# ERP Adaptations For Our Autistic Members: 20 Things To Know

Yes, you can do ERP with an autistic client! All you need is a bit of understanding & flexibility about what matters when in session with those members & how to effectively adapt ERP so that an autistic client can succeed as much as our non-autistic clients. Below is a summary of 20 things to know to help make that success happen.

Pre-ERP: Getting Oriented

1. Be patient & reset your expectations for rate of progress & change.
2. We are treating OCD, NOT autism. Autism is an inherent way of being, not a "disorder."
3. Have empathy. Put yourself in an autistic person's shoes.
4. Presume competence, but don't assume knowledge. Ask "explain it back to me" v "make sense?" (On the flip side, presume your own possible ignorance about autistic life.)
5. Autistics are coming in with higher anxiety baselines & their experience of high-level SUDS is likely to be quite different than neurotypicals (NT).

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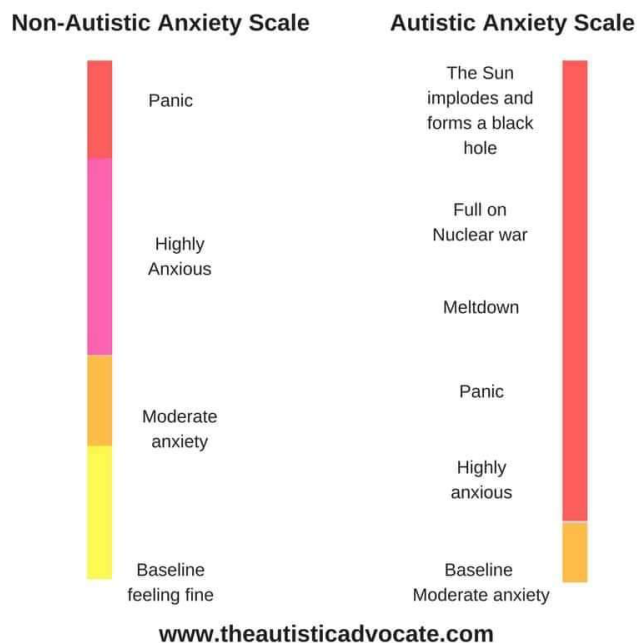
Pre-ERP: Effective Treatment Foundations

6. Work *with* autism, *not* against it. As providers we need to make some key shifts:
   a. Might need more prompts than rewards (varies if child/adolescent v. adult).
   b. Might need to use concrete language (short, simple & straightforward).
   c. Create a consistent environment - language, visuals, session structure.
   d. Minimize ambiguities - focus on 1 thing v. layering ERPs to prevent overload.
   e. Find meaningful personal motivators - specialized interests, goals - connect to ERP
   f. Allow for customized language & tools.
   g. Focus on what is being done well/correctly. Progress, not punishment.
   h. Teach the do's, not just the don'ts. The do isn't always obvious.

7. Allow reasonable accommodations - not for compulsions, but for sensory needs, choices & opportunities to succeed.
8. Allow information seeking - distorted beliefs & actions could be the result of a lack of knowledge or a misunderstanding of something someone said once.
9. Stay flexible - know when to take a different approach.
10. Communication (autistic-style) is KEY.
    a. Lean into concrete, factual, objective information.
    b. Talk less & not at high-speeds. (But do not infantilize communication.)
    c. Ask fewer questions at the same time.
    d. Let them set the pace - give time &/or space to process & respond.
    e. Give multiple options for communication - speaking, writing, typing, etc.
    f. If your autistic client is upset, speak softly & give them time &/or space.
    g. If your autistic client is perseverating, break the cycle by asking about an interest. (bonus tip: say something wrong about the interest so focus shifts to correcting you!)

ERP: Setting Up Success
11. Set up with a roadmap laying out the structure of treatment & sessions.
12. Create a SUDS scale that works for them (pre-hierarchy). Numbers can get tricky - use visuals or an autistic client's hyper-interest to create one that works for them. *(Document it!)*

ERP: Sensory-Based Tips
13. Get an individualized sensory profile & make an individualized plan for sensory overload.
14. Assess your own therapy environment from a sensory perspective.
    a. Is your background too visually stimulating?
    b. What is your background noise like?
    c. What is your vocal volume? Shhh…
    d. How bright is your lighting?
    e. How much movement is happening in the background?
15. Schedule for success - might need fewer sessions or more frequent, shorter sessions to allow for processing & recovery from ERP & room to take on new ones; others prefer the momentum &/or the accountability of meeting more often.
16. Do NOT force eye contact. Eye contact does NOT equal engagement. Lack of eye contact might be what is *allowing* them to focus & not overload.
17. Allow sensory breaks & tools so that sensory overload doesn't impede ERP.
18. Sensory habituation doesn't really happen for autistic individuals.

ERP: The Most Crucial Tip!
19. ERP IS FOR OCD COMPULSIONS ONLY.
20. It's OK & necessary to put on ERP on pause ONLY for sensory reasons or meltdowns, not high anxiety/distress. When sensory overload hits, there's zero chance for any ERP to be successful. The break is to let the sensory system settle down so that they can go back into the ERP with

focus on the exercise & an ability to focus & process. Autistic meltdowns aren't triggered by high emotion, they're triggered by sensory/somatic issues. Once those are managed, bad to ERP. Just like with our non-autistic clients, we do not stop ERP because of anxiety, but we may stop it for something that's an autistic trait getting in the way of doing an ERP exercise. This is why we need the sensory profile & plan - so both client & therapist know what to watch for!

BONUS: Autism Misperceptions v. Reality
Knowledge is bliss!

Autism Misperceptions	Autistic Reality
Autistics are all alike	*"If you've met 1 autistic person,* *you've met 1 autistic person."*
Autistics don't want (or need) friends	Autistic socializing may look different, but the need for belonging is universal.
Autistics aren't interesting in sex	A false & tragic myth. Autistics are humans with human needs. (Note: *anyone* could be asexual)
Autistics avoid novelty because they like things to be the same	Many Autistics seek out novelty in their own ways v. automatically comply with norms.
Autistics have no sense of humor	Might not find conventional jokes to be funny, but can have different humor styles.
Autistics are geniuses & have savant-like "special abilities"	Only 10% qualify as savants. The savant myth is perpetuated by Hollywood & creates pressure.
Autistics are dangerous	They're actually likely to be more altruistic than others & more likely to be victims of violence.
Autistics don't have feelings	Autistics may identify &/or display emotion differently. This is not a lack of emotional capacity.
Autistics lack empathy	Autistics might be more empathic when it comes to emotional empathy; cognitive empathy can be more of a difficulty.