



Autism Society of Minnesota Guide to Managing Self-Quarantine and Social Distancing

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Managing Your Mental Health

As the United States deals with the COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic, many in the Minnesota autism community have expressed concern and anxiety about what they can expect and how they can safely engage in self-quarantine or social distancing. This AuSM guide is a resource to support you through these unpredictable days. Individuals have unique needs, and the contents are suggestions to be used at your discretion. AuSM values the health and safety of our community and encourages you to work with your support team to create a plan that works best for you.

First Priorities

- Sleep consistently and enough
- Eat consistently, as healthily as you can
- Limit alcohol and drugs
- Take medications as prescribed

Preventative

- Mindfulness
- Continue seeing therapist through telehealth if possible
- Limit time spent on social media or looking at the news
- Use sensory inputs to calm self
- Plan what you will do daily
- Go outside as possible
- Continue managing bills, cleaning, etc.
- Read, write, or other fun activities
- Stim freely while you're at home!
- Do tasks that make you feel competent
- Use hobbies and special interests to stay engaged
- Create a list of things you enjoy doing at home (see next page)
- Create a list of things that need to get done at home (see next page)
- Set aside a space just for you
- Don't be afraid to rest
- Track how you're feeling so you can respond to crisis
- Create a crisis plan before you reach meltdown

Crisis

- Give yourself a strong sensory experience (hot shower, ice under your eyes, work out very hard for 5 minutes)
- Tell someone you are in crisis
- Have a list of people to call, text, or message
- Use an artistic outlet (painting, drawing, writing, poetry, music, etc.)
- Walk outside (away from people)
- Distract yourself: write bad jokes, read something, bake, make a playlist, organize something, clean, etc.
- Do something sensory pleasing: hot bath, paint your nails, do a face mask, spin, swing, etc.
- Rewatch a favorite show or movie
- Do one task you can easily accomplish
- Count or arrange things
- Find a comfort object
- Interact with your pet if you have one

Autistic Strengths

- You may feel more comfortable with social distancing
- You can create routines well
- You can use special interests to entertain yourself and boost your mood
- Being alone means you can stim freely and you don't have to mask
- You can use skills you've learned from a therapist, OT, PT, or other formal supports
- Sensory inputs can create powerful calming effects

Resources

If you have specific questions or are looking for personalized support during this time, please reach out to the AuSM Information and Resources team at info@ausm.org or 651.647.1083.

Suggested Activities to Stay Busy



Art and Creation

Paint/draw/collage/color/origami
Write/journal/blog
Sing/play an instrument
Cross stitch/knit/crochet
Learn calligraphy or hand lettering
Learn something (try Duolingo for a new language)
Try new makeup
Dye or cut your hair
Teach your pet tricks
Make a video for Tik Tok, Instagram, or YouTube
Puzzles or crosswords
Science experiments
Riddles/logic problems
YouTube tutorials
Virtual museum/library tours

Fun & Entertainment

Use Your Body

Hot bath
Dance
Yoga
Stretching
Walk outside
Eat something delicious
Jump up and down (if you have a trampoline this is great)
Find online workout videos
Be VERY loud or VERY quiet
Sensory exploration (e.g., color with scented markers, make play-doh/slime, etc.)

Around the House

Paint
Hang photos
Yardwork
Fix something that's broken
Deep clean (appliances, spaces, etc.)
Rearrange a space
Purge your closet, junk drawer, or garage
Home improvement projects
Use Pinterest to plan projects
Clean your car

Practical Tasks

Personal Projects

Update your budget
Update your resume
Do you have any long-term projects?
Organize your planner/to do list
Try to spice up your house so it looks or feels different
File taxes
Write a book
Take an online class

For Fun

Game night or movie night with the family
Have a date day with your partner
Read books and discuss them
Cook together or for each other
Keep some space from each other
Eat meals together
Play music together
Play trivia with each other
Make up a story one word at a time

With Your Family/Housemates

Practical

Plan something for the future
Revamp chore charts or distribution of labor
Keep the house disinfected and clean
Conflicts will occur: plan ahead and practice conflict resolution



Consumable Media List

Everyone has different tastes in media, but it can be very helpful to plan ahead what you'd like to watch, read, or listen to while you're practicing social distancing. You can even share lists with your friends to get new ideas. Use this page to write down the media that you want to consume.



TV

Music

Books

Movie

Podcasts

Video Games

YouTube/Streaming

Audio Books

Other:

Creating Routine/Sample Schedule



Use this example schedule to inspire you to create your own. You may want to create one for weekdays and one for weekends. Each day you can slot in the tasks you like during times like “work” “cleaning” or “relaxation.”

