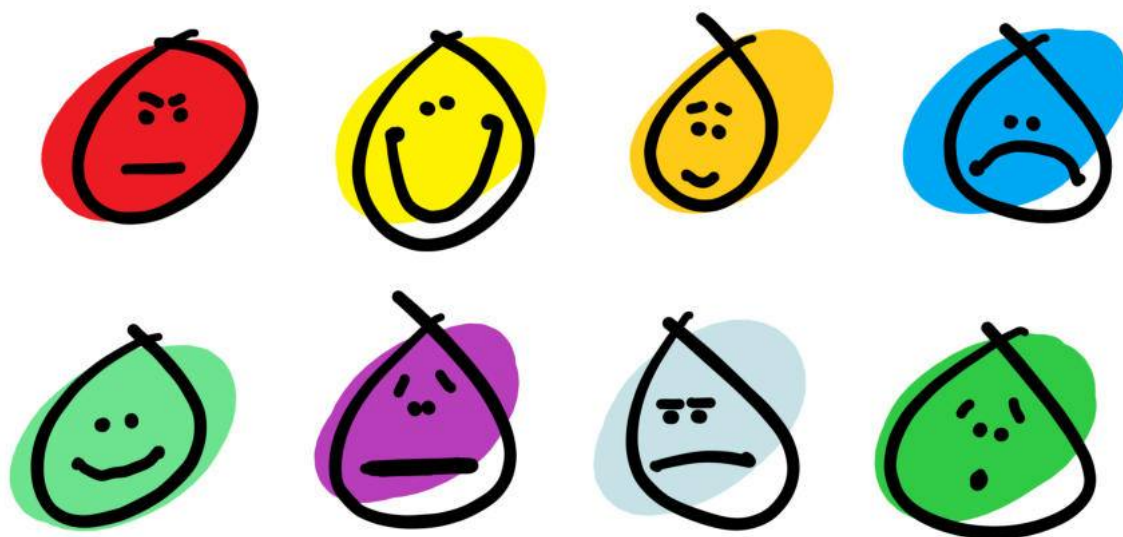


Understanding and Managing Difficult Feelings in ASD



Parent Resource Pack

Neurodisability Psychology Team

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Introduction

This booklet is designed to accompany the slides from the Understanding and Managing Difficult Feelings in ASD parent workshop.

All of the information and tools featured in the booklet will have been discussed in the workshop, and are designed to support you through the 6 steps of emotional regulation. At the back of the booklet there are also some suggestions for additional books and apps, as well as a collection of printable resources.

1

Recognising feelings



2

Naming feelings



3

Making sense of feelings



4

Taking control of feelings



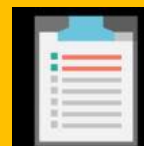
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Trying different ways to manage feelings



6

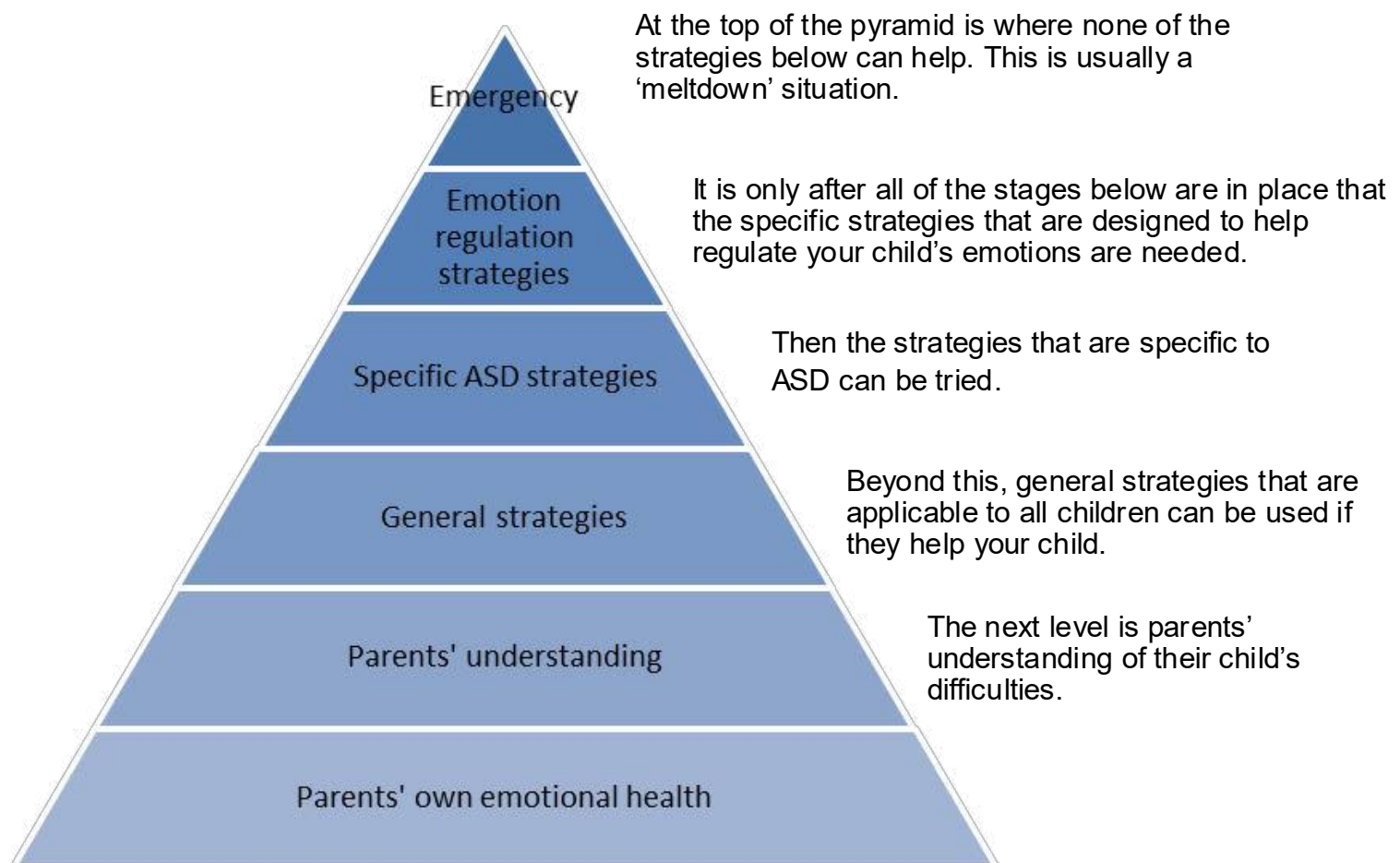
Putting the plan together



Pyramid of parenting strategies

There is not only one way to support children with difficult feelings. A pyramid is used to show the options available. Working up from the bottom of the pyramid, it's important to put the strategies at the first level in place before moving up to the next level.

Remember to start at the bottom of the pyramid and work up. For example, it can be unhelpful for a parent to try the emotion regulation strategies if they are feeling upset or angry themselves. It might be more helpful for them to take some time but to recharge their own batteries first.



At the base of the pyramid is parents' own emotional health. As parents, you need to be in a position to be able to support your children emotionally through looking after yourselves first.

Taking care of yourself

You cannot pour from an empty cup. This means you cannot look after someone else before you look after yourself.



In this emergency situation, parents are told to help themselves before helping their child. Emotional emergencies work in the same way!

Looking after yourself will enable you to continue supporting your child.

What works for you? Here are some ideas with spaces to add your own ideas

Going for a walk

Yoga class

Watching a film

Knitting

Going to the gym

General autism strategies

Visual timetables and lists

Visual prompts of the planned day reduce uncertainty which can be difficult to cope with.

Social Stories

For situations that often cause your child upset, consider creating or finding a Social Story that explains the process to let them know what typically happens.

Clear and simple language

Unclear language can leave us feeling confused about what is expected of us. Your child may think they know what you want, but if this doesn't match what you mean this can lead to disagreements and distress.

Structure/Routine

It might be helpful to make sure you are able to keep to a routine and have predictable structure in your day to reduce uncertainty which can cause distress.

