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Supporting autistic people over the holidays

The festive season brings with it a number of changes to our environment which should be considered when you are supporting an autistic person.

It is important to remember that everyone is unique and some people find it easier to adapt to change than others. Unplanned change to an autistic person can have a major effect on their life and we should do all that we can to reduce the potential negative consequences.

Changes to consider

It is likely that routine will be interrupted:

- If someone you support is studying or working then they may be required to take time off in December.
- If they have regular appointments with their doctor then they may not be able to stay on the same schedule.

There will be more sensory stimuli:

- Christmas always means there are more people in the shops and in the streets.
- Stores will often play Festive music, often louder than they play other music the rest of the year.
- Many places will be decorated with flashing lights and bright colours.

The schedules of their friends and families is likely to change:

- Will they be spending more/less time with their friends?
- Do they have extra family members staying with them?

The weather:

- Does the person you support dress appropriately for the colder weather?

You will change:

- Your availability may change.
- If you regularly meet on a Sunday, what are you going to do on Christmas Day?

Your clothes

- It is likely that you will start to wear different clothing. If you don't make the person you support aware of this in advance then the change might affect them.

Supporting people through this period

Pay attention to any changes in behaviour or attitude that you may notice, often there will be an underlying reason for any changes. Some autistic adults have a tendency to mask their struggles, ensure that the person you support knows it is okay to find the changes challenging.

Take the time to ensure you are communicating as clearly and as literally as possible. Additional sensory stimuli can reduce a person's ability to communicate. It is a good idea to reinforce any instructions you verbally give with a written copy, so it can be referred back to.

If your support schedule changes then make a calendar which shows when future meetings will take place and other key dates in the local community. If you are meeting in a community environment then attempt to change your meeting point to quieter locations.

Encourage mindfulness and breathing exercises to copy with the increased anxiety and sensory input.

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If there is a break in your support over the holidays then maintain communication via texts/phone calls or emails if the option is available to you.

Most importantly you should be planning ahead as most of these additional challenges can be overcome. Where possible create a plan with the person you support. Discuss what changes they would like to make - this will make them feel more comfortable and make you more confident in supporting them.