

**The
Advonet
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health
Equity Project**

Strategies and Resources

Sleep and Mental Health

**FUNDED
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Why Sleep is Important for Mental Health



Sleep isn't just about physical rest; it's intrinsically tied to our mental well-being. Chronic sleep disturbances can exacerbate anxiety, depression, and irritability, co-occurring conditions that autistic people can already have experience of.

Mental health difficulties can also lead to further sleep disturbances, which can cause a negative cycle that significantly impacts wellbeing.

Anxiety in particular is more commonly experienced by autistic people, with 20% of the autistic population having a co-occurring anxiety disorder (Bartolotti et al, 2020). Anxiety is a significant factor in sleep difficulty due to its effect of making you more alert and impacting your ability to relax, as well as creating feedback loops where your lack of sleep can then exacerbate anxiety.

As such improving sleep quality and maintaining a consistent sleep schedule can be a notable step towards improving mental health and reducing anxiety.

How Can Sleep Differ for Autistic People?

This section explores some of the different barriers to sleep that autistic people may experience. Difficulties with sleep and maintaining a healthy sleep schedule are particularly common among autistic individuals, with a number of contributing factors. Factors such as:



Anxiety

Levels of anxiety can be a major factor, keeping you alert and impeding the ability to relax before bed.



Gastrointestinal Issues

GI issues, experienced by autistic people, can cause pain and discomfort that leads to sleep disruption, or a change to bedtime routine.



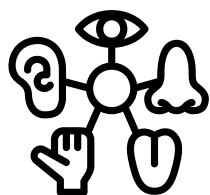
Insomnia

Insomnia is a frequently reported problem among autistic people, and leads to less sleep and poorer sleep quality.



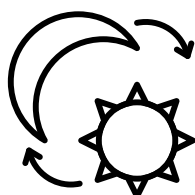
Social Cueing Difficulties

Autistic people may struggle with connecting actions of others and their own needs, such as going to bed on another's schedule.



Sensory Differences

Sensory differences and sensitivities can lead to disruption to sleep, or difficulty maintaining sleep hygiene unless addressed.



Atypical Circadian Rhythms

Autistic people may experience differences in circadian rhythm, our internal clock, which disrupts sleep patterns.



Co-occurring Conditions

Co-Occurring conditions such as ADHD and epilepsy can add additional difficulties and sensitivities that can disturb sleep.



Sleeping too much

Autistic people may sleep too much, and in fact struggle to stay awake during the day, leading to fatigue despite adequate sleep.

Factors Affecting Sleep

There are a number of contributing factors to poor sleep and sleep schedules among autistic people from sensory issues, for example uncomfortable temperatures, or texture of bedding to co-occurring physical and mental health issues. Other examples of particular problems autistic individuals may face include:



Autistic people are noted to spend less time in REM sleep - around 15% compared to non-autistic people who typically spend around 25% (Buckley et al, 2010).



ADHD can lead to many of the same impacts on sleep as autism, and as a co-occurring condition this can compound to cause serious difficulty in getting a healthy amount of rest to allow us to recover and maintain healthy energy levels.



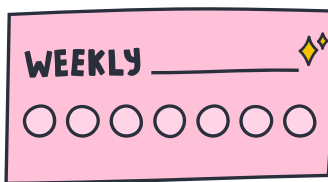
Anxiety and insomnia are both factors that have a major impact on ability to and quality of sleep, and are more common among autistic people

Sensory Needs and Effects on Sleep

Sensory needs play a significant role in both ease of sleep and its quality, and there are a number of factors depending on the individual. Some sleep difficulties can be addressed by avoiding or reducing sensory input, or through sensory seeking behaviours and tools.

As an example, some autistic adults may find that shutting out light, or noise is helpful for relaxing and getting to sleep. Whereas others may find that sensory seeking activities help them to relax and these techniques help to create an optimum sleep environment.

Examples of some low-sensory, or sensory reduction tools to help with sleep:



Shared Sleep Schedule, or Social Media Cut Off Time.



Light Reduction

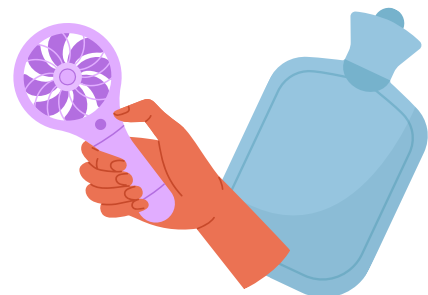


Winddown Process:
Do a low-sensory activity that helps you relax e.g. reading.



Sound Reduction:

Limiting noise in space where you sleep, such as via earplugs, turning electric devices off, or on silent.



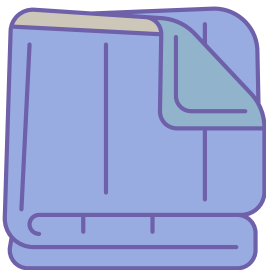
Temperature Regulation:

Regulating body temperature is important and can reduce sensory overload. You may use hot-water bottles, fans etc.