Warnings and countdowns

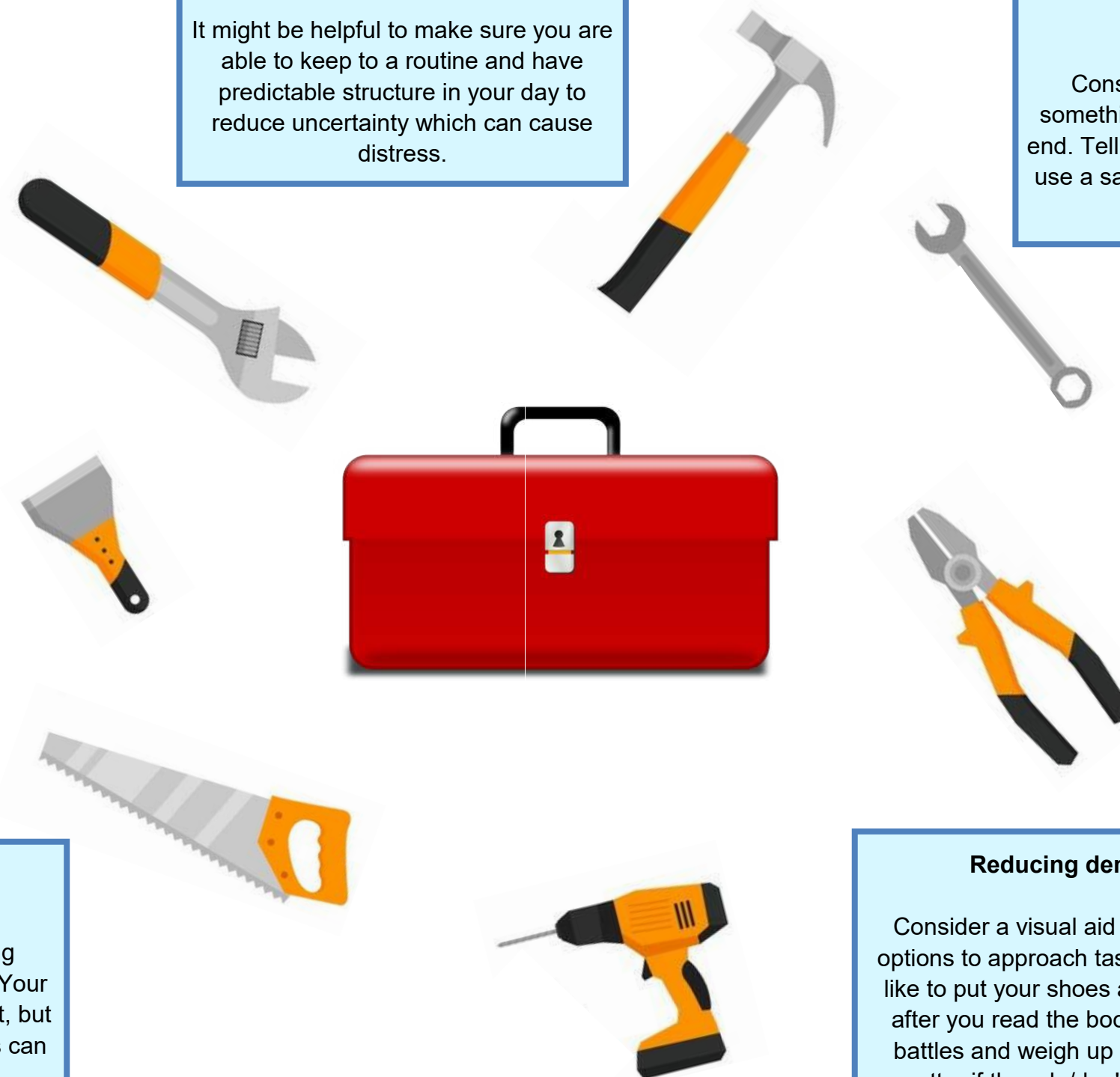
Consider giving your child notice when something (e.g. screen time) is coming to an end. Tell them how much time they have left or use a sand timer to minimise the surprise of it ending.

Sensory load

Think about what your child can see, hear, smell, taste and feel. Is this too much? Consider reducing the light levels, visual clutter or noise to avoid them becoming overwhelmed.

Reducing demands

Consider a visual aid and providing options to approach tasks. 'Would you like to put your shoes away before or after you read the book?'. Pick your battles and weigh up "Does it really matter if they do/don't do..." if their stress level is raised.



Recognising and naming feelings

The first step towards starting to develop emotional regulation skills is recognising and naming feelings. This is something that children with ASD do not learn intuitively. These steps will help you to support your child to develop these skills.

Identify feelings in others

Provide lots of opportunities to identify feelings in others. Talk about how characters are feeling when watching TV or reading books with your child. Point out facial expressions and body language. Cartoons often have exaggerated facial expressions which may be easier to read so this can be a good place to start.



Identify and name your child's feelings

Sometimes it can be hard to recognise how your child feels. Be like a detective – look at their body language and facial expression, listen to what they say and their tone of voice, and observe their behaviour.

When you think you know how they feel, name the feeling for them. Start with positive or neutral feelings such as happy or calm before moving on to more difficult feelings such as anger and anxiety.



Use your child's words to talk about feelings

It will make more sense to your child if you use their own words for their feelings. For example, if they say “mad” for angry, do the same to avoid confusion. If your child does not use any feelings words, choose the feelings words you think are most appropriate for their age and level of understanding.

Talking about feelings

Make feelings part of everyday conversations

Children learn about feelings and how to express them by watching others. Talk about your own feelings in different situations to let your child know that it's normal to have lots of different feelings. Also talk to your child about how you deal with feelings like anxiety and frustration.

Praise your child when they talk about their feelings or express them in an appropriate way. It shows them that it's OK to talk about their feelings and means they are more likely to do the same again.



Play games

Guess the feeling

Take turns to make different facial expressions and guess the feeling.

Emotions Snap!

Print some cards with facial expressions on and play Snap! with them. You could use pictures of human faces, cartoons, and Lego heads. This encourages your child to recognise facial expressions. Or, you could print out feelings words and facial expressions and match the feeling word with the correct facial expression. This encourages your child to make links between facial expressions and feeling names.

Use visuals

Visual resources like feelings charts can be helpful for children who struggle to put their feelings into words.

You could also use pictures of real faces, emojis, Lego heads, Widget symbols or cartoons. If your child has a special interest which could be incorporated, this might motivate them to use the feelings chart.

If possible, have the feelings chart on display somewhere in your house for you and your child to use at points throughout the day.

To make a more portable visual resource, the faces could be laminated, cut out and attached to a keyring.

Fight, flight and freeze

The fight/flight response is how our brains and bodies respond to threat. It's our inbuilt 'survival mechanism' that is important for keeping us safe.

What happens in our body?

There is a part of our brain called the amygdala. One of the jobs of the amygdala is to look out for danger. When it perceives danger, it triggers the fight/flight/freeze response. This response is what prepares your body to fight, run away (flight) or freeze on the spot.

When this response is triggered, we can feel it in our bodies. Our muscles may feel tense and tight. Our heart may beat faster and our breathing may quicken. We may sweat, get a funny feeling in our tummy and we might notice that we find it hard to think. These feelings are all happening because our body is preparing for fight or flight.

Fight



Flight



Freeze



This response would have been really helpful for our ancestors, who may have needed to escape from dangerous animals. Although nowadays we're not likely to be faced with a sabre-tooth tiger, our brain sees threats in other situations and still reacts in the same way. This means we can experience these physical feelings even in situations where fighting or running away wouldn't be very helpful!

Why does this happen?

Making sense of body feelings

Bodily feelings and emotions are connected. When we feel anxious, we might notice our heart beats faster, our legs feel wobbly and we need to go to the toilet. When we feel angry, we might notice that we feel hot, our fists start to clench and our body feels tense.

The bodily feelings we get when we feel anxious might be frightening or confusing to some children if they do not know why they are happening. Teaching children about the bodily feelings connected with emotions can help them to understand that they are normal and temporary, and hopefully will help them feel less worried.

Understanding the different bodily feelings linked with different emotions can also help children understand their emotions better. Paying attention to what is happening in their body can help them to recognise what emotion they are feeling.

