

Cognitive Inflexibility Fact Sheet

Cognitive inflexibility refers to difficulties or impairments with shifting focus between different ideas or thoughts. Therefore, some people who experience cognitive inflexibility may get 'stuck' on a particular thought. If an individual gets 'stuck' on a suicidal thought, this can increase their vulnerability to subsequent suicidal behaviours. This is because cognitive inflexibility may lead individuals to believe there is only one possible way to solve a problem.

It is important to note that considerable levels of cognitive flexibility have been shown across autistic individuals, suggesting that an individual's cognitive flexibility should not be generalised. It is also to take a neuro-affirming approach, and not make the individual you are supporting feel as if there is something wrong with them that you are trying to 'fix'. Instead, you are helping them develop tools to support wellbeing.

Many of the strategies recommended to improve cognitive flexibility in the general population (such as changing routines and experiencing new people and places) may be more challenging for some autistic people. When introducing changes to the routine of an autistic individual you support, you may want to think about:

- Involving them with the process of change as early as possible, and giving them autonomy where possible. Most people prefer change that they have had a role in, rather than change that they feel has been forced upon them.
- Use calendars and other visual aids, such as visual timetables, to indicate when a change is coming.
- Try to consider if the individual you are supporting struggles more with flexibility in certain situations and try to work on the root cause, rather than the general trait or behaviour.
- Use play to show that items can have more than one function. For example, you may use sponges as part of a craft or dolls as part of a drama activity. As previously mentioned, you should decide upon this collaboratively, so it doesn't feel as if the individual is being forced to engage in uncomfortable play.
- Playing games where individuals sort items by one category, e.g. colour, before resorting by shape or size. This helps individuals to visualise how items can fall into different groups, which are all correct.
- Introduce positive examples of last-minute changes on occasion if this is appropriate for the individual's needs, e.g. by adding an activity related to an individual's passion at the last minute. If managed well, this may demonstrate that change can be a positive thing.

