

# Autism and Mental Health



Some autistic people can display challenging behaviour. It includes what would normally be considered physically aggressive behaviour, but can also include other behaviours if they are having a negative impact on the person or their family. Below we give some general ideas on strategies to try, and information on getting support. We also have specific information about the possible reasons for, and suggest strategies to address:

- self-injurious behaviour
- physical challenging behaviour such as biting, spitting, hitting and hair pulling
- pica (eating or mouthing non-edible items)
- smearing.

## CAUSES

Behaviour has a function, and there could be a number of reasons for it. These may include difficulty in processing information, unstructured time, over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to sensory stimuli, a change in routine, transition between activities, or physical reasons like feeling unwell, tired or hungry. Not being able to communicate these difficulties can lead to anxiety, anger and frustration, and then to an outburst of challenging behaviour.

## BEHAVIOUR DIARIES

Completing a behaviour diary, which records what is occurring before, during and after the behaviour, could help you to understand its purpose. It is important to make notes on the environment, including who was there, any change in the environment and how the person was feeling. A diary may be completed over a couple of weeks or longer if needed.

## CONSISTENCY

Be consistent in your approach to the behaviour and ask others around the person to use the same consistent approach.

## COMMUNICATION

Speak clearly and precisely using short sentences. By limiting your communication, the person is less likely to feel overloaded by information and more likely to be able to process what you say. Support the person to communicate their wants, needs and physical pain or discomfort, e.g. by using visual supports.

## REWARDS

Using rewards and motivators can help to encourage a particular behaviour. Even if the behaviour or task is very short, if it is followed by lots of praise and a reward, the person can learn that the behaviour is acceptable.

## RELAXATION

Look at anger/emotions management and create opportunities for relaxation. You can do this by, for example, looking at bubble lamps, smelling essential oils, listening to music, massages, or swinging on a swing. Challenging behaviour can often be diffused by an activity that releases energy or pent-up anger or anxiety. This might be punching a punch bag, bouncing on a trampoline or running around the garden.

## GETTING SUPPORT

- There are a number of ways in which you could get some support.
- Meet up with other carers, or get support from, a local Autistic Society branch or group, community service or family support service in your area.
- Get ideas from other families, and share your tips with them.
- Call the national telephone service providing emotional support to parents and carers of children or adults with autism.
- Request a social care needs assessment for your family member and for yourself as a carer. You may be able to get respite care or the help of an outreach team who can support you with behaviour strategies.
- Get support from a counsellor who understands autism and can support you and your family.

### **Reference:**

*The National Autistic Society (UK)*

*Adapted by Get into Neurodiversity for a global audience*