1

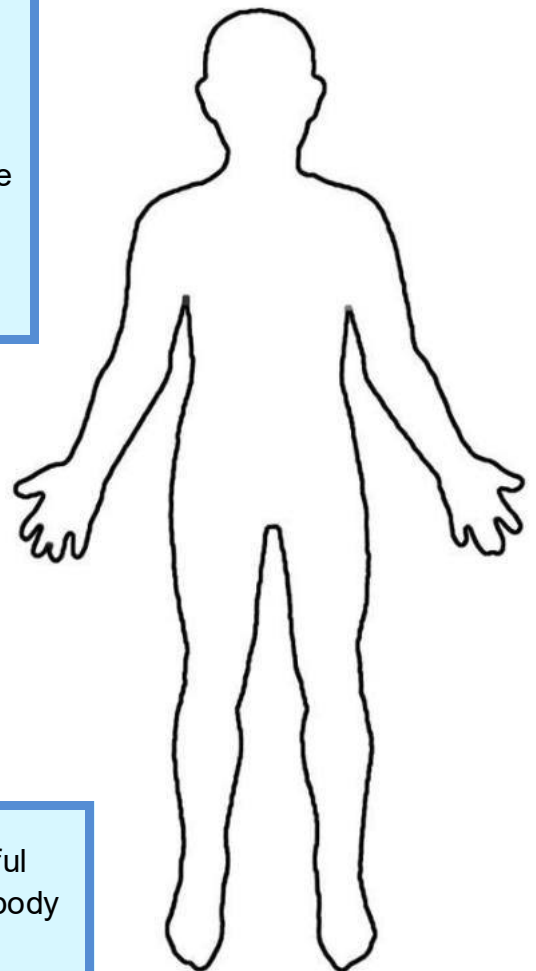
One way of introducing the idea of bodily feelings is to use the outline of a body to support discussion. You might want to draw or print a body, or have your child lie down on some large paper and draw around them.

Encourage your child to think about what happens in their body when they feel different emotions by asking them questions about what they noticed in different parts of their bodies. Write these things down on the body outline next to the right body part.

2

3

To normalise bodily feelings, it can be useful for you to talk about what you feel in your body in different situations in everyday life.



Stress Bucket

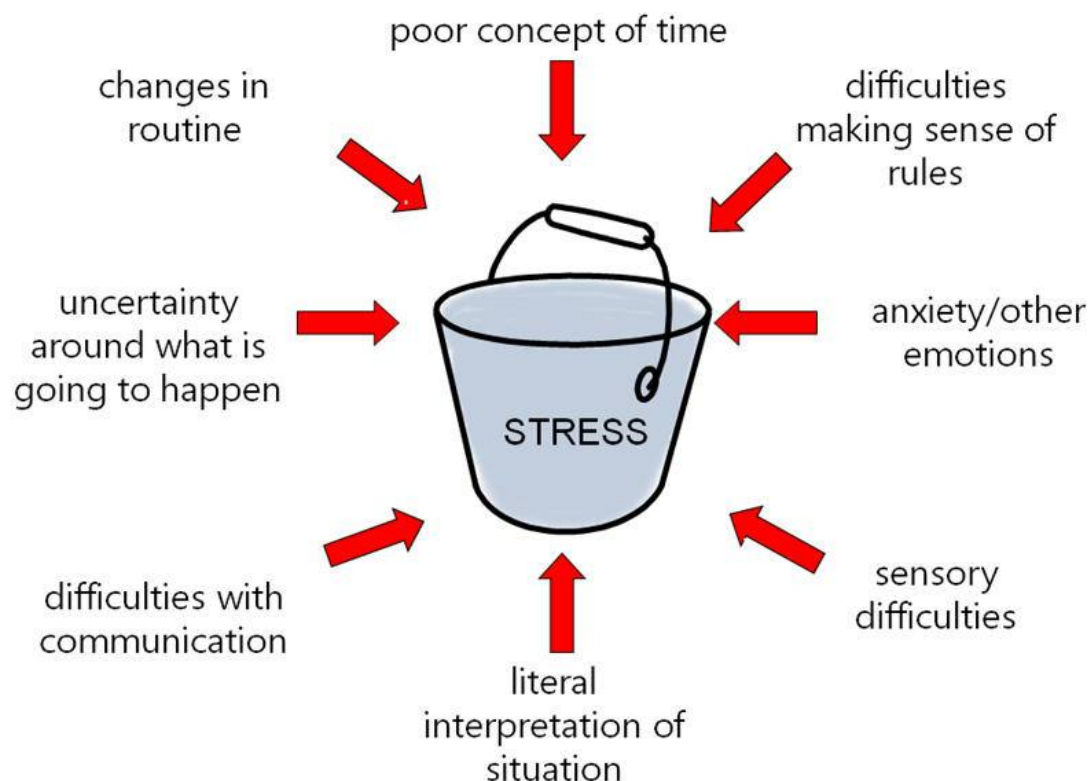
The Stress Bucket is a way of understanding the daily stresses your child might face and how they can collect over time.

You can use the stress bucket as a parent, and some children may also find it useful to make sense of their own experiences of stress.

Imagine that you have a bucket and that all of your daily stresses are water collecting in that bucket. At the end of the day, your bucket might be almost full. We all have our own ways of coping with these daily stresses. These ways of coping are like punching holes in the bucket to let some of the water out.

Children with ASD also have stress buckets. Due to differences with their social communication and imagination, and sensory processing, it is likely that their buckets will fill up much more quickly than ours. They also find it hard to recognise when their stress bucket is starting to fill up meaning it can get full up without them realising. They also might not have learned helpful ways of coping with the stresses to let some of the water out. A meltdown can be thought of as the child's bucket overflowing.

This bucket shows some of the stresses and difficulties that a child with ASD might experience on a daily basis that add to their overall stress.



Behaviour Iceberg

All behaviour is communication. The idea of an iceberg is a good way of explaining this.

The tip of the iceberg which sits above the water may look small, but this is misleading as most of the iceberg is hidden below the water. It is the same with behaviour – your child might be showing angry or anxious behaviours, but the reasons for this are hidden.

The anxious or angry behaviour is happening because of underlying difficulties which the child cannot express. It is our job to look beyond the behaviour to the underlying difficulties and feelings to make sense of the behaviour we can see. We can then focus on helping to manage the underlying difficulties.



Visual Scales and Thermometers

Visual scales can be a useful tool to help a child with Autism to learn how to identify and manage their emotions. They help to put information that might seem complicated and abstract to your child into a visual, clear format. This can then be used as a tool for communication, as well as a way for your child to learn and practice skills in identifying and managing emotions.

How to design a visual scale with your child

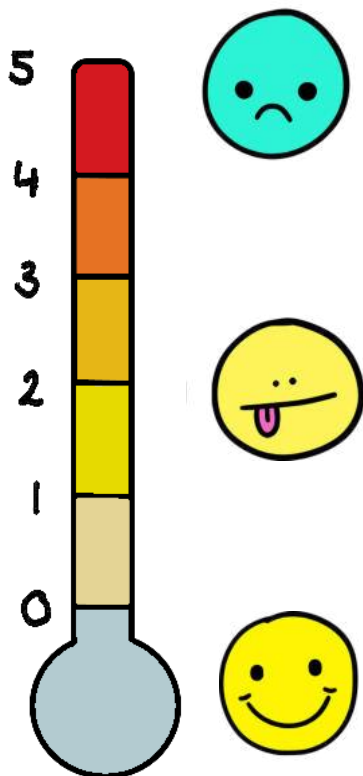
- Choose one particular feeling to begin with. This might be the feeling that causes them the most difficulty. Common examples are anxiety and anger.
- Decide on what scale to use (e.g. 1-3, 1-5, 1-10). Often a 5-point scale is used, but for some children this may feel too complicated.
- If possible, work with your child to label each level on the scale. Use your child's own words wherever possible.
- It is often easiest to start with the top and bottom of the scale before filling in the middle.
- If you think it will help your child, help them to choose a colour for each level on the scale.



Visual Scales and Thermometers

How to introduce and use the scale

- Introduce the scale when your child is calm. If this is the first time they've seen it, you can introduce it as something you made for them to help them show you how they're feeling.
- Encourage them to rate themselves on the scale regularly. It may be helpful for example to ask them to rate how they feel in the morning, and when they return from school.
- Once your child is used to using the scale to identify how they're feeling, you can develop it further. It can be a helpful way to make the link between activities or strategies that you know can help your child to the feeling.



