

Stress Management

The Practical Guide to Living on the Wrong Planet

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Key Concepts –

- Experiencing stress is common to the human experience
- Aspies and Neurotypicals may experience stress in different circumstances and have different means of coping with stress
- It is important to know what causes stress for you and recognize signs that you are becoming increasingly stressed.
- It is also important to identify activities and environments that help you relax and relieve stress.

What is Stress

We all talk about stress, but we are not always clear about what it is. This is because stress comes from both the good and the bad things that happen to us. If we did not feel any stress, we would not be alive! Stress becomes a problem when we are not sure how to handle an event or a situation. Then worry sets in, and we feel "stressed."

The things that cause stress for you may not be a problem for your neighbour, and things that bring stress to your neighbour's life may not worry you at all. It is how you think about and react to certain events that determine whether you find them stressful or fairly easy to deal with. Your reaction to stress can affect your mental and physical health, so it is important for you to learn how to deal effectively with stress as it occurs.

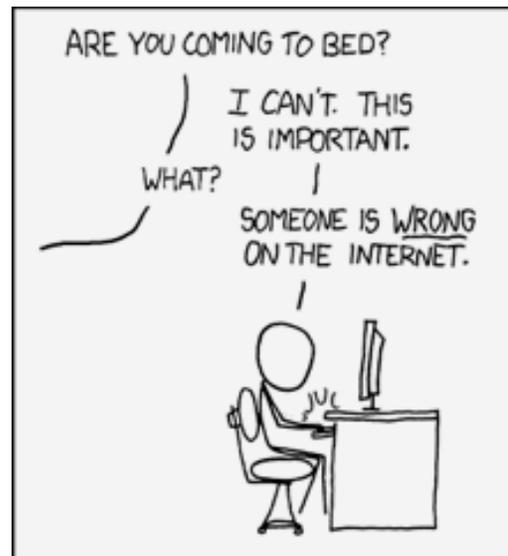
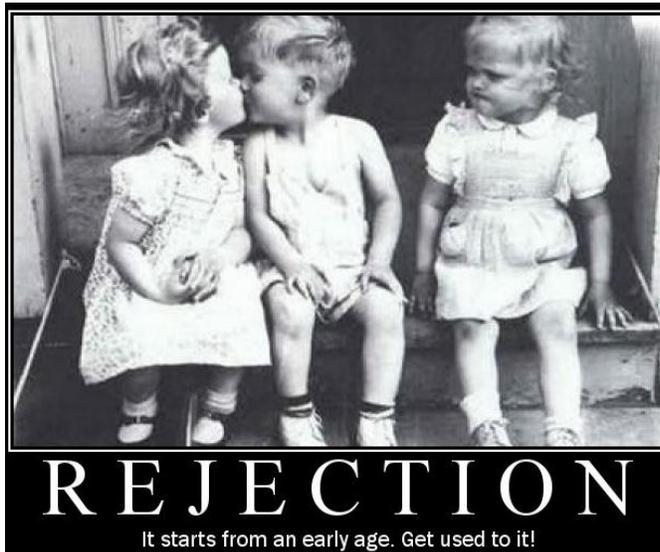


Source – Canadian Mental Health Association website

How we experience stress

All human beings experience stress, anxiety, and negative feelings like depression.

Neurotypicals usually experience stress and anxiety when they are not accepted in a social group or their social status has been lowered. Aspies usually experience stress and anxiety when they do not have information or understand what is expected, or when the information is incorrect or the rules are broken.



When human beings experience a problem that causes stress or anxiety, they try to understand what caused the problem and solve it. If they are unable to solve it, they may obsess about it in their thoughts and have difficulty sleeping.

In an attempt to solve the problem, Neurotypicals usually find someone to talk with who will help them clarify and organize their feelings, and understand why another person acted in a way that disrupted a social connection. Aspies usually mentally review all the details and sequence of events and try to identify the facts or logic that is missing.

