

# Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic People Living in Rural and Remote Communities

## Community Professionals Edition



“

*Working in a rural community can feel isolating and discouraging when the resources that we need to support families just aren't available. On the other hand, working in a rural community can also feel rewarding and worthwhile because there is this ability to think creatively and “outside of the box” that often can't happen within larger organizations or systems. This creativity often relies on having strong relationships with other community organizations who can leverage their own resources to provide innovative solutions. It is a privilege to work with families and the trust and openness they give us as service providers drives us to help them advocate for their needs and overcome the numerous barriers they face. From one professional to another, 'keep going, you've got this'.*

*- Community service provider in rural Ontario*

”



# Welcome

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### **Language Disclaimer**

*The use of referential language as it relates to autism is a sensitive, important, and on-going conversation. We recognize that language is powerful, and our goal is to support and advocate alongside autistic people. This toolkit utilizes identity-first language (“autistic person”) to reflect the growing body of research showing that autistic people prefer this terminology. It reflects the belief that being autistic is an important part of a person’s identity.*

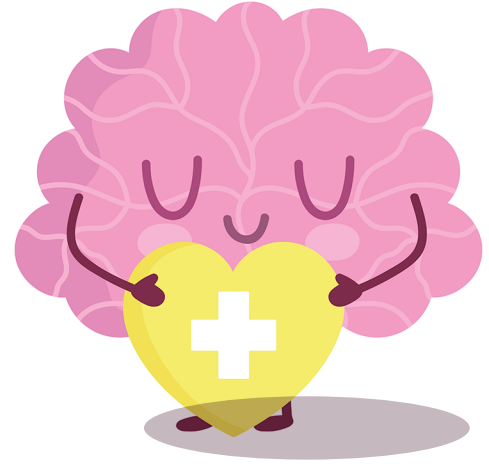
*Although the research indicates that most autistic teens and adults prefer the term “autistic person”, it is important to understand that each person may have a different preference for how they would like to be identified. Autonomy and self-determination are the most important aspects to consider when talking about autism. It is often best to ask an individual directly how they would prefer to be identified.*

*For more information on the use of referential language, see the [Autism Ontario Language Statement](#).*

# Welcome

## What is the purpose of this toolkit?

This toolkit aims to promote positive mental health in rural and remote communities. Together with autistic people, parents and caregivers of autistic people, and mental health professionals, we created various activities with information and evidence-informed strategies you can use at any time.



## Who should use this toolkit?

This toolkit is designed for **community professionals (e.g., librarians, teachers, coaches, etc.)** who support **autistic children, youth, and adults** who may be struggling with their mental health or who want more information on what mental health means.

## What are the limitations of this toolkit?

This toolkit is not meant to replace mental health therapy or support from a health care provider. It is intended to **educate** and **support** the mental health of families that you may work with or support while they are awaiting appropriate mental health services.

While we have compiled these resources promoting positive mental health for autistic people, this is not a resource suitable for individuals experiencing mental health crisis. Mental health crisis is any situation where a person may feel, act, or behave in a way that may result in them hurting themselves or other people.

“While these really are just band aid solutions to a much larger multifaceted issue of an inadequate amount of support in rural areas, it is important to recognize that autistic youth are not without support entirely. I know that autistic individuals have immense strength. I know and have heard countless caregivers speak on the kindness and care and understanding our neighbours’ and community members show their loved ones daily. Our small rural communities are a family of people supporting our autistic members. Autistic youth in rural areas may be lacking in mental health specific support, but with the love and care of their neighbours’, they are not completely without support.”

- Moira Robertson, Autistic Adult and Co-Author



# Emergency Resources

If you, or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, please call any of the following:

- **9-1-1 Emergency Response: 9-1-1**

Offers emergency response services including police, fire, and ambulance. Service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If you are having an emergency, when you call 9-1-1 be prepared to answer questions about the following:

- The location of the emergency, including the street address
- The phone number you are calling from
- The nature of the emergency (e.g., feelings of suicide or self-harm)
- Details about the emergency (i.e., information on who is having the mental health crisis, where are they, who is with them, and details about a potential plan)

\*\* If your community does not have access to 9-1-1, please contact your local emergency services number. \*\*

- **9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline: 9-8-8**

Offers trauma-informed and culturally appropriate support to people in Canada who are thinking about suicide. Service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- **Talk Suicide: 1-833-456-4566 or <http://988.ca>**

Offers toll-free support to people in Canada who have concerns about suicide.

- **Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868**

Youth mental health support available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

- **Hope for Wellness Help Line: 1-855-242-3310**

Offers immediate phone and chat counselling and crisis intervention to all Indigenous peoples across Canada in English, French, Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut.

If your role includes responding to autistic people who may be in crisis, it is important to modify your intervening strategies to support autistic people. To learn more about this, you can complete an online learning module created by the [York Community Autism Partnership](#) or access the [Supporting Autistic Children and Young People Through Crisis](#) document for more information and specific strategies.



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# Introduction to Mental Health

## What is mental health?

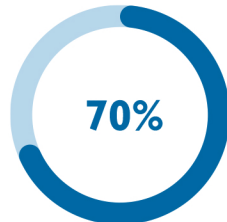
“Mental health is the ability to feel, think and act in ways that help us to enjoy life and deal with difficulties”<sup>i</sup>. It is fluid and can change day by day. Sometimes people may experience positive mental health (i.e., positive emotions, satisfaction with life, feelings of acceptance, and a sense of purpose) and sometimes they may experience mental distress. Whether the person experiences positive mental health or mental distress depends on their environment, how they are interacting with their environments, and their current resources<sup>ii</sup>



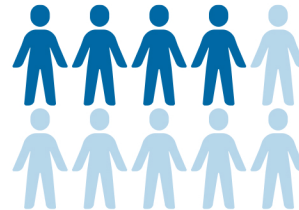
Many different factors influence mental health including:

- Lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise, and sleep <sup>iii iv v vi vii</sup>
- Health status <sup>viii</sup>
- Genetic risk factors, ie. if someone in your family has struggled with mental health concerns, you may be more at risk <sup>ix</sup>

