

Anxiety Curve

What is the “Anxiety Curve”?

The Anxiety Curve is a graph that can be used to describe and explain an emotional escalation. It is named the Anxiety Curve but actually it is useful in relation to lots of other emotions – not just anxiety! The graph shows different stages of an emotion.

- Prior - trigger and build up
- During – crisis
- Post - recovery and post event dip

Why would you use the Anxiety Curve?

The Anxiety Curve can be used by parents, carers, and even young people themselves to help understand emotions and how people respond to them.

It can be very useful to understand what leads to a crisis. Understanding triggers and the build up can limit the number of crises by minimising them, putting strategies in to help the young person cope or avoid them all together.

Knowing where the person is on the graph should inform others how they should be engaging with the person and how much they can cope with at that time.

How does the Anxiety Curve relate to autistic people?

Autistic people may have more triggers or different triggers from neurotypical people. They may also receive less internal body signals so they might not be aware of the level of emotion they are experiencing. Autistic people can also have higher levels of baseline anxiety (as they are having to work harder to understand the world/environment) and this can mean they have less capacity for situational triggers (things that happen in the moment). Autistic people may find sensory strategies more helpful to regulate themselves.

Some top tips for using the Anxiety Curve

- Always think – where is the young person on the graph? This will help tell you about how much capacity they have and whether we might need to adapt the environmental, social or task demand.
- Everyone is more responsive, flexible and open when they are calmer so being proactive and intervening earlier at the base of the curve can have better results.
- Sometimes there can be one significant trigger and at other times there can be an accumulation of lots of smaller stressors which have gathered over a period of time.
- When someone is in a very heightened state (at crisis) we call this being emotionally dysregulated. At this point – the way our brain works changes and we can see the cognitive part of the brain shut down and the stress response of fight, flight or freeze kick in.
- The post crisis dip is not the time for analysis, reflection or planning as the young person can often still be as emotionally deregulated. In the post event dip offer reassurance things can be repaired, remind them they are accepted and gently challenge any negative talk if you can. You can say we will need to talk about it another time when everyone feels calmer.
- Reflective conversations can be helpful to look back at situations and learn from them and you can use the anxiety curve to help with this. Some young people can find this very difficult and might need strategies and different communication tools to engage in this type of conversation.
- If you are supporting someone who is emotionally distressed – this can have an impact on others too. They might find that they are going up the anxiety curve too!

Where can I find out more?

Perth Autism Support run a parent training called Supporting Young People with Anxiety. See our website for more information

Young people can learn more about this in a course we run called Be Content. Please contact PAS office to find out more about this.