



Information Sheet: Obsessions, repetitive behaviour and routines

Obsessions, repetitive behaviour and routines can be a source of enjoyment for children/young people (YP) with autistic traits, and a way of coping with everyday life. But they may also limit their involvement in other activities and cause distress or anxiety. Find out **what you can do to help**.

Obsessions

Many children/YP with autistic traits have intense and highly-focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong. It can be art, music, trains, computers, car registration numbers, bus or train timetables, postcodes, table tennis, traffic lights, numbers, shapes or body parts such as feet or elbows. For many younger children it's Thomas the Tank Engine, dinosaurs or particular cartoon characters.

Children/YP with autistic traits might also become attached to objects (or parts of objects), such as toys, figurines or model cars – or more unusual objects like milk bottle tops, stones or shoes. An interest in collecting is also quite common. The pursuit of such interests is often fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness, and many channel their interest into studying, paid work, volunteering, or other meaningful occupations. These interests can:

- provide structure, order and predictability, and help the child/YP cope with the uncertainties of daily life
- give them a way to start conversations and feel more self-assured in social situations
- help them to relax and feel happy

Is it an obsession or a hobby?

It is the intensity and duration of a child/YP's interest in a particular topic, object, or collection that marks it out as an obsession.

- Does the child/YP appear distressed when engaging in the behaviour or trying to resist the behaviour? For example, someone who flaps their hands may then try to sit on their hands.
- Is the child/YP unable to stop the behaviour independently?
- Is the behaviour impacting on their learning?
- Is the behaviour limiting the person's social opportunities?

- Is the behaviour causing significant disruption to other people, eg. parents, carers and family? (Clements and Zarkowska, 2000)

If your answer to any of the questions above is 'yes', and the behaviour is actually a real issue for your child/YP, for you, or for other people in their life, there are ways you could help.

Repetitive behaviour

Repetitive behaviour in children/YP with autistic traits is not the same as OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), which is an anxiety disorder in which people experience repetitive thoughts and behaviours that are upsetting to them.

Repetitive behaviour may include arm or hand-flapping, finger-flicking, rocking, jumping, spinning or twirling, head-banging and complex body movements. You may also see the repetitive use of an object, such as flicking a rubber band or twirling a piece of string, or repetitive activities involving the senses (such as repeatedly feeling a particular texture). This is known as 'stimming' or self-stimulating behaviour.

Although repetitive behaviour varies from person to person, the reasons behind it may be the same:

- an attempt to gain sensory input, eg. rocking may be a way to stimulate the balance (vestibular) system; hand-flapping may provide visual stimulation
- an attempt to reduce sensory input, eg. focusing on one particular sound may reduce the impact of a loud, distressing environment; this may particularly be seen in social situations
- to deal with stress and anxiety and to block out uncertainty
- to pass the time and provide enjoyment.

Routines and resistance to change

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to children/YP with autistic traits who often prefer to have a daily routine so that they know what is going to happen every day. They may want to always travel the same way to and from school or work, or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

The use of rules can also be important. It may be difficult for an autistic person to take a different approach to something once they have been taught the 'right' way to do it.

Sometimes minor changes such as moving between two activities, can be distressing; for others big events like holidays, starting or changing school, moving house or Christmas, which create change and upheaval, can cause anxiety.

Some children/YP use daily timetables so that they know what is going to happen, when. However, the need for routine and sameness can extend beyond this. You might see:

- changes to the physical environment (such as the layout of furniture in a room), or the presence of new people or absence of familiar ones, being difficult to manage
- rigid preferences about things like food (only eating food of a certain colour), clothing (only wearing clothes made from specific fabrics), or everyday objects (only using particular types of soap or brands of toilet paper)
- a need for routine around daily activities such as meals or bedtime. Routines can become almost ritualistic in nature, having to be followed precisely with attention paid to the tiniest details
- verbal rituals, with a person repeatedly asking the same questions and needing a specific answer
- compulsive behaviour, for example a person might be constantly washing their hands or checking locks. This does not necessarily mean they have obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) but if you are concerned about this, speak to your GP in the first instance.

A child/YP's dependence on routines can increase during times of change, stress or illness and may even become more dominant or elaborate at these times (Attwood, 1998)

Unexpected changes are often most difficult to deal with. People on the autism spectrum may not be comfortable with the idea of change, but may be able to cope better if they can prepare for changes in advance.

How you can help

Does the obsession, routine or repetitive behaviour restrict the child/YP's opportunities, cause distress or discomfort, or impact on learning? If not, then it may not be necessary to intervene. If it is causing difficulties, or is in some way unsafe, they may need support to stop or modify the behaviour, or reduce their reliance on it.

Understand the function of the behaviour

Think about the function of the repetitive behaviour, routine or obsession. What does the child/YP get out of it? Does it reduce anxiety, or block out noise?

Modify the environment

Does the child/YP always seem to find a particular place like a classroom, hard to cope with? Is it too bright? You might find that modifying the environment (eg turning off strip lighting) can help to reduce sensory discomfort. If the behaviour is a way of getting sensory input, look for alternative ways of achieving the same sensation.

Increase structure

Make the world a more structured and predictable place. A more structured environment could reduce boredom, which is sometimes a reason for repetitive behaviour. You might prepare a range of enjoyable or calming activities to re-direct the child/YP if they seem bored or stressed.