# Mental Health Concerns in Autistic People



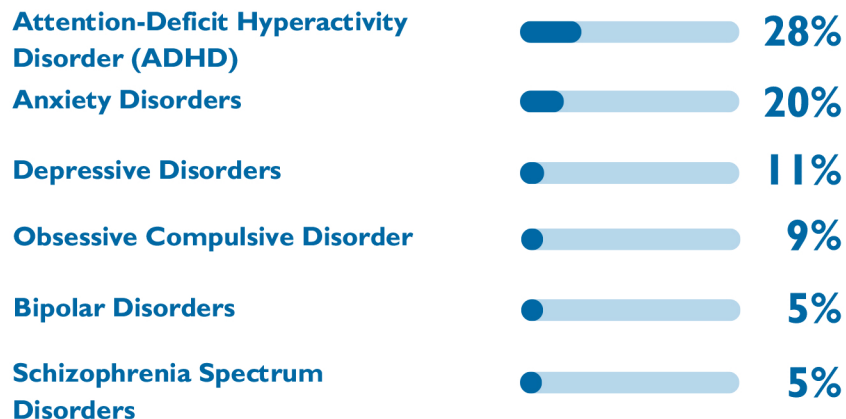
Up to approximately 70% of autistic children, youth, and adults have a co-occurring mental health condition



Approximately 40% of autistic children, youth, and adults have at least two co-occurring mental health conditions

1,2,3,5

### Prevalence of Co-occurring Condition in Autistic People



4

**“Not everyone is wired the same. And what works for you might not work for me. I just found my way to the other side and you can find yours.”**  
- Noah (autistic youth)

**I have learned that I am not alone, and that this is something to not be ashamed off, but to realize it is real and deserves help.”**  
- Austin (autistic youth)

To hear more lived experience stories about mental health, visit [POND Youth Digital Stories](#).

1. Rosen, T. E., Mazefsky, C. A., Vasa, R. A., & Lerner, M. D. (2018). Co-occurring psychiatric conditions in autism spectrum disorder. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 30(1), 40-61. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2968335/>  
2. Simonoff, E., Pickles, A., Charman, T., Chandler, S., Loucas, T., & Baird, G. (2008). Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: prevalence, comorbidity, and associated factors in a population-derived sample. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47(8), 921-929. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18645422/>  
3. Mowat, V., Barretto, J., Dunkle-Jackson, S., & Goodman, L. (2019). Putting children and youth first: Integrating autism and mental health services for children and youth. *Kinark Child and Family Services*. <https://www.kinark.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/AFHM-2019.pdf>  
4. Lai, M., Kassee, C., Bageby, R., Bonato, S., Hull, L., Mandy, W., Sattman, P., & Ameis, S. H. (2019). Prevalence of co-occurring mental health diagnoses in the autism population: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 6(10), 819-829. <https://mbs.cambridge.com/core/journals/lancet-psycho-4ad3-4210-9d43-476d42798691>  
5. Kerns, C. M., Raut, J. E., & Shattuck, P. T. (2020). Prevalence and correlates of caregiver-reported mental health conditions in youth with autism spectrum disorder in the United States. *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 82 (1) DOI: 10.4088/JCP.20m13242



## What are co-occurring mental health conditions?

Research shows that many autistic people experience mental health conditions. These are called ‘co-occurring’ because they happen at the same time. Researchers are speculating why this high prevalence of co-occurring mental health conditions exists amongst autistic people. Some reasons include that autistic people may <sup>x</sup>:

- Experience increased stressors related to sensory sensitivities.
- Experience the stress of “masking” their autistic traits and the associated autistic burnout.
- Struggle with self-regulation skills.
- Experience feelings of anxiety or stress more intensely than neurotypical peers.
- Be less likely to be appropriately diagnosed with a mental health condition because their diagnosis of autism is overshadowing other symptomologies.

“

“Autistic people are continually forced to mask and hide who we are to accommodate a world that generally does not accept our traits, I want people to understand that autistic people are struggling because our needs are just not being met throughout society.”

- Megan Pilatzke, Autistic Adult <sup>xi</sup>

”

For more information on mental health, you can access:

- [Autism Mental Health Literacy Project](#)
- [Mental Health Matters- Introduction to Mental Health in Autistic Children and Youth](#)

## What does mental health look like in rural and remote communities?

Rural and remote communities face significant barriers in addressing mental health concerns<sup>xiii</sup>.

- There are struggles with recruitment and retention of qualified mental health providers.
- Government funding does not account for the large geographical areas that the health care centers are expected to support.
- The population in these communities is diverse and may present with unique considerations.
- The social determinants of health in rural communities play a substantial role in impacting well-being and overall health.



Social determinants of health: The conditions in the environments where people live that impact health, functioning, and quality of life outcomes and risks.<sup>xiv</sup> These factors include access to health care and education, financial stability, access to food and physical activity, racism, discrimination, and violence.

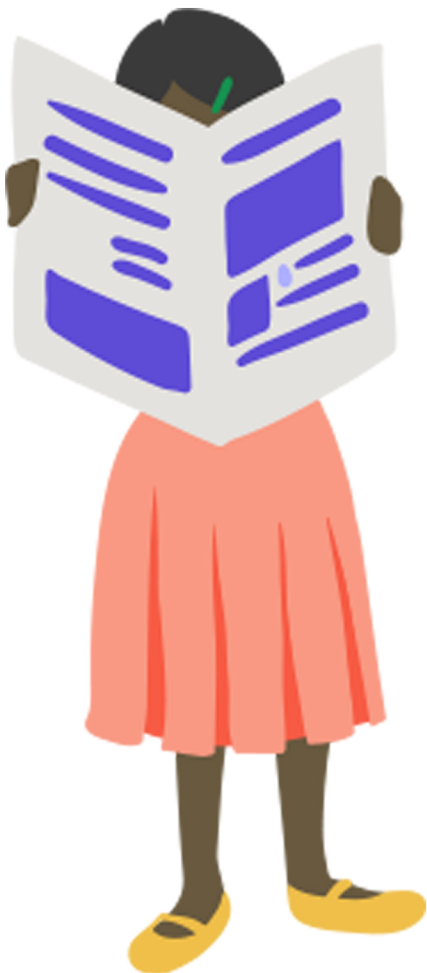
Although the research shows that rates of mental health concerns are higher in urban communities, the research also shows that people in rural communities are much less likely to report on their mental health concerns.<sup>xv</sup> This means that mental health distress in these communities may be under-identified and underrepresented due to concerns for stigma, bias, and/or lack of information.

For an in-depth research summary on mental health in rural communities, access the [AIDE Canada Impossible Conference Research collection](#).

## What's next?

The rest of this toolkit is dedicated to activities that we believe will support you in promoting positive mental health in your community. The activities set out various goals to help you in supporting the mental health of the people and families you work with, including feelings of anxiety and depression.

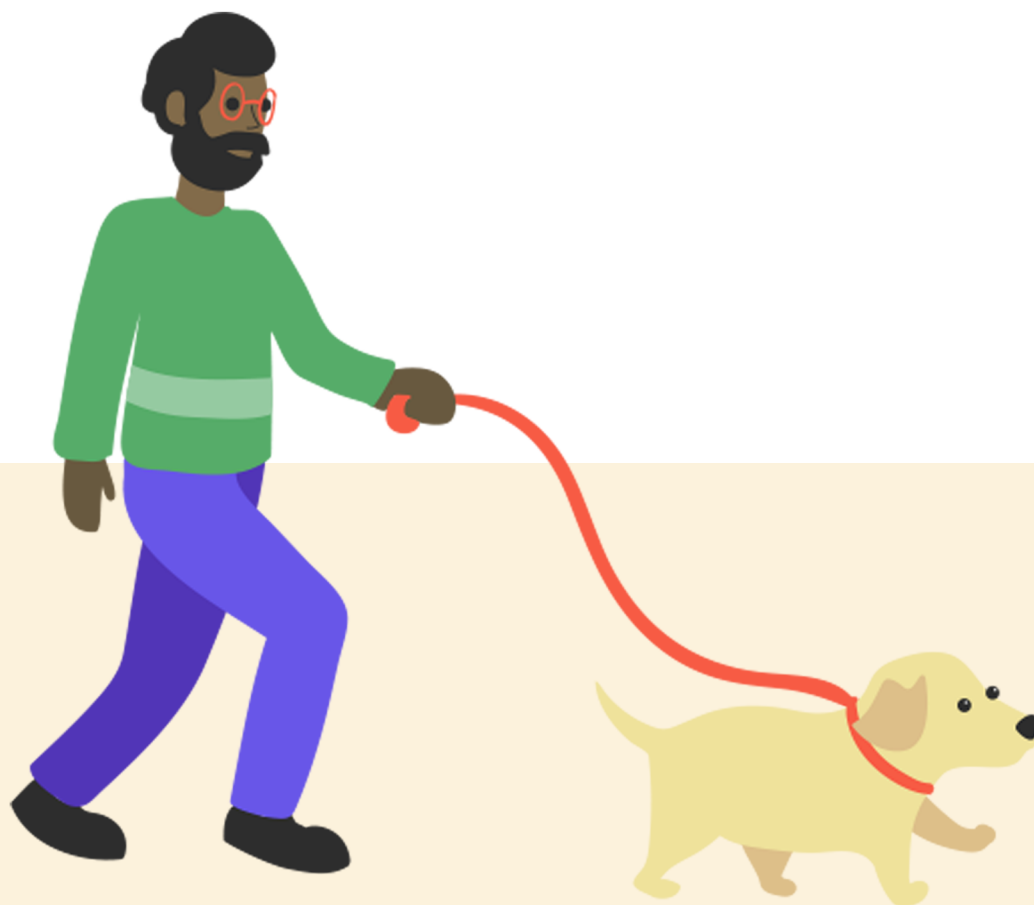
As you read through, it is important to remember that every person is unique, and the strategies that will help someone are also unique! Give something a try, and if it's not helpful, don't be afraid to try something else until you find what is right for you!



This toolkit is not a substitute for mental health counselling but is intended to help you support the families you work with while they wait for services, or until they are ready to explore that option.

# Inclusion Across the Lifespan

Audience:  
Community  
Stakeholders



## Activity: Understanding the Neurodiversity Movement

**Background:** The way the world talks about autism can impact how someone feels about being autistic. Historically, the medical model of autism was the most prominent and this model viewed autism as an impairment <sup>xvi</sup>. Today, the medical model is mostly used by medical professionals to help with diagnosis. This diagnosis is helpful in accessing funding and appropriate services and supports.

The neurodiversity movement is a recent evolution from the medical model of autism. The neurodiversity movement views autism as a “difference” to be accepted and supported and allows for discussion and individuality in supports and accommodations <sup>xvii xviii</sup>.

Many autistic self-advocates say that understanding and participating in the neurodiversity movement can support the mental health of autistic people in your community; however, it’s ultimately up to the autistic person and their family how they choose to talk about autism.

### Neurodiversity:

Represents the diversity of the human mind <sup>xix</sup>.

### Neurodiversity Paradigm:

A perspective that emphasizes that there is no “normal” or “healthy” way of thinking or behaving. It encourages people to view neurodiversity as a natural and beneficial human phenomenon <sup>xx</sup>.

### Neurodivergent:

Describes people who have differences in how their brain works, compared to the dominant, cultural “norm” <sup>xxi</sup>. This means they have different strengths and challenges compared to people who do not have these differences <sup>xxii</sup>.

Potential benefits of identifying as neurodivergent and being accepting of an autistic identity <sup>xxiii xxiv</sup>:

- Higher self-esteem
- Less likely to experience mental health concerns
- Positive sense of self
- Better understanding of individual needs and accommodations
- Improved sense of community
- Less likely to “mask”

## Activity: Understanding the Neurodiversity Movement

### Activity Information:

There are many ways to get involved and show your support as an ally to the neurodivergent and autistic community. Some examples include learning more about autism and autistic people and using appropriate language to support autistic people's identity. To get started, you can access the [How to be an Ally to the Autistic Community](#) toolkit.

**Hints to Ensure Success:** If you are looking for more ways to get involved and show your support for the neurodiversity movement, you can reach out to your community to see what is already happening locally, and where there may be a need for more support. For example, is there a group of neurodivergent people who are already connected through social media or in-person activities and events? You can ask for input and suggestions for ways your program or organization can get involved. Check out [autismontario.com](http://autismontario.com) to find events where you can learn more about neurodiversity and how to support autistic people in your community.

### Self-Reflection Questions:

1. How does your program/organization support the neurodiversity movement?
2. What are some other ways you can show your support?



## Activity: Inclusive Community Programming

**Background:** Community stakeholders can play an important role in supporting mental health by striving to create inclusive, “safer” feeling spaces for autistic community members. Many community programs and events aim to support mental health by promoting social participation. When these programs consider and plan for inclusion, autistic participants may feel more supported.

**Goal:** To create a plan for your workplace, school, community setting, or any other space that may consider supporting autistic mental health needs. Here are some suggestions and considerations for supporting inclusive communities.

### Activity Information:

Community organizations can use the following fillable worksheets to guide their program planning process.

### Tips to Ensure Success:

- **Check in with participants:** The support or accommodations that might work best for someone can be different from person to person. If you’re not sure what might work for your program or location, it’s a good idea to check with your participants to see what their preferences might be.
- **Consider learning more:** If you are supporting the physical activity of autistic people you may want to consider completing the [Strong Minds through Active Bodies](#) online course. Strong Minds Through Active Bodies is a free online course for students, professionals, and people supporting autistic youth and adults to access physical activity programs and spaces. Participants who access this self-paced course will learn critical considerations and adaptations that help create accessible and psychologically healthier physical activity spaces and programs for autistic and neurodivergent participants.

### Possible Variations:

- **“Sensory kits”:** some programs/organizations like to have “sensory kits” on hand to support people with sensory needs. Examples of items to include in sensory kits may include: sensory headphones, sunglasses, plush toy/soft blanket, fidget tool. These items may be included in a backpack or other “kit” that someone can take with them during a program visit.

### Reflection Questions:

1. How does the program support the mental health of autistic participants?
2. How can you make your environment feel more comfortable or “safe” for participants?
3. What could you do differently (add/change/remove)?

## Inclusive Community Programming Checklist

Community organizations can use this fillable worksheet to guide their program planning process:

### General Accommodations:

What accommodations are available in your setting to prioritize gentle, positive interactions?

- Participants may bypass lineups or waiting spaces if needed/requested.
- Participants may have more time if needed to participate.
- Participants may bring a friend, family member, support person, or therapy animal if needed/requested.

Are there any other/additional ways your setting can support gentle, positive interactions?

### Communication Considerations:

What communication supports are available in your setting?

- Concise/plain language: Information is provided using clear, concise, plain language.
- Interpretation: language interpretation is available if needed.
- Alternative forms of communication are supported/encouraged (e.g., *augmentative communication, technology*).
- Schedule/routine: Information is provided about the schedule of events or daily routine in a variety of accessible formats (e.g., *visual schedules, video examples*)
- Instructions: Consider modeling by performing the task first as an example.

Are there any other/additional ways your setting can support communication?



## Inclusive Community Programming Checklist

**Environmental/sensory considerations:** Autistic people may have **sensory differences** including **over-** or **under-**responsiveness to sensory input. Community organizations can use this fillable worksheet to guide environmental considerations:

What tools and/or modifications are available in your setting to support over-responsive sensory needs (i.e. easily overwhelmed by sensory input)?

- Dimmed lighting
- Sensory headphones
- Reduced volume
- Sunglasses
- Quiet space

Are there any other/additional ways your setting can support over-responsive sensory needs?

What tools and/or modifications are available in your setting to support under-responsive sensory needs (i.e. seeking sensory input and/or need more sensory input)?

- Modified seating
- Space for movement/movement breaks
- Fidgets

Are there any other/additional ways your setting can support under-responsive sensory needs?

What tools or modifications are available in your setting to support wayfinding (i.e. ways to navigate and/or find ways around a space)?

- Signage and/or directions are provided in a variety of formats (e.g., words, pictures, arrows, maps)
- Staff/volunteers are available to guide participants to areas of the environment as needed (e.g., washrooms, quiet space).

Are there any other/additional ways your setting can support wayfinding?

# Supportive Strategies for Children and Youth

Audience:  
Community  
Stakeholders



## Activity: Mindfulness Activities- Breathing Exercises

**Background:** There are many benefits to mindfulness, and it has been shown to increase mental wellness <sup>xxv</sup>. Many strategies are included in this modality, and one of the simplest ones is breathing. Taking slow deep breaths is an easy way to calm our brains and give ourselves something to focus on that is not an intrusive thought. Rainbow breathing and box breathing are simple visuals to help children and youth focus on slow purposeful breathing.

**Goal:** To share a new coping skill.

### Activity Information:

Option 1: Use these activities individually with people you are working with to help calm their bodies and their nervous systems.

Option 2: Post these activities around your center, office, or other public space to encourage community members to use these exercises to calm their bodies and their nervous systems.

\*\* see appendix for printable versions.

Figure 1.

## RAINBOW BREATHING



- 1 Slide your finger across a colour of the rainbow and take a deep breath in until you get to the end of the colour.
- 2 Slide your finger back to the beginning of the colour as you exhale.
- 3 Repeat for each colour of the rainbow.

## Activity: Mindfulness Activities- Breathing Exercises

Figure 2.

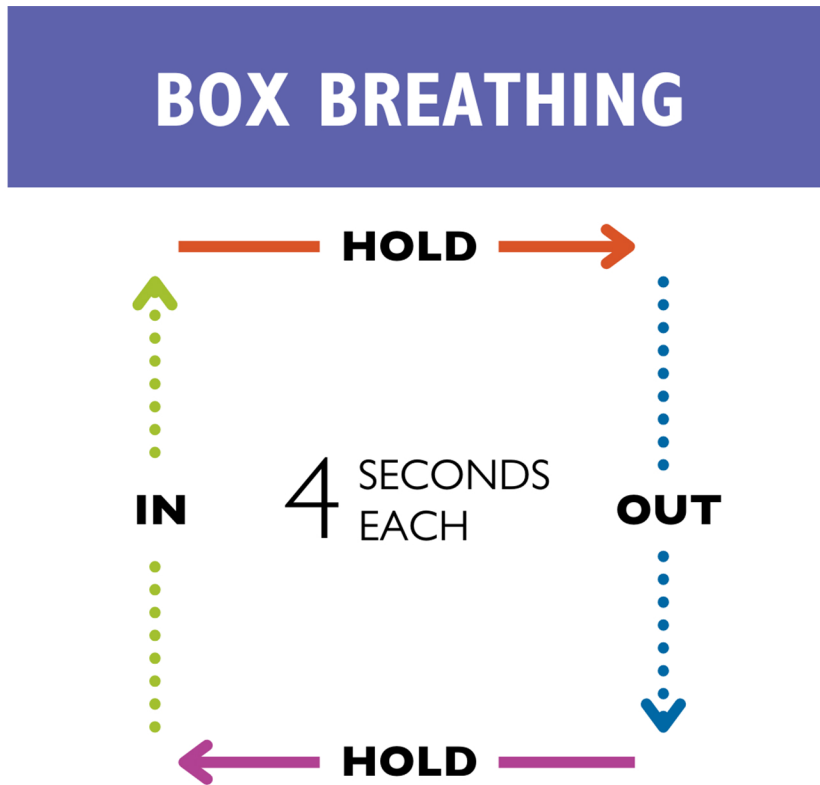


Figure 3.

**CALM DOWN COCOA**

**Smell the hot cocoa**

1 2 3 4 5



**Blow to cool the cocoa**

1 2 3 4 5

**Repeat until you feel calm**



## Activity: Mindfulness Activities- Breathing Exercises

### Hints to Ensure Success:

Keep in mind that different strategies work well for different people. If the person does not seem to enjoy one mindfulness strategy, try another one! Sometimes guided videos, podcasts or apps can add visual and/or auditory interest.

### Possible Variations:

For more ideas for at-home mindfulness you can access these resources:

- [Mindfulness Exercises for Kids and Teens \(Positive Psychology\)](#)
- [Cosmic Kids Yoga \(YouTube\)](#)
- [Bedtime Explorers \(podcast\)](#)
- [Little Renegades - Mindful Kids cards](#)
- [Mindfulness Exercises for Adults \(Mayo Clinic\)](#)
- [32 Mindfulness Activities to Find Calm at Any Age](#)

### Discussion Question for the Group:

1. Which breathing strategy was your favourite?
2. Which breathing strategy was the easiest for you? Which was the hardest?

## Activity: Mindfulness Activities - Guided Imagery

**Background:** Guided imagery is another research-based tool that has been proven to enhance an individual's sense of well-being, reduce stress and anxiety and even to boost the immune system<sup>xxvi</sup>. In guided imagery, individuals listen to a script and visualize what they hear. This tool is designed to increase the mind and body connection and to promote feelings of relaxation and calm.

**Goal:** To share a new coping skill with children and youth.

### Activity Information:

1. Prepare the space: Ensure that you have adequate space for all participants to either sit or lay in a comfortable position. You will also need access to a computer and speakers. Participants do not need to be watching the video, only listening.
2. Get comfortable: Have all participants find a comfortable space within the room. They can choose to sit or lay down.
3. Explain the activity: Let them know that they are going to listen to a script and to do their best to follow the directions of what they hear.
4. Guided imagery activity: Play [Your Secret Treehouse- Guided Meditation for Children](#)

### Hints to Ensure Success:

- The video is 16 minutes long. If you do not have the time to play the entire video or are concerned that not all participants will be able to focus for that duration then you can play the following clips:
  - 0:51 min to 3:54 min
  - 5:05 min to 10:05 min
  - 12:13 min to 15:25 min
- To make it easier to play all these sections, prior to the group open three different windows to the video and have each one set to a different time so you can easily press play.

## Mindfulness Activities - Guided Imagery

### Possible Variations:

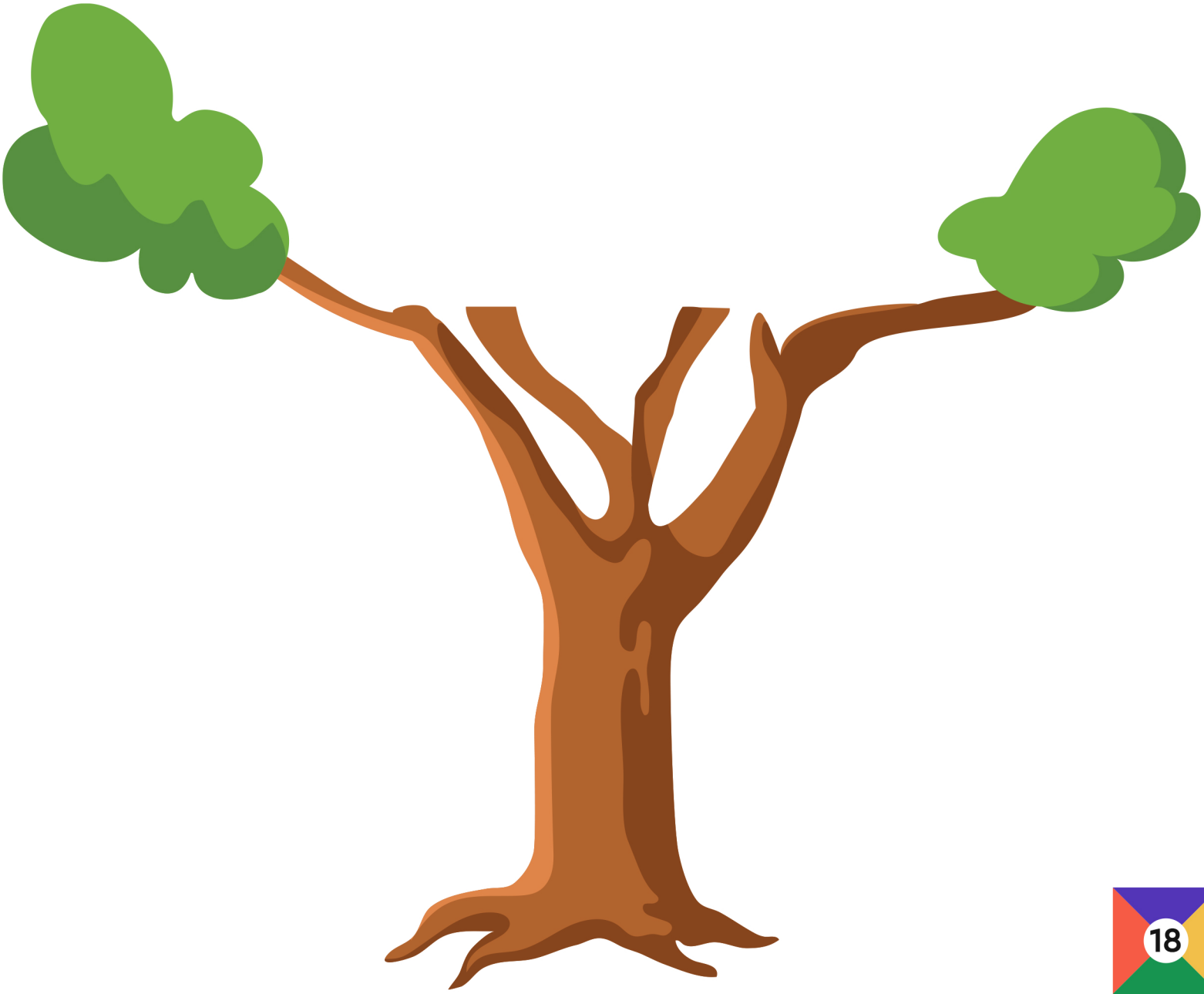
#### Bonus Activity:

