

DISTRESS BEHAVIOUR

Discussion points

- Are there any times or places when the sensory environment seems particularly difficult for your child?
- Does your child struggle to communicate their needs?
- Are you able to identify what may lead to an outburst of distress behaviour?
- Do you have any strategies for managing/approaching these behaviours?
- Is your child's distress behaviour targeted at a particular person?
- Does the distress behaviour put the child (or others) in danger?

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Understanding Distress Behaviours

Everyone displays 'distress behaviours' at some time. It is a way of communicating that something is not right and that the person is experiencing the world differently than others. Though this is because they see and experience the world in a particular way, and they are living in a world that often does not understand this.

Common distress behaviours are:

- Becoming withdrawn and resisting any interaction with others
- Crying
- Meltdowns and aggression behaviour
- Engaging in repetitive behaviours
- Fidgeting

Anxiety is a common cause of distress behaviours amongst neurodivergent people. Difficulties in understanding language, predicting others, sensory processing differences alongside other issues can all cause anxiety. These issues can compromise the ability to communicate effectively, which can lead to anxiety (not being able to describe your emotions and feelings), which would make it difficult for someone to understand you.

We all experience anxiety - it is part of our everyday life - and all react to stressful situations in a way that is personal to us, but the symptoms of anxiety are often similar. These can include physical sensations such as sweating, racing heart, tight feelings such as being scared, increased heart rate, sweating, aches, not knowing where to turn or what to do next, loss of confidence etc. These are symptoms of anxiety, but they are also symptoms of distress behaviour. It is hard to imagine what it must be like to feel anxious every day of your life but not understand why.

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 Behaviour Support Hub

Understanding and Managing a 'Meltdown' Workshop



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DISTRESS BEHAVIOURS

Five Top Tips from parents to help you understand and manage your child's distress behaviours.

Read The Signs
Watch for the first signs of distress or meltdowns in your child. You might be able to intervene early and successfully avoid a meltdown or outburst.

Don't Worry About Other People
Society is a demanding place to live in and not everyone is what other people think or say. This leaves your child feeling uncertain and worried about what others think of them. Try to ignore what others say and focus on what your child needs.

Provide Space
If your child is feeling overwhelmed, give them a space to calm down. This might be a quiet room or a quiet corner of the house. Encourage them to sit and relax again.

Try to Remain Calm
When your child is upset, always try to stay as calm as possible. When you are calm, your child will feel safe and probably escalate the situation less.

Pick Your Battles
It's important to remember that it's not always appropriate to let your child have what they want. If this is the case, then it's important to explain why and let them know that it's not appropriate.

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Advice Sheet

Webinar

Top Tips Sheet

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Using an ABC Chart

In order to identify triggers or purpose of a behaviour, you will need to record Antecedent and Behaviour and then record and after them use a period of 1-2 weeks. You will need to use an ABC chart to record the behaviour. You can download this from neurodivergencewales.org/advice/abc-chart, or you can make your own using these headings:

Date and Time	Antecedent	Consequence	Behaviour

Antecedent (what happens before) – This is often the trigger for the behaviour. This can be a person, place, thing or situation. It can be something that is obvious but for neurodivergent people it can be more difficult to identify because the cause may be related to sensory processing, communication or social interaction difficulties or related to the need for predictable routines. It is therefore important that you record all relevant information including time, environment, who was with, who was present etc.

Behaviour – In this section you will need to record details of the behaviour, without judgement or assumptions. Describe the behaviour rather than judging it. Communication difficulties can make it difficult for neurodivergent people to express how they are feeling and communicating why they are distressed. It can therefore be difficult for people to understand the cause. For example, anxiety may present as worry, but it could also present as a physical symptom such as sweating.

Consequence (what happens afterwards) – Record exactly what happens including what the person does and what any other people around them do. Often the consequence of the behaviour can provide clues as to what the person is feeling, as it shows what they are trying to achieve. Consequences can sometimes be reinforcing the behaviour.

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Behaviour Chart

Date & Time	Antecedent	Consequence	Behaviour

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Advice Sheet

Behaviour Chart

Advice Sheet

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Identifying Triggers

In order to accurately identify triggers and purpose of your child's distress behaviour you will need to have recorded it using the ABC chart.

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Look through your completed ABC chart to look for common patterns in the 'Antecedent' (what happens before section). You can then use the CRISIS acronym to identify the main issues that may be triggering certain behaviours in an autistic child.

Communication: Have you communicated in a way that the child understands?

Routine: Has there been a change in routine? Has the child been surprised to know what is happening?

Interaction: Has there been a social misunderstanding? Does the child understand what is being said to them?

Sensory Processing: Is there an increase / change in sensory stimuli?

Environment: Has the child been placed in an environment that they are not used to? Has there been a change in the environment?

Sedentary: Are you encouraging the child to sit for long periods of time? Are they finding it difficult to move around?

Often the behaviour that you see is 'functional', which means that there's a purpose to it. For example, if your child is having a meltdown, they may be in a distressing situation, hitting out to stop someone talking or hiding under a table to stop people looking along with many others. By understanding the trigger or underlying cause of the behaviour, you can then identify ways to support and manage the behaviour occurring.

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