

UBC Anxiety Stress and Autism Program

An Anxiety Resource Guide for Autistic Youth and their Caregivers



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Using This Resource Guide

This guide is meant to help autistic youth and their caregivers learn more about, and manage anxiety. Although the focus of this guide is primarily anxiety, there are also providers and resources recommended that may also be helpful for other behavioural, emotional, social, and environmental concerns that can co-occur with anxiety. The first portion of this guide (pages 1-2) provides some background information about anxiety, how to spot signs of anxiety in your child, and approaches to treating anxiety. The second portion (pages 3-8) contains resources to help their child deal with anxiety or related difficulties.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a naturally occurring and important emotion. We typically feel anxious in response to a stressful or threatening situation – in this way, anxiety helps us keep safe and prepare for such events. However, when we carry on feeling anxious afterwards, or, when anxiety starts to get in the way of things at home, at school, or with friends, this might indicate an anxiety disorder.

How Common is Anxiety?

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorder among children and adolescents, affecting about 22% of children in the general population. Research has shown that anxiety is even more common among autistic children, affecting up to 40% of autistic children. The most common form of anxiety in autistic children is specific phobias – which are intense fears and distress around a specific object or situation (e.g., spiders, loud sounds).

Researchers are working to understand why autistic children are at higher risk of developing anxiety disorders than non-autistic children. There are several possible explanations for this increased risk:

- Anxiety and autism may have shared genetic causes.
- Features of autism, such as social communication difficulties, sensory sensitivities, or rigidity around routines, could make children more vulnerable to developing anxiety in these areas.
- Other common experiences autistic children have, such as social exclusion or not receiving enough support, might contribute towards anxiety.

In terms of how anxiety impacts the lives of autistic children, research has also found that autistic children who also have an anxiety disorder may find it harder to engage in enjoyable activities at home, school, and in social settings. They may also experience poorer general health outcomes (such as more gastrointestinal and sleep difficulties), other mental health difficulties (such as self-injury and depression symptoms).

Spotting Signs of Anxiety

When children are anxious they may say they are afraid, scared, or nervous. They might also complain about having worries, or thoughts about bad or scary things that could happen. Other signs of anxiety include restlessness, increased heart rate, difficulty concentrating, muscle tension, irritability, or disturbed sleep. However, anxiety can be difficult to identify and treat among autistic children for a number of reasons. In particular:

- Features of anxiety and autism (such as sensitivity to loud sounds, or rigidity in routines) can look very similar to one another.
- Autistic children can experience and express anxiety in ways that differ to non-autistic children.
- Other features that are common among autistic children (e.g., communication differences, emotion regulation challenges) can make it difficult to detect anxiety.

Treating Anxiety

Anxiety disorders can be treated, and there are evidence-based (i.e., research-backed), effective treatments and strategies that you and your child can use to manage their anxiety. **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** is a type of psychotherapy that focuses on how thoughts, emotions, and behaviours affect each other. Clinicians use CBT to help children replace anxious thought patterns with more helpful ones, and build new problem-solving / coping skills to help them handle stressful situations more effectively.

Research has found that CBT is effective at treating anxiety disorders in autistic children who don't have co-occurring intellectual disability. Some CBT programs have been adapted to be more specific to autistic children's needs. For example, adapted CBT programs can include social skills training, more heavily involve parents and teachers in treatment, or bring children's focused interests into treatment activities. Adapted CBT programs may be even more effective than regular CBT programs at treating autistic children's anxiety.

In some cases, **medication** can be effective at reducing anxiety in non-autistic children. However, there is limited research on whether medications like selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are effective at reducing anxiety in autistic children.

Lower Mainland Psychology Clinics and Clinicians: ASD and Anxiety

The listed clinicians have specialised experience treating anxiety in youth on the spectrum

Cornerstone Child & Family Psychology

212-3195 Granville Street, Vancouver (604) 808-5559

Intake: Call or [send an email](#).

Fee: \$225 per 50-minute session.

Wait times range from 6-12 months.

[Dr. Carla Elfers](#), R. Psych

[Dr. Melanie McConnell](#), R. Psych

[Dr. Alex DiGiacomo](#), Post-Doctoral Fellow

North Shore Stress and Anxiety Clinic

145 Chadwick Court, North Van. (604) 985-3939

Intake: or [send an email](#).

Fee: \$225 per 50-minute session.

Mode: In-person or via telehealth.

Waitlist times are approx. 6-10 months.