1. Provide each participant with a copy of the treehouse activity sheet.
2. Ask each participant to remember back to the treehouse they created in their mind during the guided imagery exercise.
3. Have participants draw their treehouse on paper. Some things they might want to add to their treehouse include personal items that bring comfort e.g., a favourite stuffed animal, pets, their favourite activities, etc.
4. Talk about how they can use their imagination to pretend they are in the treehouse. Imagine that the treehouse is the participant's safe space.
5. Have participants share their treehouse with the group if they feel comfortable. Have them share what they included that helps them to feel safe and calm.
6. Talk about how this treehouse is always with them, so any time they are feeling stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed they can find a quiet place to go to their treehouse and calm their bodies. The more they practice the easier it will become to access the treehouse quickly. Explain that it can help to start practicing "going to their treehouse" when they are feeling calm so that it will be quicker to access when they feel stressed.

### Discussion Questions for the Group:

1. Were you able to remain engaged with the video? What was easy/hard about staying in the moment?
2. Did you feel any changes in your body as you listened to the video?
3. How do you feel when you imagine your treehouse?
4. How will you be able to get to your treehouse? What will help to make this easier?

Activity: My Treehouse





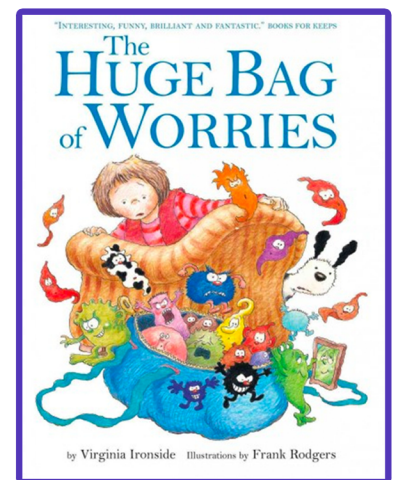
## Activity: Identifying Worries

**Background:** Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is based on the theory that our thoughts, feelings and actions are all connected <sup>xxvii</sup>. For example, when we have anxious or depressed thoughts, we will also feel anxious or depressed, and as a result we will act in an anxious or depressed way. To start feeling better we need to find a way to break the cycle. Working on changing our thoughts is one place to start. The following activities can help with this process.

**Goal:** To build skills in identifying worries and create a new tool to support coping and emotional regulation.

### Activity Information:

1. With the child, read *The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside or watch the read-aloud on [YouTube](#).
2. Point out how the “worries” that the main character identifies look like bugs.
3. Discuss as a group how “worries” and “bugs” are similar in that they annoy or bother us. \*\* Ensure that you explain that participants are to use their imagination, the bugs only represent their worries, they are not literal worries.
4. Choose a craft that your group can do to create their own ‘Worry Bugs’.



### Option 1:



Help participants use hot glue or super glue to make a bug using 3 pom poms, googly eyes, and a small piece of pipe cleaner.

### Option 2:



Give participants some play dough or other modelling clay to sculpt their own bug.

## Activity: Identifying Worries

### Discussion Questions:

1. What do you currently do when something is bugging/bothering you?
2. What happens when you try to ignore something that is bugging/bothering you? Explain how sometimes the problem goes away, but sometimes the problem gets even bigger. Just like in the story, when the main character tries to ignore her worries, sometimes ignoring our worries only makes things worse.
3. What could you try instead to help your worry bug get smaller or go away? Ideas to discuss include squishing their bug with their hand, stomping on it, flicking it off, or telling it to "go away".

### Possible Variations:

#### *Bonus Activity:*

1. Collect the supplies needed: large backpack or bag, paper, writing utensils, tape, and one random object per participant (i.e., water bottles, books, pencil cases, etc.).
2. As a group, read the *Huge Bage of Worries* by Virginia Ironside or watch the read-aloud on YouTube (if you haven't already).
3. Give each participant one of the random objects, a piece of paper, a writing utensil, and a piece of tape.
4. Have participants write down a worry on the piece of paper and tape it to their object.
5. One-by-one participants put their object into the backpack or bag. Note how it gets heavier and fuller each time someone adds their worry to the bag.
6. Take turns having participants wear the backpack to feel how heavy it is now that it is full of worries. Discuss how each of them carries around their own invisible bag of worries every day.

## Activity: Identifying Worries

### *Bonus Activity Continued:*

7. Remind the participants about the story and how the neighbour helps the main character unpack her worry bag by talking about each worry. Together, take objects out of the bag and discuss the worry. Is it something that will disappear? Does it belong to someone else? Or is it something that doesn't directly impact the participant and it doesn't require much thought?
8. Look at the objects that are left and identify these as the important worries.
9. Use the strategies identified above for using the 'Worry Bug' to help with these worries: talk about telling it to "go away", telling it "You're not the boss of me", flicking it away, or stomping on it.

### **Discussion Questions for the Group:**

1. How does it feel to carry around a full bag of worries?
2. When you see all the worries together, do they all feel as important?
3. How can you figure out which worries are more important than others?
4. How does it feel to squish your worries and yell at them?
5. Before today, who was the boss? You or your worries? And what about now? Does it feel different?