Try using visual supports (such as daily timetables), stories, or pre-planning strategies to prepare for change or events that might be stressful, or daily transition times. Egg timers or time timers can help someone to understand abstract concepts like time, plan what they need to do, in what order, and understand the concept of waiting.

Manage anxiety

Develop strategies to manage anxiety, such as introducing the Brain in Hand app. Consider contacting an autism experienced counsellor.

Intervene early

Repetitive behaviours, obsessions and routines are generally harder to change the longer they continue. A behaviour that is perhaps acceptable in a young child may not be appropriate as they get older, eg. obsession with stroking other people's hair, with copying people's accents, or with shiny things - meaning they collect change that people leave around. It will help if you can set limits around repetitive behaviours from an early age and look out for any new behaviour that emerges.

Set boundaries

If you need to, set clear, consistent limits - for example, ration an object, the time a child/YP should spend talking about a subject, or the places where they can carry out a particular behaviour. Behavioural change is most likely to be successful and the child/YP less likely to be distressed if you start small and go slowly. Increase time restrictions and introduce other limits gradually.

Decide together a realistic target and put together a plan to reach that target over a period of time. It is important to set small, realistic goals to help build on success and increase confidence.

Think about whether the child/YP would find it easier to engage in the interest for shorter periods throughout the day or for longer periods but less often.

Consider what needs to be changed. Are they unable to stop engaging in the activity? Work on lessening the duration. Is the issue that they constantly start the activity throughout the day even when they are trying to focus on other things? Work on lessening the frequency. If it is a mixture of both, focus on one aspect to change at first, to increase the chance of success and reduce anxiety.

Example

Week 1: decide on the plan and target, creating a visual support explaining the change.

Week 2: Jane is allowed to talk about train engines for 15 mins, every hour.

Week 3: Jane is allowed to talk about train engines for 10 mins, every hour.

Week 4: Jane is allowed to talk about train engines for 10 mins every 2 hours.

Continue in this way until you meet the goal, which is to find a balance between engaging with the interest enjoyably and engaging with other activities.

If you place limits around obsessions or repetitive behaviour, you might need to think about things the child/YP can do instead such as directing them to record their thoughts on their phone or write them down in an interest book. While the family are no longer engaging in the activity, the thoughts are still expressed, hopefully meeting the person's need and therefore lowering their anxiety. You could also ensure that if they wanted to express their thoughts about their interest again before their next allotted time that they could write things down and you will talk to them about their notebook thoughts later. You could use visual supports to explain these additional activities.

It might be possible for the person to engage in their interest in new ways, perhaps joining a club or group, or studying or working in a related area.

Where the activity relates to sensory needs, provide an alternative activity that has the same function, eg:

- someone who rocks to get sensory input could use a swing
- someone who flicks their fingers for visual stimulation could use a kaleidoscope or a bubble gun
- someone who puts inedible objects in their mouth could have a bag with edible alternatives (that provide similar sensory experiences) such as raw pasta or spaghetti, or seeds and nuts
- a person who smears their poo could have a bag with play dough in it to use instead.

Support skill development

The following skills can help with managing stress or uncertainty (which may lead to repetitive behaviour).

Social skills

Developing social skills such as how to start a conversation, appropriate things to talk about, and how to read other people's 'cues' (eg, we sometimes

raise our eyebrows slightly if we want to speak or say something like 'Yes, but...') may mean someone feels more confident and doesn't need to rely on talking about particular subjects, such as a special interest.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation skills are any activities that help a child/YP to manage their own behaviour and emotions. If you can help them to identify when they are feeling stressed or anxious and learn alternative strategies to use, you may, in time, see less repetitive and obsessively habitual behaviour. Strategies to consider might be relaxation techniques such as taking 10 deep breaths or squeezing a stress ball, as well as finding ways to communicate their need for support either verbally or, if that is too difficult, by showing a red card or writing a note. Many children/YP with autistic traits have difficulty with abstract concepts such as emotions, but there are ways to turn emotions into more 'concrete' concepts, eg. stress scales.

You can use a traffic light system, visual thermometer, or a scale of 1-5 to present emotions as colours or numbers. For example, a green traffic light or a number 1 can mean 'I am calm'; a red traffic light or a number 5, 'I am angry'.

Make use of interests and obsessions

Highly-focussed interests can be used to increase a child/YP's skills and areas of interest, promote self-esteem, and support socialising. Obsessions can be developed into something more functional.

- An obsession with computers could be developed into a child/YP studying or working in IT.
- An obsession with rubbish could be used to develop an interest in recycling, and a child given the job of sorting items for recycling.
- A parent showing an interest in their child's loved computer game could improve their relationship with one another.
- Collaborative and cooperative computer games can help to build relationships and social skills.
- An interest in particular sounds could be channelled into learning a musical instrument.
- A strong preference for ordering or lining up objects could be developed into housework skills.
- Someone with an interest in a particular TV show could practise IT skills by creating a presentation about it.
- You could teach internet safety while they discuss their interest on web forums and social media.
- If you and other people the child/YP knows can show an interest in their obsession this may be welcomed and help to boost their self-esteem.

Further information

Further information about obsessions, repetitive behaviour and routines is available on the NAS website www.autism.org.uk

Source: National Autistic Society 2017