Sensory Tools for Sleep

Providing and maintaining a sensory environment that meets your needs can involve seeking out sensory experiences that help you relax, or that stimulates you enough to switch a task, or a thought you are hyper focusing on long-enough to fall asleep.

Examples of sensory tools that can help support sleep include:

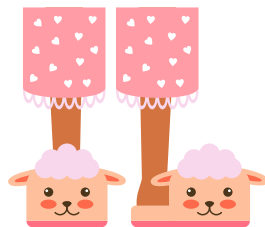


Stimming and/ or Stimulating Activity

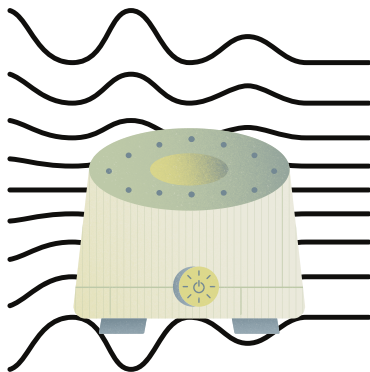


Lighting and Smell:

Set up the lighting and smell of the environment to meet your needs e.g. aromatherapy, projectors, or lamps.

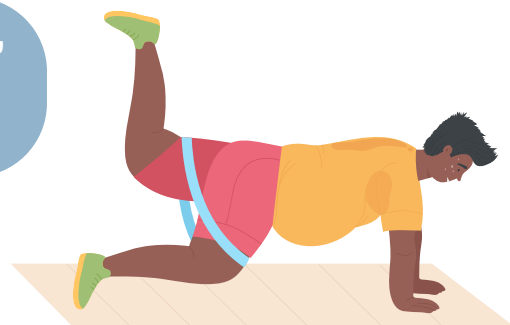


Soft Clothing, Bedding, or Other Items.



Music and Auditory Needs:

Music, or soundscapes can support sensory needs, whether a song, white noise machine, or podcast.



Exercise and Movement:

Exercise can help improve sleep. This could be via dancing, walking, hand flapping, yoga etc.

Additional Ways to Support Sleep Needs



Internal Needs Met
(e.g. Hunger)



Hydration Needs Met
(e.g. water bottle, or herbal tea)



Peer Support

Add your own here



**Support from Primary
Care e.g. GP, Counselor
or Social Prescriber.**

Unmet needs, chronic pain, or fatigue through the day can also cause sleep disruption, so it is important these needs are addressed to help regulate mood, and support a sleeping routine that works for you.

Sleep Hygiene

While the principles of sleep hygiene remain universally applicable, there's a pressing need to tailor them to the unique needs of autistic individuals. For instance, while the general advice is to maintain a dark room, an autistic person might find comfort in a soft glowing night light, or projector that provides a sensory anchor.

Similarly, while white noise machines are often recommended, some might find music, rain sounds or complete silence more soothing. It's about striking a balance between general best practices and individual sensory needs.

Other changes that can help in maintaining good sleep hygiene, include changing when and how you use technology in the evenings.

For instance by limiting screen use before bed and keeping screens out of the room if possible, and by using a blue light filter to reduce exposure to blue light which can affect your circadian rhythm and cause difficulties falling asleep.

We do acknowledge that some autistic people may need screen time to meet sensory needs, or to allow for body mirroring as part of sleep routine.

Remember to find what works for you, your personal sleep needs and that this guide is a starting point of exploration.



Apps that Might Help

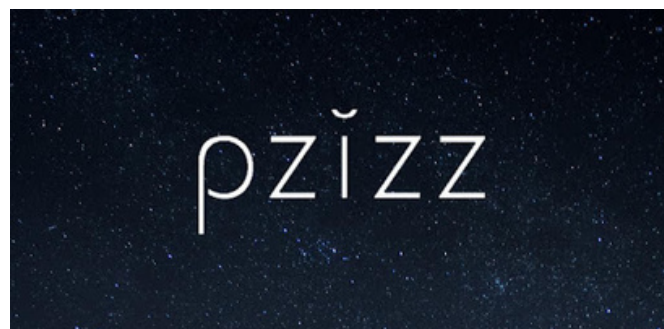
There are a number of apps that you may find useful for aiding in sleep and sleep hygiene, such as sleep trackers, apps for blocking other functions within certain times, or maintaining sleep goals.



Sleep Town - Sleep Tracker is virtual town where you can track your sleep. You set sleep goals, and targets. Once met, then the bigger your town becomes, and it allows for more customisation as sleep habits form.



Calm - Anxiety Reduction and Sleep App is a mental health and mediation app. The app allows you to select from a variety of anti-anxiety approaches to meet sleep/ wellbeing needs.



Pzizz - Sleep Tracker, Meditation and Soundscapes is an app that supports sleep via guided medication, playlists and app blockers.

Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

Leeds Recovery College – An NHS service that runs courses where you can learn more about mental health.

Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service – Offer a range of services and support for people struggling with mental health, such as anxiety.

Live Well Leeds – Provide a range of services to people with mild to moderate mental health needs, including 1-to-1 support and groups.

Further sources of support can be found in Leeds Autism AIM's Mental Health Guide: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/04/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v6-April-2023.pdf>

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This guide was produced by the Mental Health Equity Project, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.