Problem solving tips

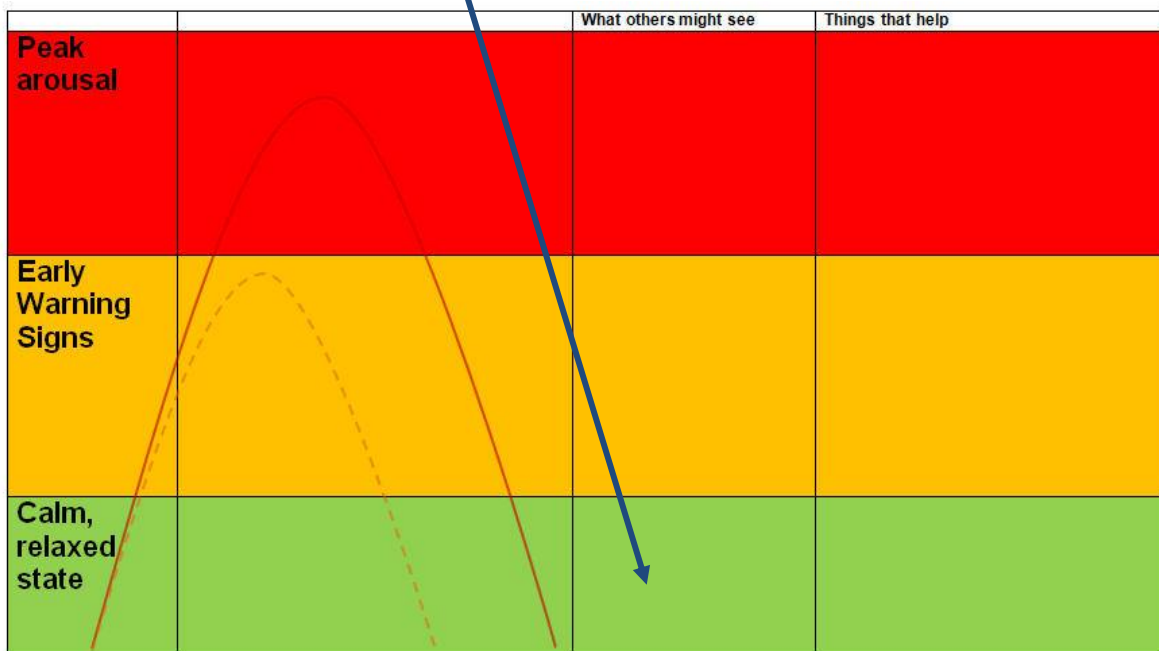
- Some children may find it hard to put into words how they feel, but might be able to draw it instead.
- Using your child's own interests can be really helpful in getting them involved in the process. Feel free to get creative, we've seen scales that use Pokemon characters, monsters, even flavours of curry to describe different levels of a feeling!
- Don't worry if your child isn't able to help you design the scale, you can still do this yourself. Make sure to keep it clear and simple.
- If your child finds it hard to rate their own feelings on the scale, try modelling by rating your own feelings.

Anxiety and anger curves

This tool can be helpful for making sense of your child's emotions. It can be particularly useful for identifying the early warning signs that show that your child might be becoming more anxious or frustrated and to put in strategies or techniques to reduce their arousal.

1

It can be easiest to start at the bottom of the curve with Calm/relaxed. Children with ASD have lots of difficulties which add to their daily stress levels, and so your child might not often be totally calm or relaxed. Think about what your child looks like when they are calm. What might they be doing? What are their facial expression and body language like? What might they say? These things will be different for each individual.



Think about the things that help your child to stay calm and relaxed. Again, these will be different for each individual. Examples of general things that might help are structure and routine, doing favoured activities or spending time with special interests, low demands, and clear communication.

Anxiety and anger curves

2

The next stage is thinking about Peak arousal or Meltdown . Think about what your child looks like when they are in the Peak Arousal zone. What might they be doing? What are their facial expression and body language like? What might they say?

Think about the things that help your child when they are at Peak Arousal. Remember, it is difficult for all of us to think and reason when we feel very anxious or angry so there is not a great deal we can do at this point.



Finally, think about the Early Warning Signs that show that your child might be starting to become anxious or angry. These will be more subtle than the behaviours seen at Peak Arousal, and so it might mean that they are harder to identify.

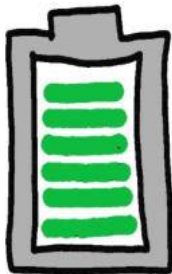
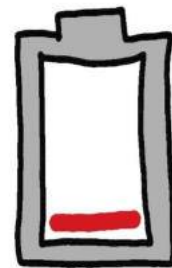
Think about what your child looks like, does and says when they are showing Early Warning Signs. Then think about what you have noticed helps your child to calm when they are starting to feel stressed. If this is difficult, it can be helpful after a Peak Arousal event to look back and think about the behaviours your child was showing before this point.

3

Energy Management

Energy accounting is an tool co-created by Maja Toudal and Dr Tony Attwood to manage the day to day stress experienced by a person with autism.

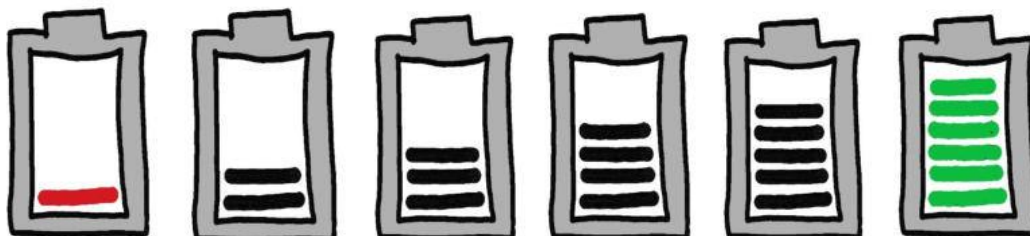
Think of your child's energy levels like a rechargeable battery. Throughout the day, they experience things that 'drain' their battery. These things might include regular activities such as getting ready for school, noise or other sensory experiences, as well as one-off activities such as a medical appointment or party.



There may also be things in your child's day that re-charge their battery. Time spent with a special interest, or listening to music for example. Spending time doing these things can restore your child's energy levels.

Energy accounting is a useful framework for making sense of the balance between activities that drain and recharge your child's battery. When energy levels get too low, meltdowns are more likely to happen as your child has little emotional energy left to manage any further demands. The idea is that when an activity, or several activities drain your child's battery, that time needs to be put aside to recharge it to prevent their battery draining completely.

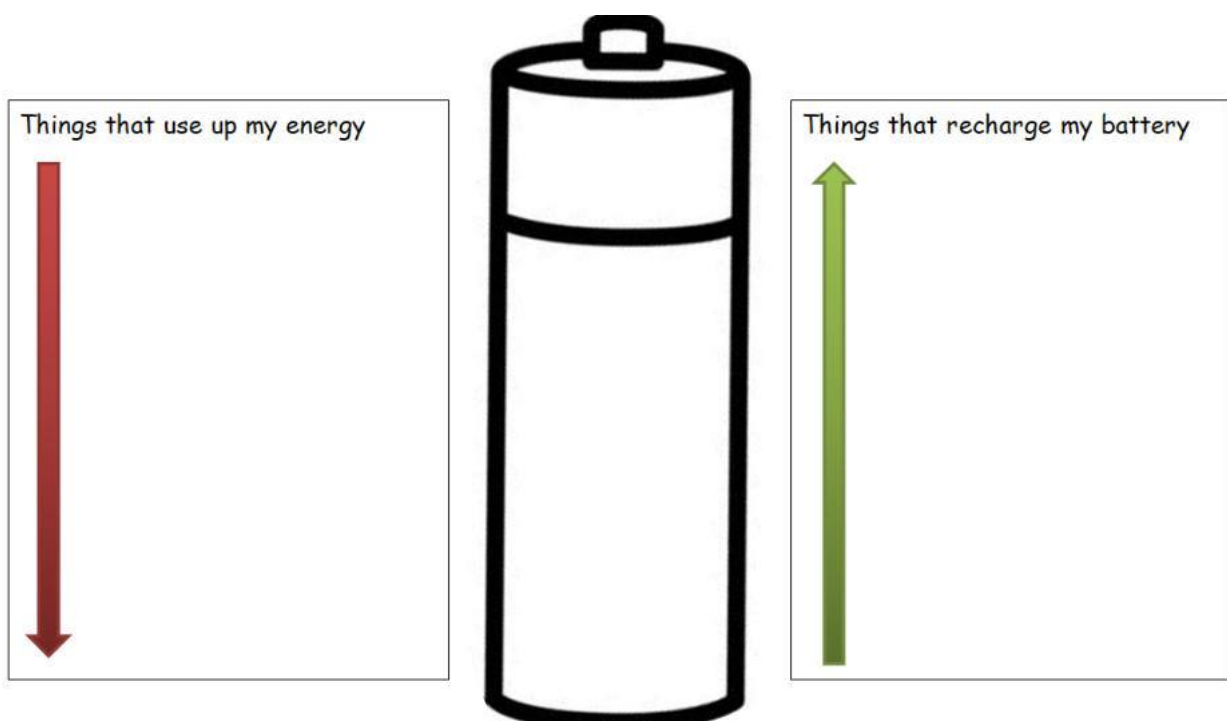
Many children understand the concept of a battery. It can be useful to use this as an analogy to help them understand how to manage their own energy levels and mood.



