

Anxiety Disorders:

Ways Anxiety Might Show Up in Autism:

Social Anxiety Disorder

Autistic people are often nervous in situations where they are expected to accurately interpret social cues and understand social subtleties. For autistic people who do not understand social expectations, interacting with others can cause significant anxiety. Autistic teens and kids might worry about being rejected by others due to their differences. Alternatively, some autistic individuals may not take part in social situations because they do not have an interest in them and would prefer to be alone, not because they are afraid of social situations. This is important to distinguish as we are trying to help autistic kids with their anxiety, not change who they are.

Specific Phobias

Autistic people are more likely to have uncommon fears such as beards, toilets, or certain textures. They are also more likely to be afraid of loud noises or specific sounds. However, fear is different from sensory sensitivities. An autistic person may avoid certain noises due to sensory issues, rather than fear.

Separation Anxiety Disorder

Autistic individuals are sometimes very attached to their routines. If an autistic child has separation anxiety, they may become anxious and upset when a routine with a family member changes (for example, if one parent goes out of town for the week and cannot drive them to school or eat dinner with them like usual, this may cause anxiety).

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Generalized Anxiety

Autistic people are more likely to have daily worries involving sticking to their schedules and routines. They may experience a lot of distress when they face new situations or when they are forced to change their routine. Their daily worries may also be tied to their special interests (for example, they may worry about not having enough time to practice a hobby or blog about their favorite TV show).

Panic Fears

Panic fears may show up differently in autistic people due to sensory sensitivities or body-related self-soothing behaviors.

Selective Mutism

Sometimes, selective mutism is caused by severe social anxiety- kids and teens might not speak in certain situations because they are worried about what others will think or about saying the wrong thing. In other cases, kids may have trouble using their words to communicate. Other times, selective mutism can be caused by a combination of both issues. Many autistic people have trouble using words to communicate, so it can be hard to figure out why an autistic individual is having communication challenges.

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Agoraphobia

If an autistic person finds it difficult to explain why they are afraid in these situations (situations they cannot easily leave or escape from), they may experience an autistic meltdown or shutdown.

Autism-Specific Fears

Some autistic people may worry excessively only about their special interest. For example, they may worry about having enough time to engage in a special interest, or fear losing something related to that special interest. Other autistic people may only fear changes in routine, even if they are very minor. For example, they may struggle if they must drive on a different route to school than usual, or if they have to skip a step in their morning routine.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Many autistic people have “repetitive behaviors”, such as playing a favorite game over and over, or discussing a topic they enjoy over and over, but this might not mean they have OCD. OCD involves reoccurring thoughts and behaviors that cause distress to the person experiencing them. The need for something to be “just-right” in OCD can look a lot like repetitive autistic behaviors that lead to feelings of satisfaction (like organizing). Similarly, sensory issues seen in autism can sometimes look like the disgust felt in OCD obsessions related to contamination.