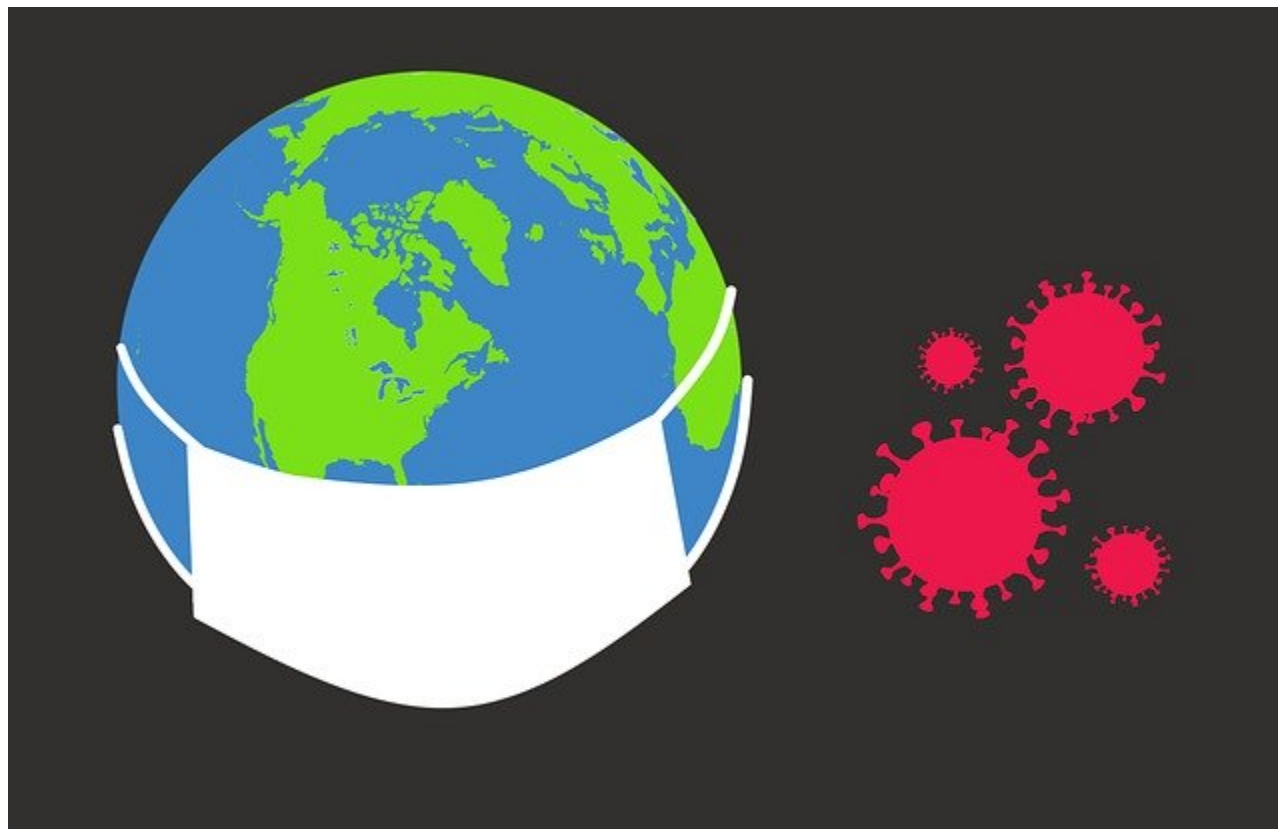




COVID 19 Challenges and Solutions For Neurodivergents

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We're all challenged by a pandemic that seems more like a sci fi horror movie than real life. For those who are neurodiverse, Aspergers, autistics, or NLD, there are additional challenges to face.

Many assume that people who are autistic or have spectrum traits welcome the chance to be legitimately socially isolated. For many neurodiverse people, this could not be further from the truth. Autistics and those with NLD usually want relationships, but their ways of engaging relationships are different from those of "neurotypicals," those who expect (and actually demand) "normal" social behavior. Those with autism spectrum conditions and "neurotypicals" can feel rejected by each other.

Because of this disconnect, autistic people and those with NLD are often isolated and rejected in their everyday lives, giving rise to anxiety and depression. In this time of heightened anxiety for everyone, they have the same need for connection and reassurance everyone else does, even if they

might express it differently.

On the other hand, when we're shut in together, there can be more social demands than usual. Families can assume that this is time to be together, to hang out and watch movies, play games or go for walks together. All this togetherness may seem very casual and nondemanding (what's stressful about watching a movie?) but this constant expectation of togetherness and spontaneity can be overwhelming to autistics, NLD and other neurodivergent folks who need alone time to wind down. Families can worry that neurodivergents are isolating themselves and that this is unhealthy, but time to decompress is important.

Everyone's routine is upended. We work from home, aren't at school, days merge into each other. Routine trips to the store are now strange experiences of empty shelves and spaced out lines. Autistics and those with NLD thrive on routine. For those with spectrum traits whose diet requires specific food, their foods of choice might not be available. Morning routine, daily routine, expectable activities are all gone. What's deeply unsettling to many can be even especially upsetting for those whose lives and sense of wellbeing is organized around expectable routine. It's critical that neurodivergent people create structure in their lives, and that families support them in this need. Creating a new expectable routine still has the difficulty of novelty and transition, but it's vital.

We're all anxious. People with anxiety disorders focused on safety for themselves and their family, on their own physical wellbeing and that of their families, or who have a constant sense of impending threat can feel unbearably overwhelmed, and many on the spectrum have co-existing anxiety disorders. For all of us who are anxious and especially those experiencing extreme anxiety, it's important to pay attention and do whatever self-calming strategies work, whether meditation, sensory tools, music, or art. Walking outside can be deeply healing and restorative to some. There's online concerts and yoga classes. There are many for whom keeping a journal gets thoughts out of a repetitive loop in their heads onto paper. In any case, never force a "solution" on someone. One person's anxiety antidote can be someone else's anxiety trigger.

Every parent with children home from school who are bored and lacking playmates knows what cabin fever is like and the propensity of children to make noise and siblings to bicker. For those on the spectrum or with spectrum traits, being shut in a noisy environment can be sensory overload, which sometimes leads to meltdowns. It's important to be able to take care of one's needs, and that might mean noise canceling headphones, sensory tools, or having a low stimulation space that is respected by others. Going to preferred behaviors such as videogames is a way of escaping to somewhere safe and manageable.

People around our communities and around the world are suffering with illness, inadequate care and loss of income. Autistics and people with NLD have deep empathy for suffering of others and for social justice. The images of death from Italy, the chaos of medical workers without protective gear putting their lives at risk and the struggle of families who have lost not only their paychecks but the school lunches their children depend on are upsetting but the shared pain is especially deep for

many on the spectrum. They may perseverate on the fear and injustice. Families might feel that this response is overdone, but it's part of the makeup of people on the spectrum who struggle with injustice and the plight of the marginalized. It's important to understand and affirm when someone shows deep compassion.

All the usual precautions apply – hand washing, social isolation of 6 feet, staying away from groups, shelter in place if required or working at home as well as limiting exposure to the 24/7 drumbeat of disaster updates on cable news. We will get through this, ideally with understanding and compassion for each other.



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