Neurotypicals usually experience relief of their anxiety through detailed processing of the emotions they are experiencing, in an attempt to understand the emotional logic that prompted another person to act in a particular way. They will usually review their mental database of emotional and relational experiences and seek to find a generalized concept of human social and psychological patterns to “explain” the problematic event.

Long-term resolution of anxiety for Neurotypicals is usually accomplished by understanding the emotional and social logic of the situation. Short-term or immediate relief of the stress usually involves verbal release of the negative emotion and verbal reassurances of one’s social status or relational importance from a trusted friend.

This release of emotion and verbal discussion is usually more important to Neurotypical women and Neurotypical gay men than to Neurotypical heterosexual men (who usually receive greater immediate benefit from engaging in a preferred extra-curricular activity and verbal reassurance that respects and validates their competence).

For Aspies, stress can be triggered by sensory overload, inaccurate or incomplete information, violation of a rule, or words / actions that do not make logical sense.

	Neurotypical	Aspie
Common stress triggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviours or words that threaten social status, disrupt relational closeness, do not follow the unwritten rules, or can not be interpreted using one’s emotional logic map 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory overload • incomplete or inaccurate information • actions or processes that do not make logical sense • behaviours that are unfair
Problem-solving strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal processing of social and emotional facts • understanding the emotional logic • revising emotional logic map 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive processing of the concrete physical facts • understanding the logical cause-and-effect sequence
Immediate stress relief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional release • verbal reassurance of one’s social status or competence from a trusted friend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being by oneself • pleasurable or relaxing sensory stimulation • thinking or learning about an area of interest • possibly a repetitive mental or physical activity that provides order / patterns • reviewing past successes
Response to other’s stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move physically closer • ask questions about feelings • increase attention to and use of non-verbal gestures • verbal reassurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdraw to allow the other person to be alone • clarify facts and offer logical solutions

Stress management strategies

Sensory strategies

Sensory overload can result from physical stimuli (e.g., sound of fluorescent light) or the intensity of verbal and non-verbal communication of Neurotypicals (i.e., when literal verbal content is distorted by emotion and non-verbal cues like tone of voice).

In the realm of the physical senses (e.g., sight, sound, smell, taste, touch), it will be useful to identify sensory stimuli that (a) energize, (b) calm, and (c) cause distress.



Temple Grandin, a successful autistic woman who is recognized around the world for her expertise in understanding bovine behavior, built a “hug machine” to help her cope with stress. The “hug machine” compresses her body and places pressure on her muscles, and she uses this as a sensory calming tool.

Sensory stimuli can bypass the cognitive processing or executive functioning part of our brain (i.e., prefrontal cortex) and directly trigger physical or emotional reactions. For example, if we are surprised by a dog that jumps in front of us and growls menacingly, we experience an instinctive “fight or flight” reaction. Adrenaline and cortisol race through our body as our muscles and reflexes immediately move into reaction mode.

Our cognitive processing is then engaged as our mind analyzes the situation and evaluates the risk and identifies different response options (e.g., call for help, run).

If we can identify sensory stimuli that energize or calm us, we can use that information to help our body activate itself to do a task or help our body calm down and relax.

Sometimes, Aspies will evidence a strong sensory interest that is particularly evident in their infant and preschool years. For example, there may be an object that has a smell or taste or texture that one finds stimulating and interesting.

Usually, the Aspie will receive some negative social feedback that tells him or her that other people consider that behavior to be strange. The Aspie receives verbal correction or other messages (e.g., withdrawal of others, teasing) that may cause him or her to stop that behavior (or do it only when alone or in hiding).

However, these early sensory activities are an indicator of the sensory stimuli that the Aspie instinctively knows are pleasurable and calming for his or her body and brain.

It can be useful to create a portable “toolkit” of calming and activating sensory stimuli, and also create a physical space in one’s home that includes these sensory elements.