Energy Management

Tips for using it with your child

- You know your child best. Whilst some children may be able to sit down and make sense of this straight away, others may need a more gradual approach.
- Your child will likely be familiar with needing to charge the battery on their phone, tablet or games console. This can be a helpful example to use to explain the idea that everyone has things that 'drain' and 're-charge' their batteries.
- Aim to start by making a list of things that 'drain' and 're-charge' your child's battery. If possible, try to do this with your child. It may be easier to start with the things that 're-charge'. If they're unsure, it might help to make some suggestions e.g. 'I've noticed that you like listening to music, is this something that helps you re-charge?'
- Encourage your child to rate each activity according to how much energy it uses or restores. Some children may not yet be able to make sense of this – don't worry if this is the case. You can choose together how to rate the activities, for example out of 10, or out of 100.
- Try to bring the language into daily life. You could do this by commenting on your child's activity, or your own. For example 'that trip to the dentist really drained my battery, I'm going to sit down for a few minutes with a cup of tea to recharge'.



Relaxation and Calming Strategies

How does relaxation work?

When we feel anxious, we might notice that our breathing gets quicker, our hearts beat faster, and our muscles feel tense. This is called the Fight or Flight response and happens when our bodies think we are in danger.

Relaxation skills work by calming our bodies down when they have gone into Fight or Flight mode.



Explaining the importance of practicing relaxation

It is easier to practise something if we know why it is important. Try explaining why relaxation techniques might help. E.g. "Learning these skills will help you feel calmer when you are scared or worried". For older or more able children, you could also talk about what happens in their bodies when they feel anxious.

When to practice



Relaxation is something we need to learn. This means it takes practice, just like reading, riding a bike or playing a musical instrument.

Try to encourage your child to practise for a few minutes every day. Start by practising when your child is calm (when we are anxious it is hard to think clearly. This makes it hard to try new things, even if they might help!).

When your child has learned what to do, encourage them to use relaxation techniques when they are feeling anxious. Eventually your child might start noticing when they are feeling anxious and use relaxation techniques independently. However, it may take a while before this happens.

Relaxation and Calming Strategies

How to practice relaxation skills

1

Find a comfortable place. You can practise relaxation sitting or lying down.

2

Start off with short sessions and gradually build up over time.

3

Practise with your child. They can also watch and follow what you do.

4

Try to use visual resources when teaching relaxation skills whenever possible. For example, you might have cards with pictures showing a skill, or use a non-verbal cue such as holding up five fingers.

5

To support generalisation, discuss when and how to use skills in different situations. It can be helpful if other people who care for the child are aware that they are learning relaxation skills too.

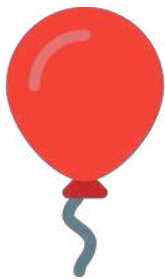


Breathing for relaxation

All children are individuals and may not like all of the relaxation skills described below or find them all helpful. Try different skills until you find one they like and that works for them.

Calm breathing

When we become anxious our breathing becomes fast and shallow. To help with this, we can learn to take slower, deeper breaths from the stomach, using our diaphragm.



Balloon breathing

Ask your child to put their hands on their tummy. When they breathe in, ask them to imagine their tummy is like a balloon being blown up. When they breathe out, they can imagine their tummy is like a balloon deflating. You should be able to see their hands moving in and out.

Five finger breathing

Ask your child to put their hand flat on the table. Starting at the base of the thumb, ask them to breathe in time to you moving one of your fingers along the side of their thumb, and then to breathe out as you move your finger down the opposite side of their thumb. Continue this for the remaining fingers. When your child is able to do this, they can move on to tracing their own fingers whilst breathing in and out.



Windmills

Encourage your child to breathe in deeply through their noses and then breathe out slowly through their mouths, making the windmill turn round.

Strategies for relaxing the body

Muscles become tense when we feel anxious. Quite often we do not realise this is happening. Tensing and relaxing muscle groups can help the body calm down. This is called Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

It can be helpful to use a video or audio recording to start with so you and your child can become familiar with the sequence. Alternatively, you may wish to read the script out

Script for an older child

Take a few moments to get comfortable. Take some long, slow breaths to begin.

Start by focusing on the muscles of your head and face. Wrinkle your forehead, squeeze your eyes shut tight and clench your jaw. Hold that as you count to 10, then let all of those muscles to relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your face.

Now focus on the muscles of your shoulders and neck. Shrug your shoulders up to wards your ears and bring your head down to put your chin on your chest. Hold that as you count to 10, then let all of those muscles relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your shoulders and neck.

Now focus on your arms and hands. Hold your arms out in front of you and clench your fists tight. Hold that as you count to 10, then let all of those muscles relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your arms and hands.

Now focus on your back. Stand up as straight and tall as you can. Feel yourself getting taller. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your back relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your back.

Now focus on your stomach. Suck your stomach in as tight as you can. Try to pull your belly button towards your back. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your stomach relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your stomach.

Now focus on the muscles in your legs. Try to make your legs as straight and stiff as you can. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your legs relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your legs.

Now focus on your feet. Try to scrunch your toes together as tight as you can. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your feet relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your feet.

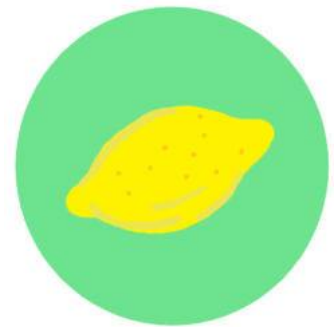
Now that you have tensed and relaxed all of your muscles, focus on how the most relaxed areas of your body feel now. Take some long, slow breaths to finish.

Strategies for relaxing the body

Script for a younger child

Hands and Arms - Squeeze a Lemon

Pretend you have a whole lemon in each hand. Now squeeze it hard. Try to squeeze all the juice out! Feel the tightness in your hand and arm as you squeeze. Squeeze hard! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Now relax and let the lemons drop from your hands.



Arms and Shoulders - Stretch Like a Cat

Pretend you are a cat and you just woke up from a nap. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Now raise them way up high over your head. Feel the pull in your shoulders. Stretch higher and try to touch the ceiling. (Hold for 5 seconds.) Great! Let your arms drop.



Shoulders and Neck - Be a Turtle

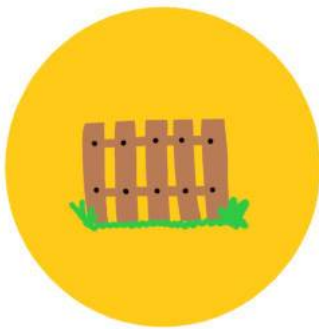
Now pretend you are a turtle. Try to pull your head into your shell. Try to pull your shoulders up to your ears and push your head down into your shoulders. Hold it tight! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Okay, you can come out now. Feel your shoulders relax.



Back - Stand up straight like a soldier

Pretend to be a soldier. Stand up as straight and tall as you can. Taller! Taller! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Great. Now relax.





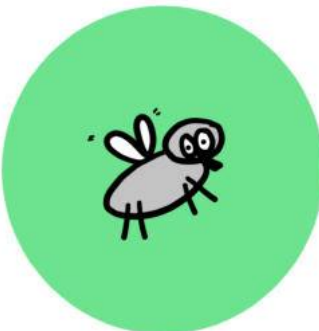
Stomach: Squeeze through a fence

Now pretend that you want to squeeze through a narrow fence. Suck your stomach in, try to squeeze it against your backbone. (Hold it for 5 seconds). Great! Now relax.



Jaw—Chew a carrot

Now, pretend that you are trying to eat a big, hard carrot. It is very hard to chew. Bite down on it as hard as you can by clenching your teeth together. (Hold for 5 seconds). Good. Now relax.



Face and Nose - Get a fly off your nose

Pretend that a fly has landed on your nose! Try to get it off without using your hands. Scrunch up your nose really hard and hold it just as tight as you can. Hold it! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Good. It's gone! Now relax.



Legs and Feet - Squish your toes in the sand

Now pretend that you are standing barefoot on the beach. Spread your toes and squish them down deep into the sand. (Hold for 5 seconds.) Relax your feet and your toes.

Now you know how to squeeze away the tightness in your body. Whenever you feel anxious, try to take a few minutes to squeeze and relax your muscles.

Mindfulness ideas

We know ourselves that our minds can get carried away thinking about all the things we have to do each day, worrying about what might happen in the future, or regretting things we did or did not do in the past. Children can be just the same.

