

ANXIETY IN AUTISM

Katie Taylor Keightley

HOW CAN IT EFFECT PEOPLE

Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life, however research shows its more common in people with autism.

Signs that you might be anxious include:

- Feeling restless or worried
- A churning feeling in your stomach
- A fast, thumping or irregular heartbeat
 - Faster breathing
 - Sweating or hot flushes
 - Nausea
 - Panic attacks.

HOW C DEALT WITH ANXIETY WHEN STARTING FOXWOOD

When C joined Foxwood, he had recently moved from a mainstream school where he was familiar with the staff, his peers, and the environment. This transition was a significant change for him and caused a lot of anxiety.

C's anxiety was often reflected in his behaviour. He became very quiet and required a high level of support with everyday tasks that he was capable of completing independently. He would often say, "C do it," while holding out his hand for a member of staff to complete the task for him.

When staff encouraged him by saying things such as, "It's okay, you can try," or, "Give it a go," C would often become visibly anxious. He appeared worried about attempting tasks independently because of the possibility of making a mistake or getting something wrong. Staff recognised this and provided consistent reassurance, encouragement, and time, helping C to gradually build his confidence and independence.

HOW DID ANXIETY EFFECT C

C had some anxiety around food when he started at Foxwood. He expected hand-over-hand support when eating and needed a lot of prompting throughout mealtimes to eat and drink.

This anxiety also showed in other areas of daily living. For example, C was unable to open doors independently without staff support. He would stand looking at a closed door and would sometimes not ask for help. On occasions, C could remain standing there for a long time, unsure of what to do and not asking for assistance.

WHAT DID WE DO TO HELP C

Staff began by making simple suggestions, such as, "Shall we open the door?" C would often reply, "You do it." However, from the beginning, staff consistently encouraged C to become more independent. Even if this meant standing with C at the door and giving him the time he needed, staff avoided doing the task for him. With patience and encouragement, C was able to open the door independently in his own time, helping him to build confidence and develop his independence.

WHAT DID WE DO TO HELP C?

C would often sit at the table for the entire mealtime without eating anything. If staff prompted him to eat, he would look to them for support and would often expect them to place the food into his mouth for him. To encourage C's independence, staff placed a simple Inprint symbol with the word "eat" on the table. We would prompt C to pick up his food while introducing him to the "eat" symbol as a visual cue. Over time, rather than repeatedly telling C to eat, staff would simply tap the "eat" symbol to remind him what was expected. This reduced the need for repeated verbal prompts and enabled C to become more independent during mealtimes. With consistent support and encouragement, C began to tap the "eat" symbol independently and was able to eat a good-sized meal alongside his peers with little to no help from an adult.

NOW

After consistently using the same approach and being receptive we now see that C doesn't need any support when eating, can walk through school and open doors himself without even thinking about it, he seem a lot more confident talking to people around school. After researching ways that we could help C we identified where he struggled the most and thought of ideas that would make these tricky tasks easier for him. We unpicked behaviors to find alternatives that would give him what he needed without causing him so much frustration.