# Mental Health Promotion Across the Lifespan

Audience:  
Community  
Stakeholders



## Activity: Social Prescribing

**Background:** In rural and remote communities, community services and support people often identify that there is a large gap between the ‘medical’ world (doctors, hospitals, etc.) and the psychosocial experience of those living in the community. Sometimes this is due to geography, and sometimes it’s due to a lack of services available for the health care provider to refer the person or family to for support. Social prescribing is one way that health care providers, and other community supports, can “shift” the focus away from medical interventions, towards community services that can support connection, relationship building, and belonging<sup>xxviii</sup>. Social prescribing has been shown to support an individual’s self-efficacy and mental well-being and improve feelings of loneliness<sup>xxix</sup>. Recently, social prescribing efforts have focused on physicians and the health care community, but it can be beneficial for any community partner to participate in connecting people with social supports where they live.

**Goal:** To help individuals and families within your communities connect with social opportunities.

### Activity Information:

\*\* Before you can start social prescribing you need to make a list of the activities, supports, and services that are available in your community. These can include support and parenting groups, lived experience and peer groups, recreation, fitness, play-based programs, and volunteering opportunities, etc. It can be helpful to make a list of both the mental health focused programs, as well as those that are strictly designed for fun and connection.

1. Talk to individuals and families about what they may be struggling with. If they identify loneliness, social isolation, or a lack of positive relationships this may indicate that social prescribing could be beneficial.
2. Once this need is identified you can start to explore their interests, their strengths, and what type of social connection they may benefit from.

## Activity: Social Prescribing

### WELLBEING PRESCRIPTION

Date:

Client Name:

#### GOAL:

- Be more socially connected.
- Be more active.
- Participate in your community.
- Gain independence.
- Do something fun.

#### ACTIVITY PRESCRIBED:

Community Professional Name:

Signed:

Date:

## Activity: Social Prescribing

### Hints to Ensure Success:

- It can be helpful to spend time researching what community activities are available in your area to have a list ready-to-go when working with a family. You might consider contacting your local library, community centre, or school for ideas.
- It's important as their community support person that you "sign off" on the prescription. This helps it feel more "real" and the individual is more likely to feel accountable to a written and signed prescription.
- To increase the likelihood that the person participates in the recommended task or activity, do your best to ensure it's something meaningful to the person or the family.
- Be specific in your prescription; people can feel overwhelmed by vague recommendations such as "join a club" or "get a hobby". Instead, try saying "join the knitting club at your local library" or "enroll in swimming lessons".
- Have a plan to follow-up with the person to ensure follow-through.

### Possible Variations:

- If you know you will be seeing this person or this family in the future, you can arrange for a certificate or another reinforcer to help ensure completion of the prescribed task or activity.
- One way you can explore what is meaningful to children and youth is to utilize the F-Words for Childhood Disability. You can find these tools, including instructional videos on how to discuss the F-Words on the [Can Child](#) website.

## Smartphone “Apps” Supporting Mental Health in Adults

App Name	App Description
Headspace	Reviews meditation and mindfulness exercises that will help reduce feelings of stress.
Self-Help Anxiety Management	A range of self-help methods that work to reduce anxiety by challenging anxiety provoking thoughts and incorporating relaxation techniques.
MoodTools- Depression Aid	Uses CBT strategies to challenge the inaccurate thoughts and provides information on behaviours that may work to reduce the intensity of distress.
Woebot	Uses CBT to deliver scripted responses to users. It is a ‘chat’ program that offers insights and skills to help the client grow into their best self.
Calm	Soothing bedtime stories, meditation, and relaxation to promote sleep.
Molehill Mountain	Soothing bedtime stories, meditation, and relaxation to promote sleep.
Finch Care	Daily self-care activities used to promote the health of your digital “pet”.

## Smartphone “Apps” Supporting Mental Health in Children and Youth

App Name	App Description
GoNoodle	Activities include videos on mindfulness, deep breathing, yoga, dancing, and exercise.
Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame Street	Activities to teach children breathing exercises, self-control strategies, and planning.
Moshi Kids	Soothing children’s stories, meditations, and music.
Calm Kids	Mindful meditation app that teaches yoga, breath awareness, and body scans.



## Self-Guided Workbooks Supporting Mental Health in Adults

- **Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think** by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky
- **Calming the Emotional Storm: Using Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills to Manage Your Emotions and Balance Your Life** by Sheri Van Dijk
- **The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety: A Guide to Breaking Free from Anxiety, Phobias, and Worry Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy** by John Forsyth
- **Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness** by Jon Kabat-Zinn

## Self-Guided Workbooks Supporting Mental Health in Children and Youth

- **What to Do When you Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety** by Dawn Huebner
- **Mindfulness for Teen Anxiety: A Workbook for Overcoming Anxiety at Home, at School, and Everywhere Else** by Christopher Willard
- **The Anxiety Workbook for Teens: Activities to Help You Deal with Anxiety and Worry** by Lisa M. Schab
- **The ACT Workbook for Teens with OCD: Unhook Yourself and Live Life to the Full** by Patricia Zurita

## Books for Caregivers of Children and Youth about Autism

- **A Neurodiversity and Gentle Parenting Journey... in Color** by Morénike Giwa Onaiwu \* \*\*
- **The #ActuallyAutistic Guide to Advocacy** by Jenna Gensic\* and Jennifer Brunton\*\*\*

\*Story was written by an autistic person

\*\*Story was written by the caregiver of an autistic person.

For book ideas for children and youth, check out the Children's Book Gift Guide 2023 [here](#).

## Books for Caregivers of Children and Youth about Mental Health

- Start Here: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children and Teens Through Mental Health Challenges by Pier Bryden and Peter Szatmari
- Raising Human Beings: Creating a Collaborative Partnership by Ross Greene
- Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life by Stuart Shanker
- The Whole-Brain Child by Daniel J. Siegel
- Brain-Body Parenting by Mona Delahooke
- Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder by Lucy Jane Miller
- Advanced Parenting: Advice for Helping Kids Through Diagnoses, Differences, and Mental Health Challenges by Kelly Fradin
- Kids These Days: A Game Plan for (Re)Connecting with Those we Teach, Lead, & Love by Jody Carrington

## Books for Autistic Youth about Autism

- Different Not Less by Chloe Hayden \*
- The Spectrum Girls Survival Guide by Siena Castellon \*
- The Awesome Autistic Go To Guide by Yenn Purkis\* and Tanya Masterman\*\*\*
- A Different Kind of Normal by Abigail Balfe \*



\*Story was written by an autistic person

\*\*Story was written by the caregiver of an autistic person.