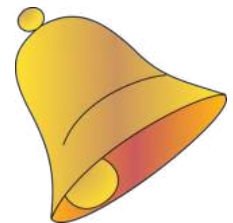
Mindfulness is about focusing on the present instead of on the past or future. It means paying full attention to what is happening inside you (thoughts, feelings and body sensations) and around you, and what you are doing now.

Like other relaxation skills, mindfulness takes practice.

Below are some examples for introducing mindfulness:

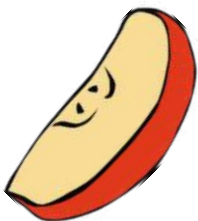
Listen to the bell

An easy way for children to practice mindfulness is to focus their attention on what they can hear. Use a bell, a gong, a singing bowl, or a phone app that plays sounds. Ask your child to listen carefully whilst you make a sound, and to tell you when they think the sound has stopped.



Practice mindful eating

Use a raisin, a slice of apple or a piece of chocolate to encourage your child to practice eating mindfully by using the following prompts:



First, look at the food. Notice its shape, size, and colour.

Notice the smell of the food.

Notice how the food feels in your hand, its texture and temperature.

Hold the food in your mouth and notice its texture and flavour on your tongue and in your mouth.

Notice how the food tastes when you bite into it and whether the flavour changes as you are chewing.

Feel the food going down as you swallow.

Mindfulness ideas

Five things

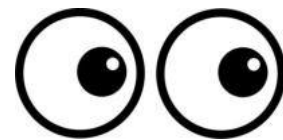
Ask your child to look around and name **five** things they can see.

Next ask them to name **four** things they can touch or feel. For example, their clothing or the breeze on their skin.

Next ask them to name **three** things they can hear. This might be a clock ticking, traffic outside, or birds singing.

Next ask your child to name **two** things they can smell. There may not be any smells they are aware of.

Finally, ask them to take **one** long slow breath in and out.



Putting a plan together

It's important for children with ASD to have a structure to follow. Structure can not only be helpful for activities such as getting dressed, but also for managing their emotions.

Any plan should aim to be **clear**, **simple** and **visual**. Aim to only include strategies that your child has already been introduced to, the aim of the structure is to help them to know **what to do**, and **when**.

Visual supports can be a useful way to support your child's understanding of the plan for managing their emotions.

Some ideas for how you could use visual supports:

- Create a 'calm down checklist' of steps your child can take to feel calmer
- Create flashcards with calming techniques on them
- Add calming strategies to your child's thermometer and stick this up somewhere handy.

Using Visual Supports



Using Social Stories



Social Stories are a useful tool for sharing information with your child in a clear, accurate and meaningful way. They can be a useful way to pull together the work you've done with your child around their emotions.


You could for example use a Social Story to explain what anxiety is, and use another one to share the ideas you've thought of with your child for how they might manage feelings of anxiety.

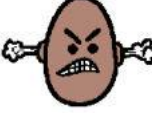
For information on Social Stories see:


<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx>


<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/>

Examples of putting a plan together

 **When I Am Angry.....**

 My teeth may be clenched


 My hands may be in a fist

 My face may feel warm

 **To Calm Down I Can.....**

 Close my eyes

 Take 5 deep breaths

 Ask to take a break

 Ask to take a walk

 Get a relaxation toy.

Anger Rules

It is o.k. to be angry but...

*Don't hurt others 

*Don't hurt yourself 

*Don't hurt property 

Talk about how you feel...



Examples of putting a plan together

ANGRY



Sometimes I feel angry or frustrated. This is OK.

These are some of the things that make me feel angry or frustrated:

- People being mean to me
- People laughing at me
- People staring at me
- People making fun of me
- Dinner not being ready on time
- People being mean to animals
- The seams not being right on my socks
- Things not happening when I expect them to

When I feel angry or frustrated I might:

Pull hair



Shout or scream



Punch someone



Nip someone



Pick spots



Cry



Fold my arms



Bite my tongue



Examples of putting a plan together

Being angry feels like:

Hot and sweaty



Get a red face



Tense my muscles



Pain all over my body



My heart beats faster



Funny feeling in my tummy



If I feel angry or frustrated I can try to:

- Go to my room and put covers over my head
- Play with my teddies
- Ask to leave or go outside
- Ask for a job to do
- Tell an adult
- Crunch ice cubes



Managing meltdowns

What is a meltdown

In everyday use, 'meltdown' describes how someone is acting when they are under pressure or stress and have reached a point where they can no longer cope. Some people might use the phrase 'they have snapped' and we might see them become angry, tearful or over react in an emotional meltdown.



The term 'meltdown' can also be used to describe the extreme actions of children on the autistic spectrum, when their behaviours are intense and 'out of control'. Whilst these outward explosive meltdowns are probably the most common, sometimes to cope with the overwhelming feelings some children experience the 'meltdown' internally and it is more like an implosion.



Visible signs of this may include withdrawing from communication, hiding, self-injurious behaviour, curling up in a ball, rocking intensely and may make sounds and noises to drown out the world around them.

Managing meltdowns

What causes a meltdown?

At the most basic level, a meltdown is caused by a feeling of being overwhelmed and a sense of loss of control. The child feels they are no longer able to cope and the resulting behaviours are an attempt by the child to regain some control over themselves, those around them, their environment or a combination of these. It is most helpful if these meltdowns are understood as a response to their emotions, rather than wilfully defiant tantrums.

Triggers

Triggers might not always be apparent and could be internal. Frequently they are a result of a build-up of anxieties or an accumulation of factors leading to overload.

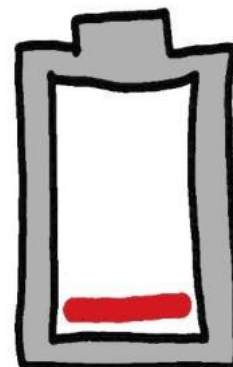


These could include sensory issues, communication and social problems, a general sense of not coping or being overwhelmed.

Duration

Usually last for lengthy periods of time and might only end through exhaustion.

When in a meltdown a child is often very unaware of those around them and unable to consider what others might think of their behaviour and are inattentive to how others react to it.



Managing meltdowns



Remember.....

Meltdowns are best understood as an emotional response. This is not a battle to be lost or won, but more a 'crisis' to manage. You are the child's emotional brakes. Your response to the 'meltdown' can make a huge difference to the outcome. Try to separate your relationship with the child from the behaviour.

'Don't hurt yourself, others or damage property'. Do remember that things broken in a meltdown can be replaced or mended, so prioritise safety.

Emergency rules apply



Drop traditional discipline

Traditional discipline is largely ineffective for meltdowns', as the child is not able to access the part of their brain that enables them to learn things.

Wait for it to pass

Parents, carers teachers or other supervising adults will usually find that they are unable to successfully interrupt a meltdown and the explosive behaviour tends to run its course until it is over.



Things you can do



Keep calm at all times. Consider whether your facial expressions and body language are showing that you're calm.

Keep communication to a minimum. Instructions should be short and simple

Encourage a positive behaviour rather than asking a child to stop a negative one e.g. encourage a child to stand still rather than asking them to stop running around.

Give emotional and physical space. Take a step backward from the situation rather than forward into conflict.

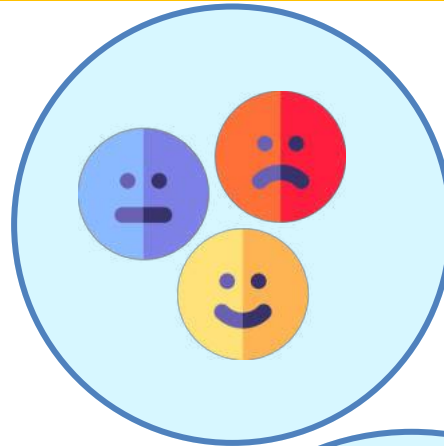
Encourage a child to exit to a safer place. This may be their bedroom or outside into the garden.

When they are beginning to calm, it may be helpful to offer verbal reassurances to your child. For example, asking them '*would you like to hug me until you're better?*' gives them control, as well as a sense of safety and security.

For children who run away during a meltdown, provided there are no safety concerns, following at a distance can be a better strategy rather than chasing.

After a meltdown

Some children can find it helpful to talk about the incident. This can provide insight into triggers and causes. However, this kind of debriefing can be too stressful for many and may precipitate another meltdown.

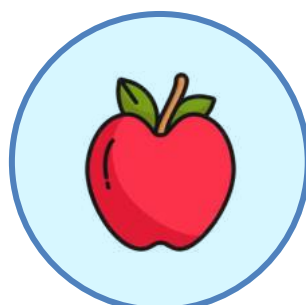


Reassure the child that it's all over. They might need to hear that you still like/love them and you understand that they could not help the behaviour.



