

SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

EMPLOYER TOOLKIT

Strategies from Autistic Employees

RETAINING AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES



13b Anxiety and emotional regulation supports

Many autistics require extra support in managing their anxiety and emotions. Contrary to popular belief, autistics are not emotionless creatures. They have the same emotions as the general population but aren't always as good at managing them, especially when emotions are triggered by high anxiety.

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supports that employers can provide their employees to assist with anxiety and emotional regulation:

- Supporting employees during times of change
- Supporting employees during performance reviews
- Providing freedom in scheduling
- Providing freedom of movement
- Providing flexibility in break times



For more information and tips for supporting employees with anxiety refer to [***Section 13.2 for Managing Anxiety Tool.***](#)

Dealing with change

Many autistics struggle with change, especially if change is constant and the reasons for it are left unexplained. Change, especially constant change, is a major source of anxiety identified in the autistic workers survey.

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barriers to emotional regulation identified in the survey:

- Lack of advanced notice about change
- Not knowing the reasons for change

Change management strategies

"Being allowed control over changes or at least asked and given time to process instead of being forced to change quickly."

"Routine, familiarity. Ability to control sensory/physical environment."

autistic employees

It's important for employers to provide autistic employees with continuous support during times of change.

Many autistics love routine and thrive with familiar environments, so a constantly changing workplace will be very stressful to them, especially if they don't feel supported by their employer or colleagues during times of change.

- Provide the employee with as much advanced notice as possible about any upcoming changes.
- Include information about the reasons for the change and how the employee and the rest of the team will benefit from the change.
- Include details on the timeline for the change (i.e., the different dates for each individual change that is happening as part of the bigger change).
- Take the time to answer all the employee's questions, and be patient and understanding of them during this difficult transitional time.

Another strategy is to actively involve the employee in the change management process from the beginning, whenever possible.

This way, the employee will have first-hand knowledge of what's happening, so there's an opportunity for reduced confusion. The employee will also have a "buy-in" to the change and may even become a change management champion for the organization, at least for that particular change.

Avoid surprising the employee with changes, and allow them as much time as needed to process and come to terms with the change. Managers should have an open-door policy so that the employee(s) may come to them anytime, with any questions or concerns they may have.

These strategies will often help reduce an autistic employee's stress during terms of change, thereby minimizing the impact on their performance and reducing the likelihood of them leaving the organization to seek employment elsewhere. However, keep in mind that no matter how much support an employer provides to their autistic employee, the employee may still feel some stress during this time, so a little patience and understanding goes a long way.



For more information and tips for supporting employees with change refer to [**Section 13.3 for a Supporting Employees During Change Tool.**](#)

Performance reviews

Respondents to the autistic workers survey identified performance reviews as a significant source of anxiety for them and the second-highest barrier to their emotional regulation.

Provide advanced notice to employees about performance reviews, and be fully transparent about what's involved with them.

Many survey respondents noted they prefer to receive regular feedback from their supervisors and have a chance to address any concerns before their performance review. This avoids the extreme anxiety caused by surprises.

"The first time I went through a performance review in a job, I had my probation extended for another three months. My boss told me my performance was around a B, and he wanted to see it become an A. He hadn't raised any concerns with me over the past month, so I mistakenly thought everything was good. Needless to say, I was very stressed and anxious at work for the next little while after the performance review because I was worried about what else I was doing wrong that he was going to wait another three months to tell me."

Corey Walker, autistic self-advocate

"Clear continuous work performance feedback."

"Someone higher up to tell me I am doing good and that I am following the rules well."

autistic employees

Feedback strategies

If an employer cannot avoid conducting a performance review, keep the process informal. Provide a draft of the performance review to the employee in advance to provide an opportunity for the employee to better understand the information. This will help the employee formulate questions and responses to the information and reduce anxiety. Allow the employee plenty of time to process the information during the actual performance review and work with the employee to achieve a consensus on the assessment of their performance.

