The Low Arousal Approach

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This document is available to download from my website at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/visual-impairment-autism/

The article is based on a document I prepared in 2009 for colleagues who were working with a young man with visual impairment and autism. Although he had a significant visual impairment, his autism was considerably more disabling. The young man required the Low Arousal Approach and the original document was intended as a guide to those supporting him.

A range of other articles is also available at this web address and on other pages on the website. They focus particularly on addressing the communication needs of people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities, including autism. They are also likely to be of interest to those concerned with children and adults who have learning disabilities.

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January 2013
The Low Arousal Approach

Introduction

The Low Arousal Approach is commonly used with people with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC). It is part of the SPELL framework promoted by the National Autistic Society.\(^1\)

The Low Arousal Approach

- provides environments in which sensory clutter is reduced as much as possible
- facilitates effective communication is; it is likely that schedules will be used; the Minimal Speech Approach \(^2\) may also be employed
- offers opportunity to relax and relieve tension
- ensures that interactions are calm
- is non-confrontational
- reduces events, situations and experiences that trigger anxiety, stress, over-stimulation
- avoids the escalation of arousal levels and so reduces the risk of people going into crisis
- has strategies for managing crises when they do occur.

Reducing clutter

Many autistic people have sensory difficulties and needs. Reducing sensory information in the environment is often essential. It contributes to the management of arousal levels, enabling autistic people to remain calm, relaxed and free to engage in educational and leisure activities and to interact with other people. Providing an environment in which clutter is reduced should, therefore, be a core element of the Low Arousal Approach.


\(^2\) The Minimal Speech Approach is described in a separate article, available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/visual-impairment-autism/
A reduced clutter environment is one in which sensory stimulation is kept to a minimum. Thus, for example:

- walls are kept free of art work, posters and notices
- décor is simple and unfussy and colour schemes take account of people’s preferences
- strip lights, other bright lights and glare are avoided
- smells are reduced by using fragrance-free cleaning products, soap and so on, with people refraining from using perfumes and after-shave
- curtains and blinds are prevented from blowing in the breeze
- noise is kept to a minimum by taking care over the use of computers and laptops (because they hum) and such items as heaters, air-conditioning equipment and radiators
- spoken language is reduced (perhaps by using the Minimal Speech Approach)
- people avoid raising their voices
- people move around in a calm way and avoid rushing and bumping into, or brushing against others
- groups of people are avoided completely, or kept very small.

Although it is impossible (and undesirable) to eliminate all sensory stimuli, it is important for those who adopt the Low Arousal Approach to become very aware of them. This enables people to predict, and so avoid, situations which the autistic person is likely to find difficult. For example, it is important to monitor many features, including:

- noise levels
- the number of people in the room
- smells
- the temperature
- how tired, hungry and thirsty the autistic person is
- anything that indicates the autistic person may need the toilet, be in pain or uncomfortable.

An autistic person in education can be provided with his or her own work station. In fact, work stations can be useful in non-educational situations too; for example, they can support autistic people to engage more readily
in leisure activities. It may be necessary to provide a work station in each room the autistic person uses. It may be helpful to position the work station close to the room’s exit door, so the person can readily leave the room if the situation becomes too arousing. The work station should be positioned against the wall, so that the learner faces the wall when working at the table. The wall in front of the person should be free of visual distractions such as art work, posters and notices.

**Effective communication**

It is essential that strategies are adopted to communicate effectively with every autistic person. However, many autistic people find it difficult to understand spoken language, and benefit from some kind of visual support, such as pictures, symbols or printed words. It is often appropriate to reduce the amount of spoken language; the Minimal Speech Approach is useful in this regard. Schedules are very supportive for many autistic people. As autistic people vary so markedly, it is not possible to provide details here of how best to support any particular person’s communication.

**Opportunities to relax and relieve tension**

Everyone needs to be provided with activities he or she finds motivating, enjoyable and relaxing, and this is, perhaps, particularly important for autistic people. Autistic people can become over-aroused as a result of being required to participate in activities they do not understand, do not find motivating or find aversive. Not all such activities should be avoided; for example, it is not wise to avoid cleaning one’s teeth. A non-motivating or aversive activity can be followed by one the person finds motivating and pleasurable, as a way to relax and relieve tension. In fact, such activities can be provided at frequent intervals throughout the day, in order to minimise the risk that the autistic person will become very anxious, highly stressed, or over-stimulated and so go into crisis.
Interactions that are calm

All interactions with an autistic person should take account of his / her interactive style. They should be calm in nature unless the person clearly indicates he / she wants to interact in a boisterous manner. Even on these occasions, it is important to be sensitive and to proceed with caution, as the person may quickly become over-aroused during an enjoyable activity, especially a lively one.

It is also important to respond to the person in such a way that you support him / her to remain calm. This means responding sensitively and as quickly as possible. The response should take account of the person’s mood, stress and anxiety levels, physical well-being, and the levels of stimulation in the environment.

An autistic person can quickly become over-aroused if a request for an activity or item is turned down. At times, when the autistic person is calm and relaxed, it may be appropriate to withhold from him / her something he or she has requested. But even at these times, it is advisable to avoid saying No, as this may cause stress. An alternative strategy that is often effective is to say Later. For example, if the person requests a favourite activity (perhaps photocopying) during an educational activity, it is possible to say Work now. Photocopying later. If the person needs visual supports, these should also be used.

Being non-confrontational

It is particularly important to be non-confrontational at all times with autistic people. When an autistic person’s arousal level begins to rise, it is very easy for others to inadvertently become confrontational. This can occur as a consequence of presenting demands on the autistic person which, in the circumstances, are unreasonable. For example, if he / she is becoming very anxious or stressed and behaves in a way that is regarded as inappropriate, requiring him or her to apologise is, in effect, confrontational – it is a demand that may not be understood even when calm, and it is one which is likely to further raise the person’s level of anxiety or stress.

Being non-confrontational also requires people to avoid confronting an autistic person with situations he / she cannot handle.
Reducing triggers

It is important to reduce – if possible, to eliminate – all those events, situations and experiences that trigger anxiety, stress and over-stimulation. This can be achieved by employing all the elements of the Low Arousal Approach.

Avoiding the escalation of arousal levels

Every effort should be made to avoid autistic people’s levels of anxiety, stress or sensory stimulation escalating out of control. It is important to constantly monitor each person and the environment. If it becomes clear that a person’s level of anxiety, stress or sensory stimulation is escalating, measures need to be taken urgently to eliminate the causes of the escalation. In some situations, the most appropriate approach is for the person to access a quiet, relaxing environment in which there is very little sensory stimulation. This may be a separate room, but it could be a part of the room clearly marked with some kind of partition; some autistic people find a large box or tent useful.

Managing crises

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to prevent a situation from escalating out of control; the person then goes into crisis. In the Low Arousal Approach it is essential to have strategies for managing crises: people need to know how to respond. Because a person who is in crisis loses communication skills, it is particularly important that other people understand how to communicate effectively with him / her.

Should an autistic person go into crisis, he or she will need time to calm down. The amount of time he / she needs on any one occasion depends on a variety of factors, particularly the severity and duration of the crisis.

In order to calm down, some people benefit from a quiet, relaxing environment in which there is very little sensory stimulation (see the last paragraph of the previous section). Others benefit from being in the open air. However, a person in crisis may not be able to go to his / her usual calming environment or to go outside; if this is the case, it may be necessary to take other people away from the person in crisis, to refrain from communicating with him / her and to reduce sensory stimulation as much as possible.
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Closing remarks

The Low Arousal Approach provides an environment in which autistic people are likely to be more relaxed than would otherwise be the case. It plays a key role in managing arousal levels, keeping anxiety, stress and sensory stimulation under control. It is non-confrontational and has strategies for preventing the escalation of arousal levels and for managing crises when they do occur. The Low Arousal Approach enables autistic people to engage more effectively in educational and leisure activities and to interact with other people.

Providing the Low Arousal Approach makes a key contribution to providing an Empathic Approach.³

³ The Empathic Approach is described in a separate article, available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/