Some children may express remorse or anger at themselves.

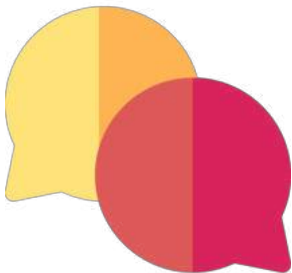
Children will need time to recompose. Their 'safe place' is a good place to do this.



A snack or a drink may help a child calm down and recover.

Verbal Strategies

Use simple language and keep communication to a minimum.
Keep language neutral and empathic e.g. "I can't let you do that..."
Avoid direct demands/instructions as this might increase anxiety. For example, suggesting "you may feel calmer if you stand still" or requesting "could you help me and stand still for a moment?" might be more successful than a command of "stand still".



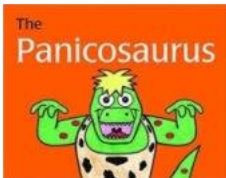
Make suggestions of positive behaviours they can do e.g. stand still, rather than telling them to stop running around.
Give choices to reduce the demand and allow your child to have a feeling of autonomy.

Consider reinforcing 'the rules' which apply to everyone and therefore are out of your control to pass over responsibility. This can remove any personal element to the situation and it creates an opportunity for you to verbalise your empathy. After all we all have to adhere to rules that we don't necessarily agree with. e.g. "I'm sorry but it's a health and safety requirement..."

Avoid threatening sanctions, punishments or rewards. It is likely that your child is unable to reason and respond appropriately in the heightened state of anxiety. Therefore, suggesting these could increase anxiety rather than act as an incentive to stop the behaviour. It is a case of they 'can't' rather than 'won't'.

Books

Anxiety

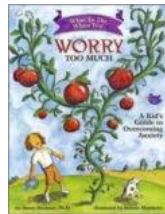


The Panicosaurus. Managing anxiety in children including those with Asperger Syndrome

K. I. Al-Ghani

A useful metaphor to help younger children understand anxiety.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1849053561>



What to do when you worry too much

Dawn Huebner

Young person's guide to overcoming anxiety using cognitive behavioural techniques

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1591473144>



When my worries get too big

Kari Dunn Buron

Book for children about how to cope with worries by relaxing

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1937473805>

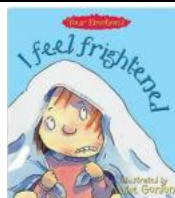


Overcoming your child's fears and worries

Cathy Creswell and Lucy Willatts

Self-help guide for parents using cognitive behavioural techniques

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/>

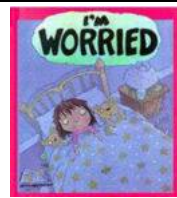


I feel frightened

Brian Moses

A story book about common fears to read with a child

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/075021404X>



I'm worried

Brian Moses

A story book about having worries to read with a child

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0750221313>

Anger

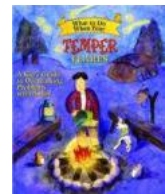


The Red Beast: Controlling anger in children with Asperger's Syndrome

K. I. Al-Ghani

Fun, accessible book for children 5+ to talk about anger

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1843109433>

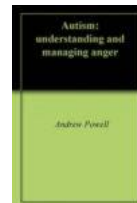


What to do when your temper flares

Dawn Huebner

Young person's guide to overcoming anger using cognitive behavioural techniques

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1433801345>



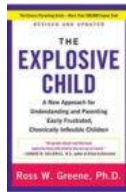
Autism: Understanding and managing anger

Andrew Powell

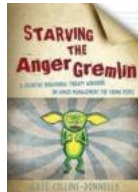
Written for parents and carers of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/>

Books continued



The explosive child
Ross Greene
Understanding and managing children who have severe temper outbursts
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0062270451>



Starving the anger gremlin
Kate Collins-Donnelly
Anger management workbook for young people using Cognitive Behavioural techniques
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/>

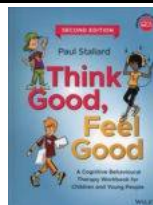


Exploring feelings
Dr Tony Attwood
Book of worksheets for young people with ASD using Cognitive Behavioural techniques
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1932565221>

Mood



Exploring Depression and Beating the Blues
Tony Attwood
Understanding and coping with depression and low mood in ASD using cognitive behavioural techniques
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1849055025/>

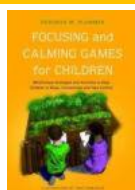


Think Good, Feel Good
Paul Stallard
Guide to using cognitive behavioural approaches to improve mood (includes activities and worksheets)
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1119395283/>

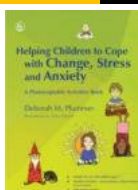


A Practical Guide to Happiness in Children and Teens on the Autism Spectrum: A Positive Psychology Approach
Victoria Honeybourne
Contains strategies for happiness in children with autism, based on positive psychology principles.
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/>

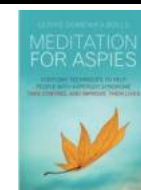
Miscellaneous



Focussing & calming games for children
Deborah Plummer
Good introduction to theory about mindfulness, with practical activities
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/>

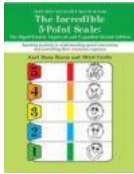


Helping Children to Cope with Change, Stress & Anxiety.
Deborah Plummer
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1843109603>

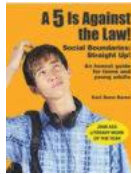


Meditation for Aspies.
Ulrike Bolls
A clear explanation of how to reap the benefits of welcoming meditation practice into your life.
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1849053863>

Books and apps



The Incredible 5-point scale
Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis
Understanding social interactions
and controlling emotional re-
sponses
[https://www.amazon.co.uk/
dp/1937473074](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1937473074)



A 5 is against the law! Social Boundaries: Straight Up!
Kari Dunn Buron
Understanding rules around social
boundaries for teens and young
adults
[https://www.amazon.co.uk/
dp/1931282358](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1931282358)



The new social story book
Carol Grey
How to write social stories with
lots of example stories
[https://www.amazon.co.uk/
dp/1941765165](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1941765165)

Apps (all free to download)



Headspace
A range of mindfulness and
relaxation tracks for adults and
children



Cove
Create music to reflect
emotions like joy, sadness and
anger to help express how you
feel.



Autism 5 point scale EP
Make a basic 5 point scale and
attach pictures and audio
recordings.



Worrinots
A space for children to record
their worries and practice
coping techniques.



Breathe, think, do
Calming strategies with
Sesame Street characters



Social Story Creator
Write your own stories and add
photos and drawings. Store as
books for children to read.