Time	Task
8 a.m.	Wake Up
8-8:30 a.m.	Read
8:30-9 a.m.	Make Coffee and Set Up Work
9 a.m.-12 p.m.	Work
12-12:30 p.m.	Lunch and Do One Small Cleaning Project
12:30-4 p.m.	Work
4-5:30 p.m.	BREAK TIME! Fun Stuff Only
5:30-6:30 p.m.	Work Out
6:30-7:30 p.m.	Home Projects
7:30-8:30 p.m.	One to Two Cleaning Projects
8:30-10 p.m.	Relaxation Time
10-11 p.m.	Read
11 p.m.	Sleep

Tips for Keeping a Regular Routine

When you're at home with no obligations it's easy to stop keeping a regular schedule, or throw off your sleep and eating times. Do your best to keep your day as similar to usual as possible. If you normally wake up at 8 a.m. to go to work, set your alarm for 8 a.m.

- Schedule time for fun
- Schedule time for socializing remotely
- Schedule time for work if you work from home
- Schedule time for school if you have children
- Schedule time for projects
- Schedule time for cleaning/housework

Where Do I Start?

Building a schedule can be tough. Start with the things you know you have to do (sleeping, eating, working) and schedule time for those.

Next, make sure you have a list of fun things and projects you want to accomplish. Assign them to different days or set time each day for fun.

Then, work with any friends or family to set aside time to be social. This is particularly important while you're in isolation.

Finally, give yourself down time to simply relax or follow your whims.

This schedule doesn't have to be set in stone, but it can help you create structure.

Setting Up Your Space

- Have a separate space for working (ideally you won't do anything else in this space).
- Try to remove distractions from this space.
- Make it comfortable: include a solid chair with a good back, your coffee and water, fidgets, and technology.
- Don't work from your bed or your couch: keep your office space feeling like an office.
- Think about your sensory needs and try to meet them in this space:
 - Do you want white noise?
 - Do you like perfect silence?
 - Do you need to decrease your visual clutter?
 - What do you need to stay organized?
 - Do you need a particular temperature?
 - Do you want particular smells?

Communication

- Communicate clearly with colleagues and management: you don't have nonverbal communication to help and it can be easy to assume that coworkers know what you're working on or what you've done. They probably don't, so make sure you tell them. Clarify how you will communicate with colleagues (e.g., calls, text, e-mail, Slack, Zoom)
- Try to be clear with management about your hours and projects, as well as what you can and can't do from home (some projects won't be possible remotely).
- Communicate to others in your space about your work hours and expectations to limit interruptions.
- Have a plan for pets or kids: does your pet need to be restricted from the office space? Do kids need to have clear tasks while you're working?

Managing Distractions and Workload

- Try to make yourself feel more "formal" or businesslike by getting dressed every day. You may want to wear shoes or makeup to help you get in the mindset of work.
- Have a solid morning routine to get you started. Keep it the same each day. Ideally, you won't wake up and immediately start working so that you have time to wake up.
- Write a clear to do list each day and keep it close at hand.
- Take breaks regularly. Step away from your computer and fully disconnect.
- Have times when you're working during which you're not answering the phone or e-mail so that you can work on projects.
- Schedule time for chores rather than doing them in the middle of work.
- In conference calls, use headphones and mute your microphone if you're not speaking.
- Sign out of social media accounts while you're working.
- Sign out of work devices at the end of the day to keep clear boundaries.



Socializing Remotely

Identify the people you are closest to and talk to them in advance about how you can connect with them. Schedule time that you can spend doing high engagement activities, and set up ways to work them into your daily life. Know which forms of socialization work for you: if you hate phones, don't call people. You may have to be creative and try things that aren't immediately comfortable. Try to vary how you communicate: don't just use video chat or only text. Use all the resources at your disposal.

Writing

- Write an actual letter
- Share compliments or kind words with friends
- Use Slack, Discord, or another chat that you can keep going regularly
- Let friends know if you're struggling and need support
- Offer help whenever possible: it can boost your mood
- Create challenges with your friends (photo challenges, cooking challenges, etc.)
- Use your extra time to reach out to people you miss or haven't had time to see lately

Video

- Video chat Facetime, Google Hangouts, Zoom meeting, etc.
- Twitch or other streaming services
- Watch parties: start a movie or TV show at the same time
- Online games: try Jackbox, online cooperative games, or an online game like Dungeons & Dragons
- Keep a video chat with friends running in the background
- Have dinner with friends over video
- Try changing up your video background: if you want to simulate a coffee shop date, make your house look like a coffee shop

Speaking

- Call friends at scheduled times
- Do TED talks for your friends; pick a topic you love and share information about it
- Use voice chats while playing video games or watching movies together

If You Live With Others

- Make sure you have time apart, in different rooms, doing different things
- If possible work in different rooms
- PLAN to spend time together so that you can make it quality: pick something to do that you actually want to do
- You CAN go outside as long as you're not near others. Leave the house if you need to
- Get creative about what you can do together: make music, create your own short play, cast a crossword puzzle to your TV and work on it together, see who can do the most push-ups

If You Live Alone

- Schedule meals, downtime, and fun activities with friends online
- Find ways to share what you're doing: take friends on a video tour of your space or share videos back and forth (you can even make it a challenge: who can do the funniest dance or make the other one laugh)



If you aren't sure where to start with mindfulness, try one of these exercises to give you direction. For each, if your attention starts to wander just notice it, then return to the task. Start small: one or two minutes at a time. As you get more comfortable focusing your attention wholly on what you're doing, you can increase the time you spend.

