



1. Hidden Anxiety

Spotlight on
Supporting Autistic
Girls and Gender
Diverse Students
at School

Neuro-affirming tips and strategies to support autistic girls and gender diverse autistic students with hidden anxiety at school:

- Get to know your individual autistic students and pay close attention to those who are quiet and compliant. Seek to understand their individual triggers for anxiety and dig deeper if they are not obvious- they may be camouflaging them.
- Check in with your autistic students regularly and be aware that they may not be able to ask for help, or to verbalise that they are not okay. You might need to be the detective and look for non-verbal cues and signs.
- Check in with parents and believe them if they tell you that their child is struggling with anxiety, even if they appear "fine" at school.
- Develop authentic relationships with your students. Connection and relational safety are the key to helping anxious autistic students to feel safe and supported.
- Offer a variety of means for autistic students to communicate with you. Examples can include visuals (such as a card) that students can use to signal they need help, a box or note system where they can write to you, or for older students, being able to email or message the teacher directly.
- Establish a safe haven or quiet place for students to access in the classroom or playground. Provide autistic students with a discreet exit strategy to use these spaces when needed. This can include a designated quiet corner or keeping the library open during breaks.



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- Allow for accommodations including comfort items and sensory tools to be accessed whenever needed, with dignity, and without singling individual students out. Normalise the process of having ALL students recognise their needs, and model this yourself as an adult.
- Having a predictable routine can often help reduce feelings of anxiety for many autistic students. Providing visuals including the class timetable, instructions, timers, etc and notifying autistic students of any major changes in routine (for example, a different teacher or a special event) ahead of time can help alleviate anxiety.
- Recognise that stimming is a legitimate way for autistic students to provide the sensory input they need to regulate and to reduce anxiety or nervous system distress. Allow students to stim when needed, without judgement. Note however that stimming can also be an indicator that an autistic student is experiencing anxiety, and therefore a sign to check in with them.
- Be aware that many autistic girls and gender diverse young people have deep empathy and can be highly attuned to the emotional states of other people. Provide trigger warnings and consider offering additional support for students in cases where classwork involves potentially distressing topics (for example war, or injured animals).
- Be mindful of autistic students who have perfectionist tendencies. Although perfectionism can appear to some as 'striving for excellence', in many cases perfectionism is linked to fear, and is a way for some autistic students to hide their anxieties and struggles. Supporting positive self-talk and self-esteem, encouraging healthy 'good effort', breaking tasks into smaller, more achievable steps, and praising effort, not grades, are some strategies to help some perfectionist students.