

SUPPORTING FLEXIBLE THINKING

Many autistic individuals have a strong preference for routine and similarity. It can be overwhelming and stressful when things change, when we need to do things differently, or when we're confronted with new ways of thinking. If you are a family member or support person for someone who is autistic, this resource will help you support them in practicing their flexible thinking in a way that is respectful and puts their needs first.

WHAT IS FLEXIBLE THINKING?



Seeing Different Perspectives



Considering Alternative Options or Ideas



Adjusting Plans



Being Open to Change



Transitioning Between Activities

Flexible Thinking and Autism

Change is inevitable,
but it doesn't have to
be unpleasant.

Routine and sameness are a large part of the autism diagnosis. In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), this is described as: "Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities." One of the specific examples of this is: "Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day)."

While the DSM describes this in a deficit-based way, sometimes it can be a strength. There are a few elements of routine that are especially helpful for the autistic neurotype:

- Routines can help with executive function challenges by reducing the amount of focus you need to spend on tasks you do repeatedly.
- Routines help make the world more predictable, which is especially important if you struggle to understand neurotypicals.
- Things that are familiar create a sense of comfort: coming back to a familiar routine can help to regulate your emotions.
- Routines can bring joy.



Why Do You Need to Support Flexibility?

Despite the fact that routine can be useful, there are times when everyone needs to be able to deal with changes. A common challenge for autistic folks is flexible thinking, whether that's transitioning between activities, dealing with a change in your schedule, adjusting your approach, or thinking differently about something. This can lead to anxiety, frustration, and interpersonal problems. It can even interfere with school, work, or relationships.

If you are a parent or caregiver, you can help your autistic child learn flexible thinking skills earlier in life, so that they are prepared to manage their emotions when they do encounter changes. Even as autistic individuals get older, they can still benefit from a trusted support person to help them through changes and to support them in practicing their flexibility skills.

Empowering the Individual

No matter what you do, the autistic individual should guide your process.

Whether you are a parent, caregiver, professional, or take on a different support role, it's essential that you put the autistic individual at the center of the process of practicing flexibility.

Being flexible is not inherently better than having routines or set preferences. There are times when it is useful and necessary, and times when doing things the same way is beneficial.

Here are a few principles to keep in mind that will help you center their needs and goals.

- Respect their boundaries. If they say they are not in a place to practice right now, save it for another time.
- Help them find a reason why **they** want to learn more flexible thinking. If they don't want to work on it, they won't.
 - For younger kids, explain why you're asking them to practice these skills. What are the skills? How will they be helpful in the future? Allow them to share their perspective, too.
- Let them set their own goals. They should be the one to decide which areas they want to be more flexible, and which are less important to them.
- Respect their feelings: you may feel as if an autistic loved one's rigidity is your burden, but it's not about you. As you help them practice, recognize that you're asking them to do something really hard and potentially anxiety-inducing. Those feelings are real.
- Validate when their routines and habits are positive.
- Celebrate together when things go well.

Examples of Support

- Act as a body double
- Teach an emotion regulation routine. Practice it together and help remind them to use it when necessary.
- Use co-regulating techniques.
- Create visuals, calendars, and schedules to cue change in advance. This works best when there is one place to check for all changes. Help create a habit to check that place every day.
- Talk through why a change is happening.
- Incorporate a lot of activities into daily life. Try to introduce the person to new hobbies or activities that take place in different spaces.
- Model what you're hoping to help them with.
- Help them determine what is challenging about change and brainstorm supports together.
- Keep calming items and sensory tools on hand to help them.
- Assist them with their executive function: give them reminders when it's time to practice.



Practice Activities

Try out some of these suggestions with the autistic individual in your life. Remember to let them choose which activity to practice, when to practice it - and to go at their pace! To help them be a part of their own practice, use the worksheet on the following page to decide what activity you'll do and how you'll prepare.

- Try out a new hobby/activity/experience together.
- Try a new food together.
- Brainstorm an unimportant rule together, then let the autistic individual try breaking it.
- Take a task they always do the same way and try doing it differently.
- Drive a different route to a familiar place: if they don't drive, have them ride with you while you try it.
- Take a schedule they do regularly and try changing something in it.
- Take a game you both know and make up new rules. Play it with the different rules. Alternatively, try playing a game where the rules change.
- Play different types of games that engage the mind in different ways, for example do a Sudoku and then a Kenken (both number puzzles that make you approach them differently).
- Try to find two different solutions to the same problem. You can talk through ideas with the person you're supporting.
- For someone who is struggling with categories, try a matching game that includes different matching rules. This will help them learn that things can fit into more than one category.
- Play "pack my bag": this game helps someone practice preparing for different situations. You create a hypothetical event and ask the person to pack their bag: it could be going to the library, hanging at the pool, or anything else. They then practice gathering what they'd need for the outing.

Remember as you do these practice activities to incorporate the supports and preparations discussed in the previous pages. If something becomes too distressing, stop and use some emotion regulation skills.

Resources

- [Creating Autism Interventions That Promote Flexibility](#)
- [Executive Functioning Skills 101: Flexibility](#)
- [Dealing With Change](#)
- [Why Autistic People Find Change Difficult](#)
- [Learning a Flexible Routine](#)
- [Use Inflexibility to Teach Flexibility](#)
- [5 Ways to Help Your Child With Autism Learn Flexible Thinking](#)
- [Building a Skillset for Flexible Thinking](#)

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Practicing Flexibility Worksheet

What practice activity do I want to try?

When will I do it? For how long?

How will I prepare in advance?

What supports will I have ready during the activity?

What will I do afterwards?

How did it go?