[Dr. Michael Papsdorf](#), R. Psych.

[Dr. Randall Gillis](#), R. Psych.

[Dr. Lauren Campbell](#), R. Psych

[Dr. Lindsay Mathieson](#), R. Psych

[Ms. Sharon Hou](#), Therapist

ABLE Developmental Clinic

110-585 16th St, West Vancouver - (604) 922-3450

→ [Send an email](#) or call.

12-15243 91st Ave, Surrey - (604) 584-3450

→ [Send an email](#) or call.

3688 Cessna Drive, Richmond - (604) 207-1984

→ [Send an email](#) or call.

Currently accepting new referrals.

ABLE clinic offers a multidisciplinary team with several psychologists at each location. See website for list of specialists.

Richmond ABLE clinic also offers MSP-covered paediatric medicine and psychiatry through the AIMS program.

West Coast Child Development Group

100-1300 West 8th Ave, Vancouver - (604) 732-3222

Intake: Call or [send an email](#).

Fee: \$225 per 50-minute session (R. Psych)

\$150 per 50-minute session (RCC)

Mode: In-person or via telehealth

Wait times are specific to each clinician; contact clinic.

[Dr. David Worling](#), R. Psych

[Dr. Aaron Jacobsen](#), R. Psych

[Dr. Kimberly Armstrong](#), R. Psych

[Dr. Katia Jitlina](#), R. Psych

[Dr. Anisha Varghese](#), P. Psych

[Leah Marks](#), Registered Clinical Counsellor

Harbourside Family Counseling

1727 Fir Street, Vancouver - (604) 689-9116

Intake: [Book online](#), call, or [email](#).

Fee: Varies by clinician

Mode: In-person or via telehealth

Currently accepting new clients.

[Michele Kambolis](#), RCC - \$252

[Steve Dolson](#), RCC - \$199.50

[Shanthi Jayarajah](#), RCC - \$178.50

[Nimni Weerasekara](#), RCC - \$178.50

[Moyin Adefisayo](#), RCC - \$178.50

Three Story Clinic

301-601 W Broadway, Vancouver - (604) 563-3093

Intake: fill out the [New Patient](#) form or [email](#).

Fee: Varies by clinician

Mode: In-person or via telehealth

Psychologist wait times vary, inquire by phone.

[Dr. Antanina Firer](#), R. Psych. - \$225

[Dr. Neeti Sachdeva](#), R. Psych. - \$225

[Justine Thomson](#), RCC - \$160 individual; \$180 family

[Imogen McIntyre](#), RSW - \$160 individual; \$200 family

Low- or No-Cost Mental Health Support Services

The following are a list of youth mental health services that are free or sliding-scale.

Low- or no-cost therapy	Quick reference
<p><u>Foundry BC Centres</u></p> <p>Foundry BC Centres are “one-stop-shops” for free, drop-in youth mental health and social services. Several centres exist in each provincial health region. Mental health services offered at Foundry are appropriate for youth who do not require intensive, ongoing care.</p> <p>Foundry BC App: An interactive mobile app and web portal designed to help youth aged 12-24 connect directly with FREE virtual counselling, peer support groups, and personalised recommendations for health services. You can access drop-in virtual counselling from Monday to Thursday, 2pm-6pm; or, pre-book an appointment at a time that works for you.</p>	<p>Location: use the Find a Centre tool to locate your local Foundry Centre.</p> <p>Online: www.foundrybc.ca</p> <p>Get Connected: Download the Foundry App from the iTunes App Store, access it through the Web Portal, or call 1-833-308-6379.</p>
<p><u>BC Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMH)</u></p> <p>CYMH clinics across the lower mainland serve children with complex mental health needs and their families. CYMH teams can provide the following: psychiatric assessment, psychotherapy, case management, DBT and CBT skills groups, parenting skills sessions, medication management, referral to other programs.</p> <p>Intake: call your closest clinic to book an intake appointment with a CYMH clinician, who will then direct you to appropriate services for your child. If the intake clinician determines that a CYMH team is not appropriate for your child, they may offer options such as a youth DBT skills group, or direct you to Foundry’s virtual counselling services.</p>	<p>Location: check to see which CYMH clinic is closest to you.</p> <p>Get Connected: Contact your local clinic</p> <p>Learn more: The Child and Youth Mental Health Toolkit explains the CYMH service model. HereTo Help BC’s info sheet on CYMH lets you know what to expect from BC Child and Youth Mental Health Services.</p>
<p><u>Mood Disorders Association of BC (MDABC)</u></p> <p>While MDABC psychiatry services are only available to adults, children can be seen at the MDABC Counselling and Wellness Centre by a registered clinical counsellor. A 50-minute individual session is \$95. There are many forms of therapy and many therapists to choose from.</p>	<p>Online: www.mdabc.net</p> <p>Intake: you can self-refer or refer your child using this intake form. Wait times are very minimal.</p>
<p><u>Moving Forward Family Services</u></p> <p>MFFS connects low-income individuals who don’t have extended healthcare benefits with registered or practicum counsellors.</p> <p>Services: <i>For medium-income clients without extended health insurance:</i> Registered Clinical Counsellor (> 12 sessions, \$50) <i>For low-income clients:</i> Practicum student (< 12 sessions, \$20) <i>For unemployed clients:</i> Practicum student (<4 sessions, FREE)</p>	<p>Online: www.mffs.ca</p> <p>Intake:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Send an email to counsellor@movingforwardfamily.com- OR complete this self-referral form- OR call (877) 485-5025.

