Mental health problems are more common in children and people with Autism than in the general population. Mental health problems can lead to even higher levels of stress and anxiety. It is vital that children and young people with Autism are supported to find healthy outlets for their anxieties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental Health Issue</th>
<th>Possible Causes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obsessive Compulsive Disorder</td>
<td>Need for routine and consistency, fear of germs or contamination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Anxiety Disorder</td>
<td>Lack of understanding in social situations, repeated lack of success in social situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panic Disorder</td>
<td>Stress levels are so high that they cause regular panic attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agoraphobia</td>
<td>Fear of sensory issues occurring or social anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>Need for routine and control over surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppositional Defiant Disorder</td>
<td>Resistance to change, rigid thinking, lack of understanding of consequences or social compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Consistently high levels of stress leading to a loss of hope or motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research suggests that those children with higher cognitive skills experience greater levels of anxiety:

Emotional well-being or happiness has received very little attention in the field of Autism. Emotional well-being has rarely been considered as a desired outcome when assessing the effects of treatments. Instead outcomes have focused on levels of cognitive functioning, or societal norms of functioning such as having a job or living independently:

( http://www.Autismwestmidlands.org.uk )
Strategies to reduce anxiety

Managing change

- Best way to reduce anxiety about change is to provide predictability and consistency. Support the child to understand what is happening and what will happen next.
- Preparation allows a child to organise and process their thoughts, ready themselves and feel more relaxed going into an activity
- Visual timetables, now/next boards, daily schedules

Sensory sensitivities

- Help find ways to manage sensory overload/under-responsiveness - refer to Occupational Therapy for expert advice in developing an accurate sensory profile
- Movement breaks, blu tack, therabands, weighted vests, noise cancelling headphones, sensory diet, separate room at lunch time
- Do not try to force the person to speak or give eye contact

Social anxiety

- Be clear and direct with social rules – use Social Stories to give information about new situations
- Explain situations that have been misunderstood or where the child has made an error or caused offense – use Comic Strip Conversations to show what happened and what people thought about it
- Teach socially acceptable ‘escape routes’ – ways out of difficult situations
- Support time alone - do not force company onto an anxious child

Shorter break times

- Refuge – a place to have a break away from social pressures
- Lunchtime clubs – with like-minded peers
- Lego Therapy

Other strategies

- Teach the science of anxiety - what happens to your body when you feel anxious
- Time designated to Special Interests and relaxation
- Consider how you communicate. Are you clear/direct? Use a low arousal approach.
- Never leave a person in full meltdown unattended
- Do not attempt to interrupt routines or prevent ‘stimming’ or repetitive behaviours – these show that a child is attempting to self-regulate
- Don’t take anything the child says or does personally during a meltdown – they are in a state of extreme anxiety

Consider professional help

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a type of talking treatment that focuses on how your thoughts, beliefs and attitudes affect your feelings and behaviour, and teaches you coping skills for dealing with different problems. It combines cognitive therapy (examining the things you think) and behaviour therapy (examining the things you do).

(http://www.mind.org.uk)
Mindfulness - Mindfulness is a practice that individuals and groups can do on a day-to-day basis. It can enable people to change the way they think and feel about their experiences, especially stressful experiences. As a mind-body approach, it can increase our ability to manage difficult situations and make wise choices (http://www.bemindful.co.uk).

Recently there has been a move towards positive psychology and a focus on developing strategies to facilitate feelings of happiness and better emotional well-being in children and young people with Autism. (Peter Vermeulen: GAP Autism, Happiness and Well-Being Conference: 14 November 2014).

Vermeulen advises:
1. Create an Autism friendly environment - an environment that is
   • clear and understandable
   • predictable
   • meaningful
   (provides freedom from stress)
2. Balance between protection and challenges (gives status, autonomy, existential accomplishment)
3. Ensure experiences of success and focus on strengths and interests (gives pride, high levels of self esteem)
4. Focus on positive feelings, not negative ones (leads to happiness, satisfaction).

Useful reading: