

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Travel and Holidays

If you are autistic there are lots of extra stresses with holidays that can prevent you from enjoying the experience:

- Before hand: there's more executive load with all the decisions, then packing and travelling.
- On the trip: routines change, you're somewhere new, possible sensory overload.
- Then you have to travel back and when you're home there's more laundry and unpacking.

You might feel that you need additional time off to rest and recover from your holiday. It can be made worse if you're travelling with other people who seem to be having fun, and complain that you aren't joining in.

Here are some tips and strategies that other people have used, in case they help:

TIPS FOR PLANNING

It's okay to go back to the same place each time, stay local to where you live, or stay at home for your holiday.

You could use 'Google street view' to see the local area before you arrive.

Check an events calendar for your location to see if there are any festivals or noisy events while you're there, before you book.

<https://www.johnpendal.com>

johnpendalcoach@gmail.com

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Go somewhere that matches your sensory needs, e.g. noise, temperature and humidity.

If you're struggling to make a decision about accommodation because there's too much choice, can you use your sensory preferences to filter the results? (*E.g. would you prefer air conditioning, comfy chairs, blackout blinds, a shower or bath, or would you like the furthest room from the restaurant or bar?*)

Build a holiday around certainty and familiarity.

You can use deep interests as a guide, for example a dinosaur park/ Lego sculptures/ locations used for your favourite film or TV show.

Some people go on holiday separately from their partner.

Some of my clients choose a self-catering apartment, so that they have somewhere to relax and can cook if they don't have the social energy for a restaurant.

Some hotel chains (*IBIS, Center Parks*) are the same in every location.

If you're travelling with or visiting friends or family, are you able to book separate accommodation so that you have somewhere to go that's your space to recharge?

PACKING

I'm a big fan of a packing checklist. It reduces anxiety and worrying that you've forgotten something, and you can make your packing decisions ahead of time on days when you have more energy.

Can you include items for soothing your senses, e.g. slippers, fidget toys, teddy bear or favourite smell?

It's okay to start packing early so that you aren't flustered on the day of travel.

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TRAVELLING

Give yourself extra time for transitions.

If practical, you may want to visit train stations or transport hubs near where you are staying in advance, so they're familiar when you need to make a connection.

Lots of autistic people find that wearing sunglasses and noise cancelling headphones helps to reduce sensory input.

Some people have said it helped to wear a Sunflower lanyard for hidden disabilities (<https://hdsunflower.com>), or carry an 'As I Am' card (<https://asiam.ie/what-we-do/asiam-autism-id-card/>) or a JAM card (<https://www.jamcard.org/>)

At an airport I like to arrive early so that I'm not rushed. Once through security I go to a lounge or an empty gate that's not being used. If the lounge is busy or noisy, try the business centre. Even if that has people in it they tend to be working quietly. Don't forget to keep an eye on gate changes while you're there.

If flustered on the flight, you might want to soothe yourself by saying validating sentences, such as *"I have wallet, phone, keys and passport ... everything else I can buy"*, *"This is not an emergency"* or *"you've got this."*

Are there items that help you remain calm that you can take on your person or in hand luggage?

WHEN YOU'RE THERE

It might help to have a routine built in.

You might negotiate with others on the trip, e.g. alternating one day out/ one day relaxing. Or have a day out, but then you're allowed time to recharge before doing something else the same day.

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You might choose to stay somewhere busy with tourist options - but your accommodation is just outside so you can unwind in between events.

Use walking poles to help with balance on unfamiliar ground.

Visiting local cave systems can be somewhere quiet and dark.

If there's light rain that can be a good day to do outdoor attractions, as the weather will put other people off going.

Food can be a big problem – would you like to take some of your favourites?

You don't have to do something just because you booked it. It's okay to change your mind.

Don't get trapped anywhere that you can't leave. *E.g. if you haven't been on a coach trip or boat cruise before and you're thinking of booking one – how would you leave if you didn't like it?*

Remember: you don't have to like it. It's all data for the future so that you can make a different choice next time.

BACK HOME

If you're overwhelmed with laundry when you get home, you are allowed to use a laundry service. Some companies will collect from your front door, or a local laundrette might offer service washes.

Why not book a day or two back home before you have to return to work? Then you can recover from your holiday if you need it.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

'*Neurodivergent travel: Advice and supports for holidays and transport*' by Claire O'Neill of Thriving Autistic:

<https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/healthandwellbeing/arid-40913510.html>

'*Autism makes travel a challenge. Here's how I learned to cope*' by Allie Mason:

<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2024/apr/22/autism-makes-travel-a-challenge-heres-how-i-learned-to-cope>

Allie Mason has also written a book: "*The Autistic Guide to Adventure.*"

I hope that helps. Please get in touch if you have any questions or would like to chat further.

Best wishes,

John Pendal

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