The portable toolkit could be an iPad or iPhone with visual images, or sounds or music, or it could be items that have a pleasant smell or texture. Some Aspies find it relaxing to engage in a sensory activity that involves a repetitive pattern. For example, this could be an iPad app where one uses a finger to draw patterns in a “virtual sandbox”.

Sometimes the sensory stimuli involves physical movement such as jumping. To ensure that Neurotypicals do not misinterpret the behavior or react negatively (e.g., co-workers gossiping), it will be useful to create visual cues that provide others with a positive way to interpret the behavior.



For example, if one finds jumping an effective stress relief, then one could put a small trampoline in the corner of one’s office. The visual cues could include putting an exercise chart and weight loss graph on the wall. You don’t have to follow the exercises or even be concerned about weight loss, but it provides Neurotypicals with a visual cue that helps interpret the behavior in a positive way.

Another example: If waving my arms was a relaxing sensory activity, I could hold an orchestra conductor’s baton in my hand, put on some classical music, and then I could wave my arms without concern that Neurotypicals might misinterpret or react.

The key is to use visual cues to create an acceptable “social story” for the activity.

Cognitive strategies

Most Aspies can experience energy and relaxation by learning information related to their areas of special interest. This is another activity that fits well with the capabilities of an iPad or iPhone. There are a multitude of apps that provide facts about almost any area of interest, as well as the opportunity to search online for additional facts.

Logic games or role-playing games are also readily accessible via an iPad or iPhone.

However, it will be important to implement some self-imposed time limits on these activities, as they can easily become an escape and avoidance. Many Aspies have experienced (or know another Aspie who has experienced), a time period when playing video games consumed a lot of time and isolated them from other important activities.

It is helpful to think of these game-playing or fact-finding activities as a short-term temporary relief. They are useful in the same way that a coffee break is useful. They provide a temporary distraction but do not work as a long-term solution.



A more effective long-term solution is to use one's iPad or iPhone as a place to store visual examples of one's accomplishments and successes. Most Aspies have struggled with anxiety and depression, and these feelings are usually linked to a belief (based on actual experiences) that one can not or may not be successful in accomplishing a goal. The goal could be a social goal or a practical goal, but the experience of failure creates doubt and uncertainty that one will be able to

accomplish important goals in life.

Storing pictures of one's accomplishments, saving copies of emails where a co-worker expressed appreciation or admiration for our help, videos of us in a social activity (e.g., technical presentation to clients) are all ways that we can record evidence and facts to show that we have been and can be successful.

When anxious feelings arise or we doubt our ability, it is helpful to review these facts and evidence of past success so we can come to a more positive conclusion. Saving copies of strategies that have helped us experience success is also useful. For example, you might want to save copies of explain scripts on your iPad or iPhone.

Social strategies

Social situations are often a source of stress and anxiety for Aspies.

Although strategies such as the explain script are often effective, there may be situations when we have incomplete knowledge about the expectations, unwritten rules, non-verbal signals etc. As a result, the explain script might not be as effective as we had expected or predicted based on our prior knowledge.

It can be helpful to meet with a Neurotypical friend, partner, mentor or ally and debug or trouble-shoot our explain script if we experienced an unexpected outcome. As we develop an effective social partnership with our Neurotypical ally, that person can act as an “early warning system” in preparing for social situations. We do not want to place an expectation on them that they must always provide information in advance, as this would be an unfair and an unrealistic expectation – just as it would be unrealistic to expect that Wikipedia contact me and provide information I will need in the future.

However, it is fair and appropriate to say to our Neurotypical ally: “I respect your social skills. Is it OK if I sometimes ask your advice about a social situation that I am uncertain about?” If we keep these requests to a reasonable amount (e.g., maximum of once per week) and we provide a “thank you” (an occasional thank you gift), this can work well.

Some newspapers or magazines or websites offer advice columns on issues related to work or dating. This is another option for asking questions and requesting information. However, it is best to treat the response as only one possible option, since these individuals are often not professionals and may be only a “self-proclaimed expert”. Anyone can write a blog or create an online forum and claim to be an expert.