Self-Help Mental Health Support Resources

For people who prefer to receive anonymous treatment, or for those who are waiting to access virtual or in-person support services, you may be interested in some of the following self-help resources.

Self-help	Quick Reference
<p><u>Walkalong</u></p> <p>Walkalong was developed by UBC researchers as a free tool for young adults to self-monitor and manage their mental health. It includes a Life Chart for wellness tracking, Self-Help exercises, an Encyclopedia of reliable treatment options, and stories of others' lived experiences.</p>	<p>Online: www.walkalong.ca/about-us/general</p>
<p><u>HereToHelp BC</u></p> <p>HereToHelp BC provides health literacy resources on provincial mental health services as well as common mental health concerns. Check out their Resource Library for information, workbooks, and wellness modules.</p>	<p>Online: www.heretohelp.bc.ca</p>
<p><u>Kelty's Keys</u></p> <p>Kelty's Keys is a free online therapy program for adolescents and adults offered by Vancouver Coastal Health. There are "self-help" online modules and a "guided" option where online tools are supplemented with email counselling from a virtual therapist. Note that both options require independence and self-initiation and are not suitable for children.</p>	<p>Online: www.keltyskey.com/</p> <p>Currently only the "self-help" option is available until further notice; all therapist spots are filled.</p>
<p><u>Anxiety Canada</u></p> <p>Anxiety Canada provides educational information on anxiety disorders. In addition to learning about the conditions themselves, you can also access a variety of self-help tools or download the Mindshift Mobile App.</p> <p>My Anxiety Plan (MAP): A 10-hour CBT self-help course that helps people map out the causes, triggers, coping skills, and treatment strategies for their anxiety. There is an adult curriculum and a child & teen curriculum.</p>	<p>Location: www.anxietycanada.com or www.youth.anxietycanada.com</p> <p>Mindshift App: MindShift CBT MAP courses: My Anxiety Plan</p>

Webinars, Books, and Websites: Anxiety

Webinars, podcasts, websites, and books that autistic young adults and caregivers may find helpful.

Webinars

[Autism, Anxiety, and COVID-19.](#)

A webinar hosted by [Autism Community Training](#).

- This presentation features three expert clinicians who discuss how COVID-19 has affected the prevalence & presentation of anxiety disorders in autistic people.

[Social Thinking Methodology Webinars.](#)

By [Social Thinking](#).

- Free evidence-based webinars on the basics of social-emotional learning. Learn how your child can build social awareness and self-regulation skills. Also, see their [Methodology Articles](#).

[ACT Mental Health and Autism Project.](#)

By [Autism Training Community and the UBC Faculty of Medicine](#).

- A webinar series discussing mental health challenges in autistic children. The intended audience is clinicians, but parents may find the discussions of lived expertise, coping strategies, and treatment options helpful.

[Tackling Anxiety: Strategies for Children & Youth.](#)

A podcast from [Kelty Mental Health](#).

- A podcast featuring a clinical psychologist specialising in paediatric anxiety treatment, and a parent of two youth living with anxiety.

[Anxiety and Autism Webinar](#)

From the [MIND Institute at UC Davis](#).

- Psychologists discuss the unique ways that anxiety may show up in autistic youth, and share strategies that reduce anxiety while promoting bravery and independence.

Books and Websites

[Managing Anxiety in People with Autism.](#)

By [Anne Chalfant](#).

