

## **Dealing with Change: Key Strategies for Autistic Individuals**

### **Routines and Difficulties with Change**

**Autistic people can find any kind of change difficult, whether it's small day-to-day transitions or major life events. Set routines, rituals, and predictability can help manage anxiety and create a sense of safety. For example:**

- **Always travelling the same route to school or work**
- **Eating the same food for breakfast**
- **Having precise rituals around daily activities**

**Rules and routines can become especially rigid during periods of stress, illness, or major change. Even minor transitions, such as moving between two activities, can cause distress.**

### **Common Signs Related to Routine Dependence**

- **Distress with changes to the environment, people, or schedules**
- **Strong preferences for specific items (e.g., clothing fabric, soap brand)**
- **Verbal rituals (repeated questioning with specific expected answers)**
- **Compulsive behaviours (e.g., frequent handwashing or checking locks)**

**Note: Compulsive behaviours do not always indicate OCD, but if concerned, consult a GP.**

---

### **Strategies to Support with Change**

#### **1. Find Out About the Change**

**Be proactive as a parent or carer. If a change is upcoming (e.g., a teacher leaving school), try to get as much detail as possible in advance so the autistic individual can prepare.**

#### **2. Describe the Change Clearly**

- **Mark the date of the change on a calendar and help count down the days**
- **Use clear, simple language**
- **Limit gestures and facial expressions while explaining**

#### **3. Use Visual Supports**

**Visual aids can improve understanding and reduce anxiety:**

- **Show photos of the new place, new people, or new activities**
- **Create a photo book or folder to look at before and during the change**
- **If going on holiday, show pictures of the entire journey, not just the airplane**

**On the day of the change:**

- **Use a visual timetable to show what's happening and when**

- Reverse the visuals to help explain the return journey

#### **4. Involve the Right People**

**If moving to a new school or care provider:**

- Involve staff from both the current and new settings
- Ensure person-centred planning
- Focus on the individual's needs, communication preferences, and potential anxiety triggers

#### **5. Support Transitions Between Activities**

**Sequencing and understanding time can be difficult. Strategies include:**

- Use a visual “now-and-next” board
- Use a timer to show when an activity will end
- Allow the person to move symbols or objects to indicate an activity is finished
- Make wait times as short and predictable as possible
- Use visual representations of waiting time (timers, sticker clocks)
- Introduce transition boxes with calming activities

#### **6. Manage Anxiety**

- Be observant of anxiety signs
- Offer a worry book or worry box to express concerns
- Explain positive aspects of the change
- Use social stories or apps like “Brain in Hand” for support