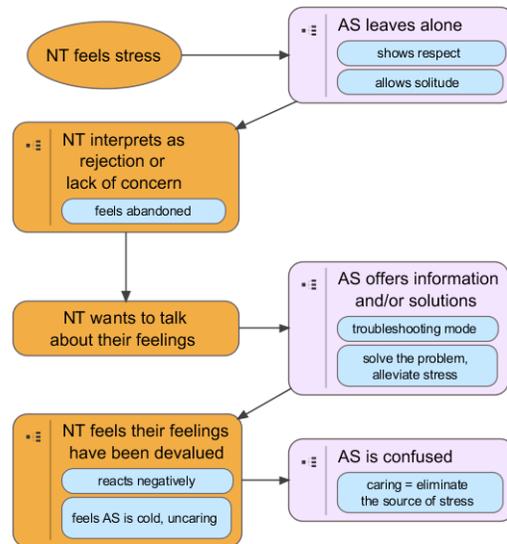
It can be helpful to access online forums that reflect the shared knowledge and experience of a community of people. The democratic nature of an online forum allows multiple opinions, and people can critique each other’s logic and provide additional facts. Online forums created by Aspies for Aspies, such as www.wrongplanet.net, allow you to read about other people’s experiences and the strategies that they used, and you can decide whether you would like to experiment using that strategy in your situation.



Interpreting other's reactions to stress

Neurotypicals tend to seek social connection when they experience stress. This enables them to express their feelings and review their emotional logic. Another person can validate that their feelings are a legitimate response and help them find a social or emotional solution.

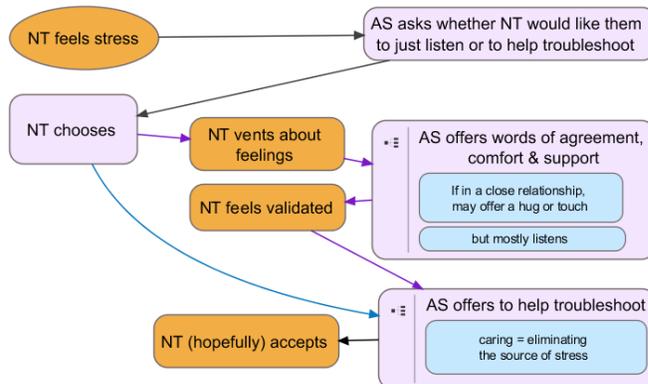
Aspies tend to withdraw and engage in a mental review of all the facts and logical cause-and-effect sequence of events. An Aspie may view feelings as irrelevant information, or as an outcome that automatically changes if the correct logical solution is implemented.



When an Aspie and Neurotypical are in a friendship or romantic relationship, or are co-workers, this difference in responding to stress can escalate problems. An Aspie may withdraw from a Neurotypical who is experiencing stress or talking about distressing feelings, because the Aspie considers this to be a respectful way of allowing the other person to think through the problem and have the peace of solitude. The Neurotypical may interpret this as rejection and lack of concern.

An Aspie may offer the Neurotypical additional facts or information, or a logical answer, which could help the Neurotypical solve the problem. However, the Neurotypical will likely react negatively if the emotional feelings are not discussed first. The Neurotypical will likely interpret these facts and advice as non-verbal cues that he or she does not have a legitimate reason to feel the feelings they are experiencing. The facts and advice will then be seen as a devaluation of the Neurotypical's social skills and emotional stability.

Although these words and actions can be motivated by genuine concern and empathy, the Neurotypical can interpret them as cold and uncaring because of the difference in communication and cognitive processing style. If both people are in a close friendship or romantic relationship, an Aspie will find it helpful to provide some positive sensory stimuli (e.g., a 'protecting' hug) that communicates concern and comfort to the Neurotypical.



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