

Handling Stress and Anxiety

By Minni K. Ang, Ph.D. Autistic Self-Advocate

I've already described how my brain works. Stress and anxiety just result in a noisier image, with everything moving faster and there being more things bouncing around in my head. If I'm not careful it can get to a point where everything is just way too overwhelming, and I feel like I just have to shut down. When that happens, I find the most helpful thing to do is to sit in my rocking chair with a sheet over my head to shut out the whole world, and to listen to what I term as my "autistic reset" playlist on my phone.

My playlist is quite short. It starts with the Desiderata, which I play twice - The first time helps calm me down and it's on the second playing when I can actually focus on the words and their meanings. The Desiderata helps remind me of my own value; something which I typically doubt when I'm highly stressed or anxious. Next on my playlist is the theme song from the movie Pocahontas, "Colors of the Wind". This song really is the cry of my heart to everyone that I know - The song writer says it all so perfectly. After the songs I have three other items on my playlist: The first is a recording of crickets chirping in the night, the second is a recording of the steady patten of rainfall, and the third is the sound of wind chimes in a gentle breeze. All three help me ground myself in nature. My entire autistic reset process takes around half an hour, and it can take me from the point of virtual shut down to a much better place.

If I'm just feeling stressed or anxious but not really at my wits end like that, I have a few different strategies that help me. The first is to get a long hug from my spouse. The next is to give my poodle a long hug. It's important to note here that I generally don't prefer getting hugs from people - this is definitely not a case of feeling better with a hug from just anybody. The reason hugs by my spouse or my dog work is because I feel safe with them.

Playing one of my musical instruments is another excellent way to make myself feel better. I love playing the alto recorder because the instrument is like an extension of myself - my breathing is transformed into beautiful music and I can feel the instrument vibrate in response. I also love playing the piano. This is an instrument I grew up playing, and I find it can really lift my spirits; more so if I'm playing for an appreciative audience. And the musical notes themselves are very pacifying - they provide a beautiful structure and organization of seemingly random sound waves into amazing intricately woven soundscapes. I find Baroque music the most soothing perhaps for this reason.

The third strategy that I find helpful for reducing stress and anxiety is swimming. One of the best investments we ever made in our home was the installation of a swim spa in our backyard, in which I can swim against a continuous current in a relatively warm temperature. I find this very calming, both physically as well as emotionally. When I have time after completing a couple of sets of swimming I like to just float on my back and soak up the surrounding environment. I even go in in the middle of winter, although an outdoor temperature of minus 8 Celsius is pretty much my lower limit. But the sensation of floating or swimming, but especially of floating, in warm water while breathing in freezing air is really quiet something. It's very calming but at the same time mentally invigorating and I find it a very conducive state in which to discover solutions to complex problems.

About the author

Let me introduce myself - my name is Minni, and I was diagnosed with Level One Autism only a few years ago, although I have of course been autistic all my life - autism is not something you catch or develop: it is rather a non-neurotypical wiring of the human brain that some of us are born with. Today I am employed full-time as a software developer by a great Canadian company, Kinaxis. I love my job - it is interesting, sufficiently challenging, and the company culture is amazing and inclusive; I was hired through their "autism at work" programme, intermediated by another great Canadian non-profit human resource agency that specializes in work placements for neurodiverse individuals, Specialisterne Canada.

My backstory is pretty complex. I emigrated to Canada in 2009, although I was here for several years as a young child when my dad did his doctoral and post-doc studies at the University of Waterloo. I have a Ph.D in Computer Applications, but also have degrees in Music and in Physics. I have worked in exceptionally diverse fields including academia, as a professional musician, in broadcasting, as a youth worker, ran my own music production start-up company, as a freelance iOS developer, as a consultant for academic and research development, and even spent a year driving a big yellow school bus!

I live in Ottawa with my spouse Sofia and our three dogs, and I have a teenage daughter who is presently studying abroad. To relax I love doing puzzles of any sort, playing one of my many musical instruments, reading or watching science fiction or fantasy, and woodworking. I have many special interests, but especially love learning how things work and creating new things for others to enjoy.



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