- A book that helps to recognize and respond to unique presentations of anxiety in autistic children. Coping skills & interventions for social, academic, and clinical settings are discussed.

[Freeing Your Child From Anxiety.](#)

By [Tamar Chansky](#).

- This guide provides practical and evidence-based strategies. It offers visual metaphors to help you see the world through your anxious child's eyes and compassionately address their root causes of worry.

[Treating Childhood and Adolescent Anxiety: A Guide for Caregivers.](#)

By [Lebowitz, Omer, and Hoboken](#).

- A variety of anxiety management strategies that you can implement to help your child overcome anxiety.

[Beating Anxiety: What Young People on the Autism Spectrum Need to Know.](#)

By [Davida Hartman](#).

- This book is written by an educational psychologist and autism specialist. It is geared towards autistic children and young people aged 8-14, and provides coping techniques for managing anxiety at home, at school and with friends.

[Anxiety and autism in the classroom](#)

By [Sarah Hendrickx for the UK National Autistic Society](#).

- A blog post discussing the topic of anxiety and autism in education.

Resource Guides and Templates on Anxiety and Autism - For Caregivers

[Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times.](#) *By the UNC FPG Child Development Institute.*

- This comprehensive PDF specifically addresses the uncertainty and anxiety brought by COVID-19. It discusses strategies to navigate challenges that may be uniquely faced by autistic individuals during the pandemic.

[Research Bulletin on Anxiety.](#) *By Middletown Centre for Autism.*

- An accessible summary of 9 peer-reviewed articles on anxiety and autism. The contents discuss parent and child perspectives, randomized controlled trials, treatment considerations, and more.

[Anxiety - guides for autistic adults, parents and carers, and professionals.](#) *By the UK National Autistic Society.*

- This webpage offers resources relevant to anxious individuals on the spectrum and their caregivers.

[The Essential Guide to Anxiety and Autism.](#) *By Research Autism (now the National Autistic Society).*

- Informed by empirical research, this PDF describes the causes, presentation, and treatment options for anxiety experienced by people on the spectrum.

[Safety Planning Template.](#) *By MHAutism.*

- For youth who experience mental health challenges or suicide ideation, safety planning is critical to mitigating and managing acute emotional crises. This template is tailored specifically to autistic individuals and can be filled out and shared with your child's support team and family members.

Resources for Clinicians

Below are some resources you may wish to share with your children's care team, describing evidence-based practices to address anxiety in autistic children.

[Meya.](#) *By Jeffrey Wood and Karen Wood*

- MEYA is a comprehensive clinical training and clinical-decision-making personal assistant for clinicians working with youth on the autism spectrum in outpatient settings. Meya provides evidence-based, treatment planning guidance to clinicians.

[Facing Your Fears.](#) *By Judy Reaven, Audrey Blakely-Smith, and Shana Nichols*

- Facing Your Fears is a group therapy program for autistic children aged 8-14 and their parents. This evidence-based, ready-to-use manual is suitable for psychologists, behavioural interventionists, and other mental health professionals who work with autistic children and their families in clinical settings.

Phone Apps

You can find a clinician-approved list of mental health mobile apps at [ReachOut! - Tools and Apps](#); we describe a few below. Keep in mind that mental health phone apps are not appropriate for everyone, but they can be useful for providing daily reminders to practise certain skills, keep track of medications or mood, and “game-ify” activities that your child might otherwise see as boring or anxiety-provoking. For skills-based apps, you might consider learning alongside your child so that you can practise the suggested strategies together. If your child’s care team thinks that keeping a mood diary, worry journal, or self-care log would be beneficial, consider encouraging them to incorporate a tracking app into their daily routine.

Emotion Regulation

[Mindshift CBT](#): Developed by researchers at Anxiety Canada to teach evidence-based anxiety and stress management skills.

[Youper](#): Builds skills using exercises based on CBT, DBT and ACT. Includes daily guided therapy exercises, medication management, and progress checks.

Worry-Journaling and Mood-Tracking

[ReachOut WorryTime](#): This app lets your child record their anxious thoughts throughout the day, and then prompts them to revisit the worries at a designated time of their choosing.

[Daylio](#): Daylio helps keep a record of fluctuations in mood and anxiety. By self-reporting their feelings on a consistent basis, the app can offer your child personalised insight into healthy and harmful behaviours.

[Booster Buddy](#): Game-ifies and logs wellness and self-care activities through daily “quests”.