This is a good time for the employer and employee to review the adjustments being provided for the employee and to determine if any adjustments would be beneficial. If inadequate supports and/or adjustments are or could be a contributing factor to poor employee performance, then the employee should not be terminated or disciplined. Instead, revise the adjustments and supports and give the employee a chance to succeed with these changes in place.

By providing transparency, flexibility, and support during any performance review process, both the employer and the employee are likely to find the experience less stressful. Keep in mind that the employee may still experience some level of anxiety no matter what adjustments the employer provides, so ensure the employee has the time and tools they need to manage that anxiety, so it doesn't become overwhelming.

Scheduling

Many autistic employees struggle with unstructured environments and a lack of control over their schedules. Providing a structured work environment with a consistent schedule will further support the employee to thrive.

Remember, many autistic employees struggle with frequent change, so a frequently changing schedule would be a nightmare for those employees. Work with the employee to develop a schedule that meets both the employee's and the employer's needs, and keep that schedule consistent as much as possible, again providing advanced notice of any schedule changes. Should the schedule need to change, support the employee during this transition using the strategies mentioned earlier in this section.

*"Having a set schedule that does not change unless *I* ask for the change."*

Schedule success

"Creating my own schedule. Being able to complete meetings and communication when it best suites me and working on paperwork when I'm not capable of meetings. Being able to schedule interactions as often or little as I need."

autistic employees

Providing consistency in scheduling doesn't have to be an onerous task. It should be a collaborative task that meets both the business needs of the employer and the employee's needs. One thing to consider is asking the employee to agree to a periodic schedule review. This provides both parties the opportunity to discuss and agree upon scheduling changes if the current work schedule no longer meets the needs of one or both parties.

Also, keep in mind that some autistic employees will prefer flexibility over consistency so that they can request schedule changes based on their own life needs. Even though some of these needs may not be work-related, it's important for employers to support all their employees in maintaining a good work/life balance. This holistic support provides employees with less stress, allowing them to thrive and perform their best for their employer.

Allowing freedom of movement

In the autistic employee survey, the third most requested support to help regulate emotions and reduce anxiety was the freedom to move around as needed. This helps autistic employees reduce stress and anxiety, helping them to better regulate their emotions. This, in turn, reduces conflict and improves employee performance.

This could include:

- Freedom to stretch or to engage in activity that best meets the employee's needs to decompress.
- Using a tactile object like a fidget spinner.
- Repetitive movements like flapping hands, or something else.

While this may be easier to implement in some jobs than others, a supportive employer will consider the needs of their employees to have some freedom of movement and identify a way or incorporate that adjustment with them.

Flexibility in taking breaks

For many autistics, the social aspects of the job can be stressful and, at times, emotionally draining.

For many autistics, the social aspects of the job can be stressful and, at times, emotionally draining. This is why the fourth most requested support for emotional regulation was the ability to take breaks as needed. Ideally, employees should be empowered to take short unscheduled breaks as needed, but of course, this is not always possible. For those situations where it isn't possible to provide sporadic unscheduled breaks, ensure employees have regularly scheduled breaks and encourage them to take advantage of those breaks. Reducing employee stress reduces the costs associated with sick days and lost productivity. Sometimes, autistic employees don't always know in advance when they need a break but will benefit from the flexibility of being able to request one when they need one.

"Being allowed to step away from an activity because I am not mentally capable of participating."

"Work alone time. Taking unscheduled breaks as needed, especially if the weather is good enough to go outside and there is a nearby more natural area to walk through."

"Specific break time that I can take as needed is better than scheduled breaks. It's easiest to hyperfocus when I can and regulate when it is needed. "

autistic employees

Benefits of a break

Just like with communication, every autistic employee will regulate emotions and anxiety differently. The strategies described above are the strategies most requested by respondents to the autistic workers survey, but remember that some employees may have different needs than those listed above. If the employer and the employee are willing to collaborate on exploring individualized strategies for emotional regulation, the results will be a happier employee, fewer sick days, and lower employee turnover, all of which saves the employer money.