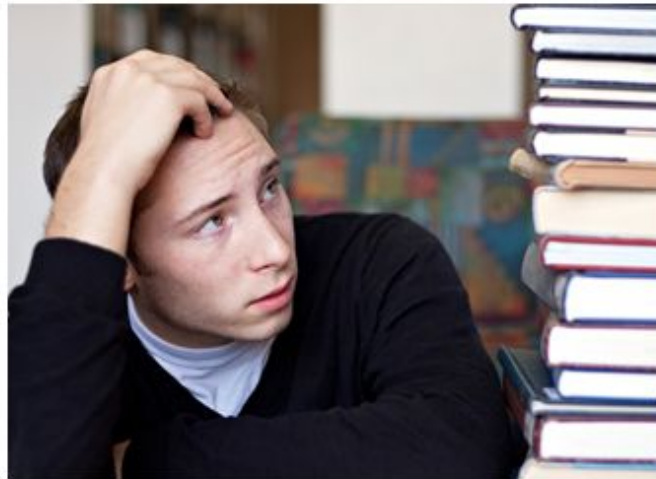
Risk factors for anxiety

- Stress and danger: pandemic, racism, assault
- Medical conditions
- Drugs
- Genes



Thoughts and worries

- Cognitive distortions (“twisted thinking”):
 - overestimating likelihood of negative event
 - underestimating ability to cope with outcome
 - discomfort with uncertainty



Common/less helpful reactions

- Avoidance
- Addictive behaviors
- Reassurance-seeking
- Checking
- Compulsions/rituals



Healthier strategies

- Meditative practices: breathing, yoga, tai chi, prayer
- Mindfulness
- Exercise
- Nature
- Sunlight
- Rest
- Music



Healthier strategies (cont.)

- Journaling
- Reading
- Routine/structure
- Connection with others
- Treatment: therapy (e.g., DBT), medication, biofeedback
- Strive for “the zone” - not too easy/familiar, not too hard/unfamiliar



Warning Signs

- Hopelessness
- Focus on suicide or death
- Decreased functioning (e.g., school performance)
- Isolation
- Compulsive/addictive behaviors
- Disturbance in sleep, appetite, energy, focus



Helping Students Proactively

- “If you see something, say something.”
- “Seek first to understand.”
- Empathize.
- Normalize.
- Empower. Encourage a growth mindset.
- Be a role model.



Coping With Anxiety

Students:

- Face your feelings
- Tolerate discomfort
- Realize change is normal
- Stay connected with others
- Develop a structure
- Stay on track
- Notice what works
- Savor your successes



Getting help in college

Research on-campus resources in advance

Think beyond the counseling center:

- Wellness living-learning communities (LLCs)
- Clubs (Active Minds), peer support groups, [JED campuses](#)
- Mentors, tutors, RAs, faculty, advisors, coaches

Arrange off-campus supports:

- Individual therapy
- Group therapy
- Psychiatry/prescriptions
- Primary care, medical specialties



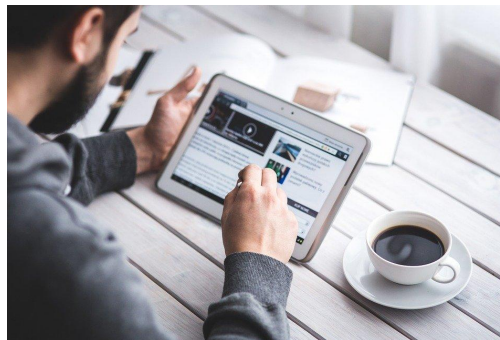
Referral Options

- Primary care providers
- School counselors
- Employee assistance programs
- Health plans
- APA Psychologist Locator <https://locator.apa.org>
- Psychology Today
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists>



Resources

- [Breathe 2 Relax](#) (free app)
- [College Students and Mental Health](#) (podcast)
- [Autism and the Transition to College](#)
- [College Support Options for Autistic Students](#)
- [Asperger/Autism Network](#)
- [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#)
- [Psych Central](#)



Takeaways

- Assess emotional readiness for college
- Start working on skills in high school
- Develop a support plan for college



