

COPING IN A PANDEMIC: A Mixed Methods Study of Neurodiverse Adults and Coping Strategies Used to Manage the Negative Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

- More than half of adults (60%) said their mental health (MH) worsened during the first lockdown (Mind, 2020) and 90% of autistic adults worried about their MH during this period (NAS, 2020).
- Autistic and other neurodivergent adults may be particularly vulnerable to the negative psychological effects of COVID-19 due to a high rate of co-occurring MH conditions and an increased susceptibility to stress and anxiety as a result of changes in daily routine.

Study Aims

- 1) Identify coping strategies used by participants.
- 2) Quantitatively compare coping strategy endorsement between autistic and other neurodivergent adults and their neurotypical peers.
- 3) Investigate the role of Intolerance of Uncertainty in predicting the endorsement of coping strategies.

METHODS

- June-September 2020 we collected data from an online survey.
- Intolerance of Uncertainty (IoU) was measured with a 12-item IoU scale (Carleton et al., 2007)
- This poster focuses on responses to the open-text question: **Have you used any coping strategies or techniques that have helped you deal with the uncertainty or life changes due to COVID-19?**
- Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify coping themes and subthemes using NVivo.
- Theme and subtheme endorsements were quantified in SPSS and compared across four groups using Fischer's exact tests.
- Binary logistic regressions were used to examine the effect of intolerance of uncertainty on theme endorsement.

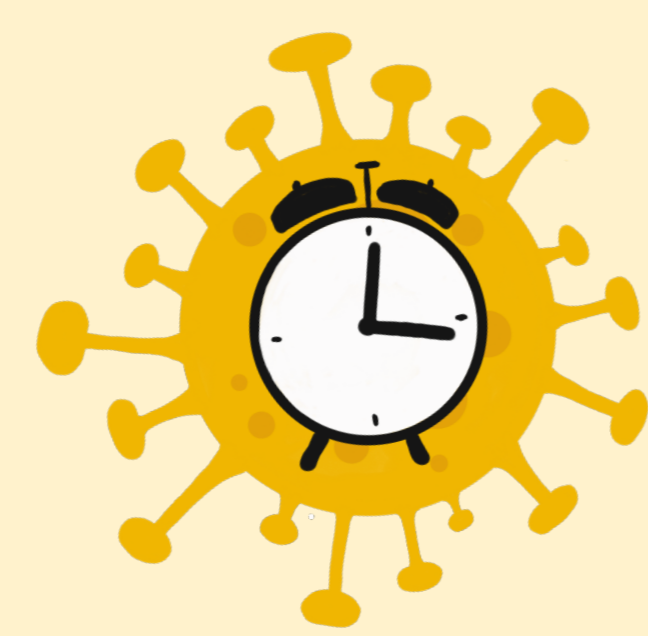
Participants

- 212 participants (age 18-72 years, 74.1% female) responded to the question on coping strategies, and were categorised into four groups based on self-identification:
- Autistic (ASD-only; n=54; 72.20% female)
 - Other neurodivergent, such as ADHD or dyslexia (ND-only; n=42; 73.81% female)
 - Co-occurring autism and other neurodivergence (ASD+ND; n=39; 51.28% female)
 - Comparison group of neurotypical adults (NT; n=77; 87.01% female).

RESULTS

Coping Themes

From the open-response question regarding coping strategies used during COVID-19, 13 themes and 41 subthemes were identified. Themes endorsed by > 10% of participants are presented in full (with n and % of whole sample who endorsed each theme). Additional themes are noted in the bottom bar.



ROUTINES & PLANNING

- (endorsed by n=68; 32.08%)
- New or Continued Routine
 - Planning Ahead
 - Sleep Routine
 - Using Items to Support Routine

"I have tried creating new routines to force me to do the things which have gone from my life"



SOCIAL INTERACTION & INFORMAL SUPPORT

- (n=57; 26.89%)
- Connecting with Close Contacts
 - Support from Close Contacts
 - Community Connections
 - Pets

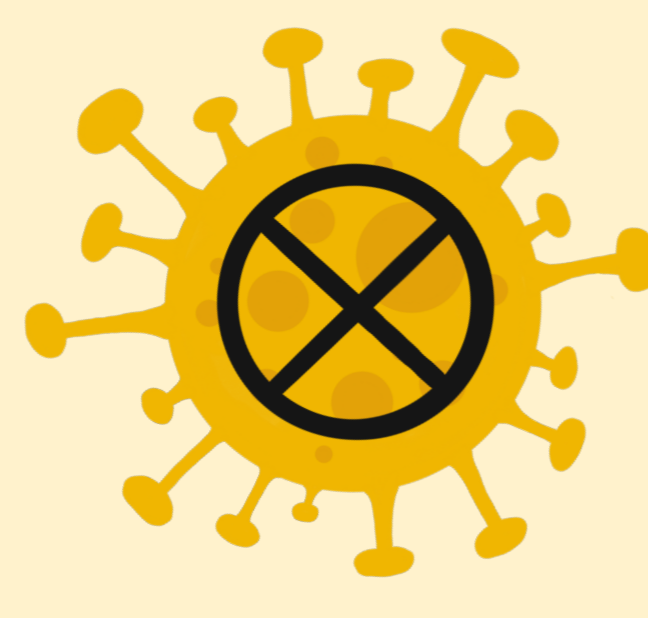
"Messaging more friends when I felt I needed support, even a general chat, to prevent further self harming or mental health deterioration"



HOBBIES & SPECIAL INTERESTS

- (n=54; 25.47%)
- Creative Hobbies
 - Screen Time
 - Reading
 - Acquiring Knowledge
 - General Hobbies or Projects
 - Musical

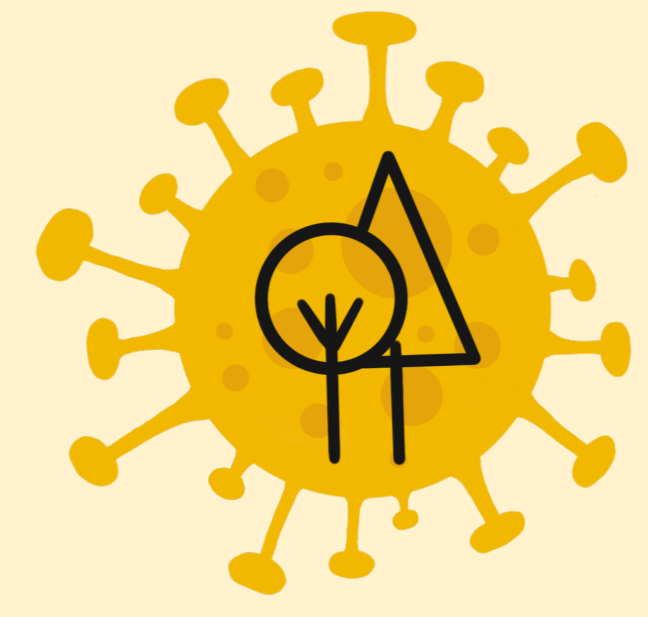
"I've started learning Chinese as it takes up all my attention when I'm studying, and it takes my mind off things. It also gives me a sense of achievement as I know it's a really hard language to learn"



NO STRATEGIES & DIFFICULTIES WITH COPING

- (n=50; 23.58%)
- Unsuccessful Strategies
 - No Strategies
 - Difficulties Coping

"I called Samaritans, Mind, Crisis lines, etc, but these don't help when you are socially isolated and can't see anyone and don't know when you'll ever be able to see anyone again..."



EXERCISE & THE OUTDOORS

- (n=48; 22.64%)
- Physical Exercise
 - Walking
 - Gardening
 - Spending Time Outdoors

"I've been doing a lot of gardening when weather permits, so if I want a distraction from current life, that's where I go"



SELF-CARE

- (n=44; 20.75%)
- Relaxation Technique
 - Diet and Eating Habits
 - Prioritise Wellbeing

"Relaxation techniques and guided mindfulness sessions which has helped a lot to cope with the changes due to covid"



SUPPORT SERVICES

- (n=24; 11.32%)
- Mental Health Support and Services
 - Other Healthcare and General Services
 - Medication

"I had psychotherapy for the whole period of 'lockdown' which helped relieve some stress and anxiety"

Group Differences in Theme Endorsement

EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCE

New Employment and Employment Seeking



ASD+ND ↑

ROUTINES AND ORGANISATION

Planning Ahead



ND-only ↑

No significant differences in group endorsement for the main 13 themes, and no significant differences in group endorsement for 41 out of 43 subthemes.

Intolerance of Uncertainty (IoU)

ASD-only and ASD+ND groups reported significantly higher IoU than non-autistic groups (comparison, ND-only).

Increasing IoU predicted:

↑ probability of endorsing coping strategies related to **new and continued routines, medication** and **negatively focused emotions** themes

↓ probability of endorsing coping strategies related to **physical exercise** theme

IoU was **not** associated with: social interaction and informal support; hobbies and interests; no strategies and difficulties with coping; self-care; employment and finance; helping others; COVID guidelines; the home environment; and maladaptive strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

- This is the first study to compare coping strategies between autistic, other neurodivergent and neurotypical adults during the pandemic.
- Many have used an array of strategies to try to manage their mental health and well-being during this time.
- However, a substantial number of adults have struggled despite attempting to use coping strategies.
- Overall, the selection of coping strategies between groups was similar.
- Our data suggest some possible interventions to support coping, for example:
 - Improved access to public green spaces may facilitate positive coping for those without access to private outdoor space.
 - Increased availability of mental health services is vital for those who are continuing to struggle.
- Many people have built new routines to support their mental health and wellbeing; future governmental changes should be introduced slowly and with warning, to allow people to adapt their routines accordingly.

REFERENCES:

Carleton, R. N., Norton, M. A., & Asmundson, G. J. (2007). Fearing the unknown: a short version of the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale. *Journal of anxiety disorders*, 21(1), 105–117.

Mind. (2020). *The Mental Health Emergency: How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted our mental health?* National Autistic Society. (2020). *Left stranded: The impact of coronavirus on autistic people and their families in the UK.*

OTHER COPING THEMES:

8. Emotional Strategies (n=20; 9.05%)
9. Employment & Finance (n=13; 5.88%)
10. Helping Others (n=12; 5.43%)
11. COVID Guidelines & Announcements (n=11; 4.98%)
12. The Home Environment (n=10; 4.52%)
13. Maladaptive Strategies (n=7; 3.17%)