Body Scan Meditation: Sit or lay comfortably, then focus your attention slowly and deliberately on each part of your body, in order, from toe to head or head to toe. Be aware of any sensations, emotions or thoughts associated with each part of your body.

Walking Meditation: Find a quiet place 10 to 20 feet in length, and begin to walk slowly. Focus on the experience of walking, being aware of the sensations of standing and the subtle movements that keep your balance. When you reach the end of your path, turn and continue walking, maintaining awareness of your sensations.

Mindful Seeing: Look out a window and notice each thing you see. Avoid labeling and categorizing what you see outside the window; instead of thinking "bird" or "stop sign," try to notice the colors, the patterns, or the textures. Give yourself a time limit, and simply notice and see as carefully as you can.

Mindful Breathing: Sit or lay comfortably and focus your attention on your breath. Breathe in to a count of four, hold for one, and breathe out to a count of five. Notice how your breath feels in your nose, in your throat, in your lungs. Notice the rising and falling of your chest and stomach.

5 Senses Meditation: Look around the room and identify 5 things you can see, then 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Notice each one carefully and pay attention to the sense as you identify each thing.

Mindful Awareness: Think of something that happens every day more than once; something you take for granted, like opening a door, for example. At the very moment you touch the doorknob to open the door, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel in that moment and where the door will lead you.

Mindful Listening: Select a piece of music you have never heard before. Close your eyes and put on your headphones. Try not to get drawn into judging the music by its genre, title or artist name before it has begun. Instead, ignore any labels and neutrally allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song. Allow yourself to explore every aspect of track. Explore the song by listening to the dynamics of each instrument. Separate each sound in your mind and analyze each one by one.

Mindful Appreciation: All you have to do is notice 5 things in your day that usually go unappreciated. These things can be objects or people; it's up to you. Use a notepad to check off 5 by the end of the day.

Mindful Tracking: Keep a time journal of what you achieve in a block of time. Work out when you're single-tasking and when you're multi-tasking. Note down what you achieved in that time block and how mindful you were.



Sensory & Stimming Examples

While you're at home you may not be able to get the same sensory experiences you may like. Here are ideas for strong sensory inputs you can use to help regulate your emotions. These suggestions are for inputs. If you need to decrease sensory input, try to carve out a space in your own home where you can change the environment.

- Look at engaging photos or colorful computer backgrounds
- Wear bright clothes
- Watch a live feed from an aquarium or zoo
- Make sure you have tons of fidgets
- Use apps for visual or auditory stimming
- Try your hand at graphic design on a site like Canva
- Add flavors to water
- Use a chewable fidget
- Chew gum or suck on a breath mint
- Eat something spicy, sweet, bitter, salty, crunchy, or chewy
- Use a straw
- Put on headphones and turn your music ALL the way up
- Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) videos on YouTube
- See what you can use at home to make new and interesting noises
- Put subtitles on movies or TV
- Put white noise on (Spotify or YouTube have playlists)
- Create deep pressure with a weighted blanket, cuddling a pet, or asking a loved one to squeeze you
- Make a pillow nest or fort
- Find as many interesting textures as you can in your house
- Wear clothing that is fitted or gives feedback
- Roll down a hill if there is one close to your house
- Candles, essential oils, plug ins. Some smells might push you to alertness (peppermint) while others can be relaxing (lavender): plan when you want each
- Cook with strong smells
- Fresh fruits have strong smells: zest an orange or lemon for a good scent
- Yoga
- Do a heavy lifting task
- Pushups or planking
- Stress ball, grip strengthener, other squeezing fidget
- Jumping, spinning, bouncing
- Flap
- Toe walk
- Twist side to side
- Crack your knuckles, back, neck, etc.
- Jump onto pillows
- Watch a familiar/comforting movie, or listen to a favorite song



Guide content was inspired by multiple online sources and personal autistic experiences. Please feel free to consult these links for additional information and support.

Mental Health and Crisis Management

The Recovery Village: <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/mental-health/related/crisis-kits/#gref>
The Mighty: <https://themighty.com/2017/10/what-to-put-in-mental-health-crisis-kit/>

Mindfulness

Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/mindfulness-exercises/art-20046356>
Mindful: <https://www.mindful.org/10-ways-mindful-work/>
Pocket Mindfulness: <https://www.pocketmindfulness.com/6-mindfulness-exercises-you-can-try-today/>
Positive Psychology: <https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-exercises-techniques-activities/>

Self-Isolation

USA Today: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2020/03/16/coronavirus-quarantine-100-things-do-while-trapped-inside/5054632002/>
BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51936286>

Socializing

The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-quarantine-socializing/608020/>
BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51966087>

Working from Home

PC Mag: <https://www.pcmag.com/news/get-organized-20-tips-for-working-from-home>
NPR: <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/15/815549926/8-tips-to-make-working-from-home-work-for-you>
Buzzfeed: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/natashajokic1/work-from-home-hacks>