## Books for Autistic Adults about Autism

- Neuroqueer Heresies by Nick Walker \*
- Funny, You Don't Look Autistic: A Comedian's Guide to Life on the Spectrum by Michael McCreary \*
- Can't Read, Can't Write, Here is My Book by Michael Jacques \*
- What I Mean When I Say I'm Autistic by Annie Kotowicz\*
- I Overcame My Autism and All I Got Was This Lousy Anxiety Disorder by Sarah Kurchak\*
- Pretending to Be Normal by Leanne Holliday Willey\*
- Be Different by John Elder Robison\*
- Looking after your Autistic Self: A Personalized Self-Care Approach to Managing Your Sensory and Emotional-Wellbeing by Niamh Garvey\*



For book ideas for children and youth, check out the [Autism Ontario's Children's Book Gift Guide](#).



\*Story was written by an autistic person

\*\*Story was written by the caregiver of an autistic person.

# Resources

## Autism Ontario Webinars and Resources:

- Mental Health Matters- Webinar mini-series
- Understanding Autistic Burnout, Inertia, Meltdown, and Shutdown (BIMS) with Dr. Christie Welch
- Strong Minds Through Active Bodies- Online Course
- Children's Book Gift Guide

## Other Online Resources:

- Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism
- F Words in Childhood Disability
- Sault Police Implement Sensory Kits in Cruisers
- ASIST Adjunct Module- Modifications for intervening with a person with ASD- York Community Autism Partnership
- Supporting Autistic Children and Young People Through Crisis- Autistica

## Mindfulness Resources:

- Mindfulness Exercises for Kids and Teens (Positive Psychology)
- Cosmic Kids Yoga (YouTube)
- Bedtime Explorers (podcast)
- Little Renegades- Mindful Kids cards
- Mindfulness Exercises for Adults (Mayo Clinic)
- 32 Mindfulness Activities to Find Calm at Any Age
- Your Secret Treehouse- Guided Meditation for Children

## AIDE Canada Resources:

- Impossible Conference- Research Collection
- How to Be an Ally to the Autistic Community - Toolkit

Figure 1.

## RAINBOW BREATHING



- 1 Slide your finger across a colour of the rainbow and take a deep breath in until you get to the end of the colour.
- 2 Slide your finger back to the beginning of the colour as you exhale.
- 3 Repeat for each colour of the rainbow.

Figure 2.

## BOX BREATHING

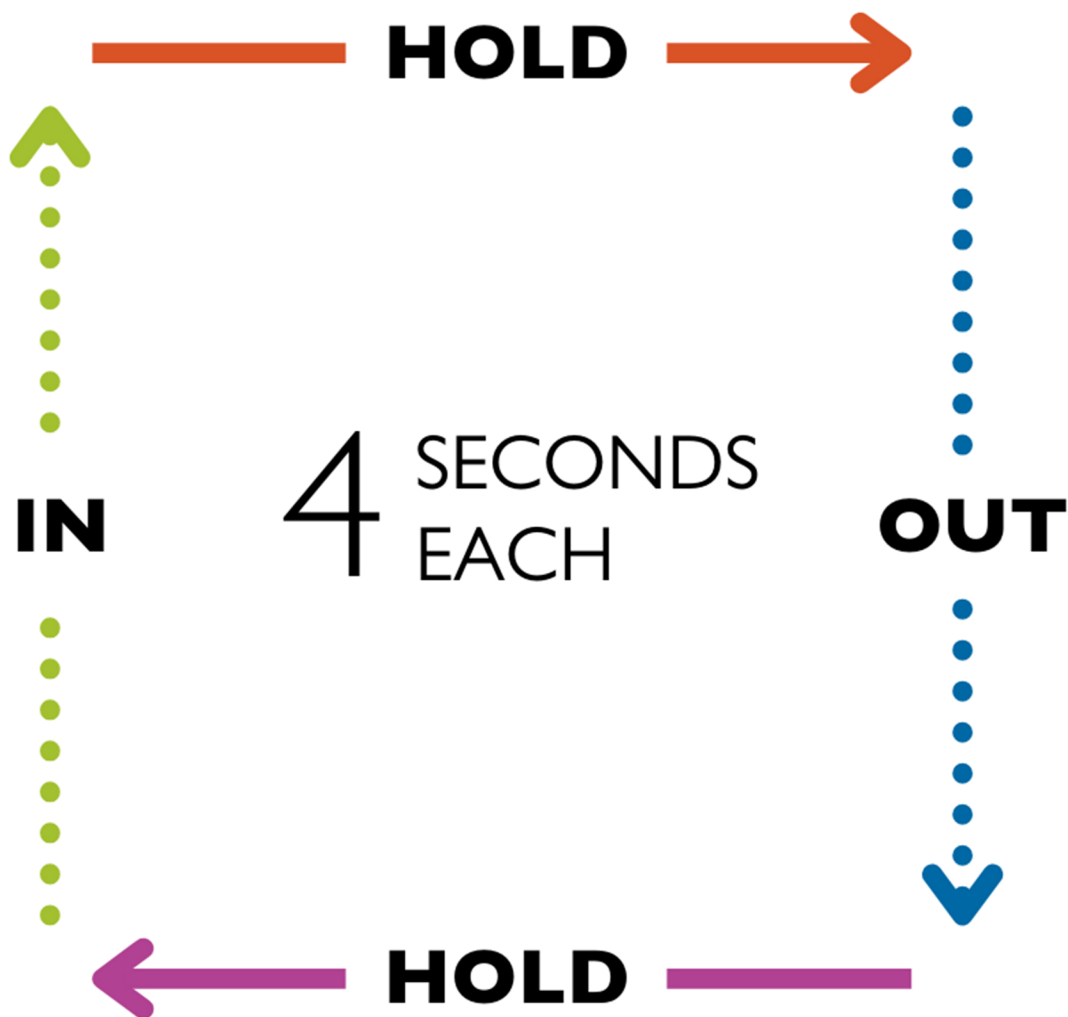


Figure 3.

## CALM DOWN COCOA

**Smell the hot cocoa**



**Blow to cool the cocoa**



**Repeat until you feel calm**



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