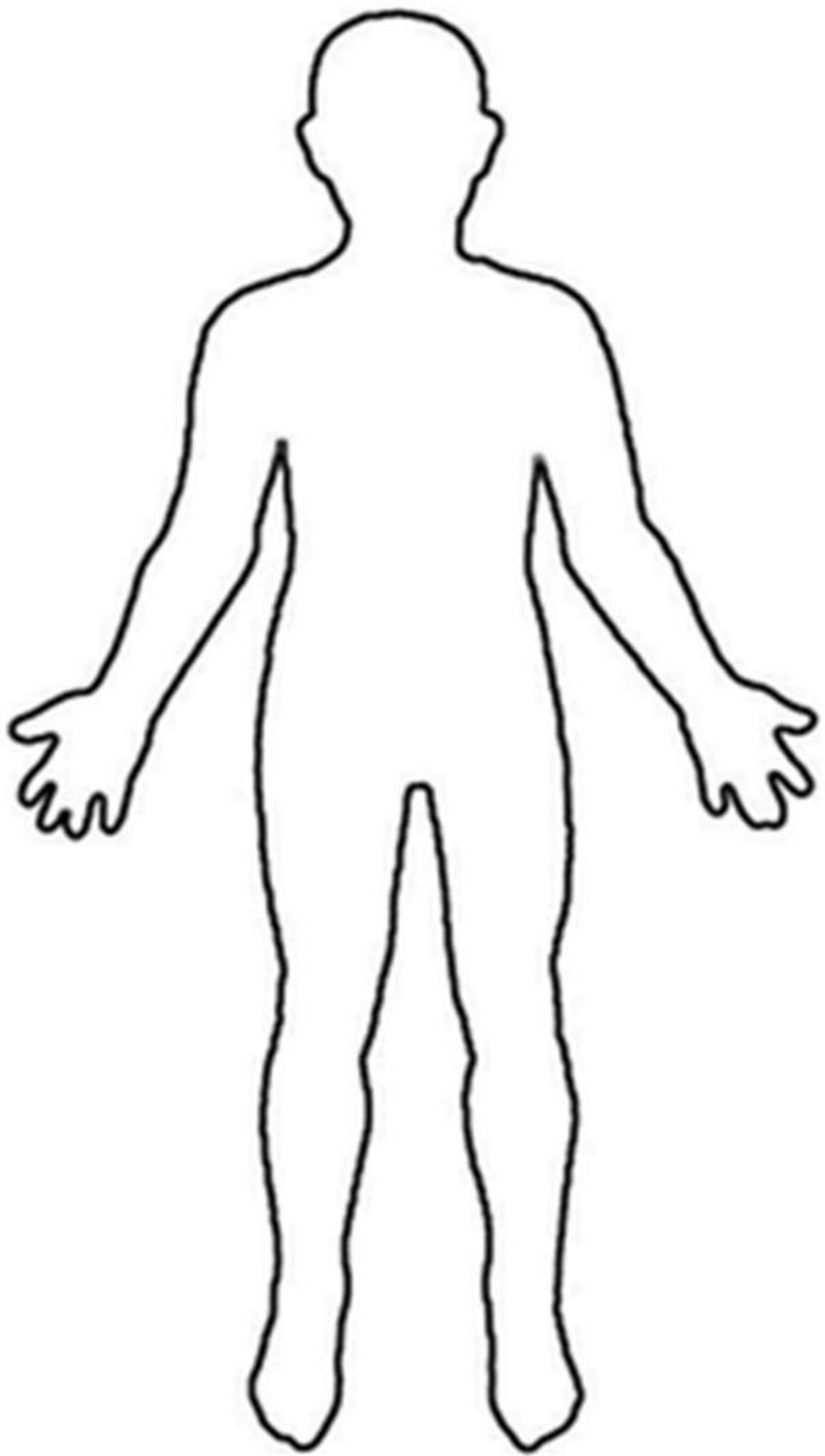
Sand timer
Basic visual sand timer,
adjustable.



Bubble wrap
Virtual bubble wrap for a
portable calming strategy.



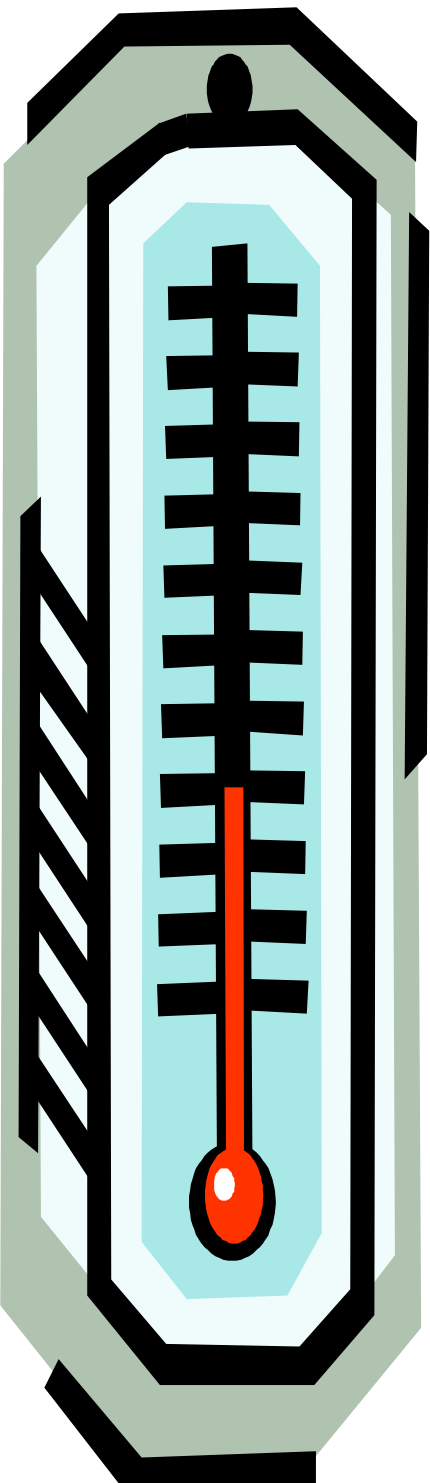
Story Kit
Create visuals and stories to
share with your child.



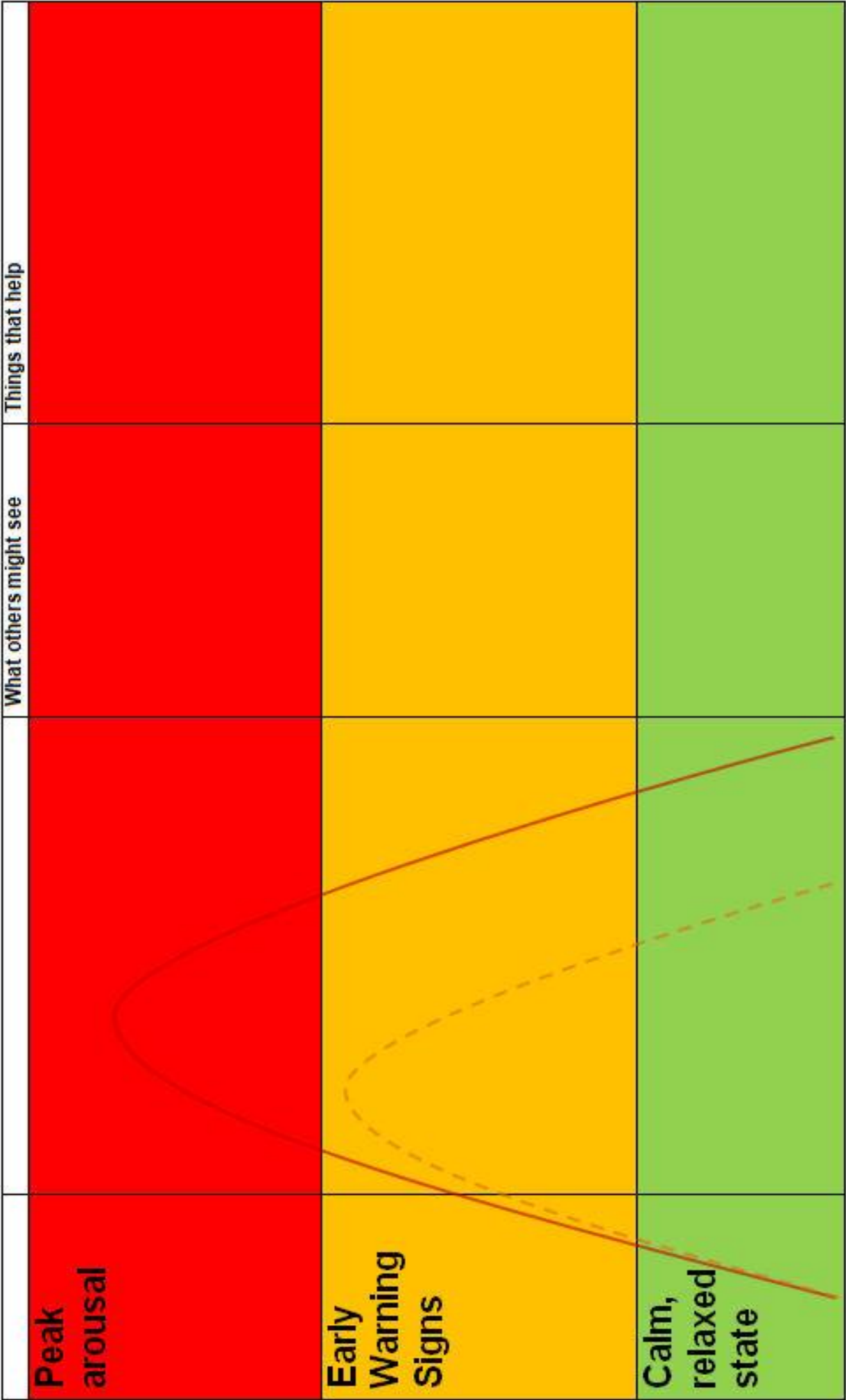
_____ 's _____ **Scale**

Rating	Looks like	Feels like	I can try to
5			
4			
3			
2			
1			

The Anger Thermometer

	5	Boiling over!
	4	Getting hotter
	3	Hot
	2	Warm
	1	Cool

Arousal Curve



Energy Management

Things that use up my energy



Things that recharge my battery

