

Life Skills for Adulthood: Self-care and health management

Hygiene

Personal hygiene is important for multiple reasons:

- It prevents you from getting sick or infections
- It prevents you from spreading germs
- It is good for your mental health
- It is necessary for maintaining employment or relationships because if you smell bad or look messy, it can be unpleasant for those around you. It may also look unprofessional or be a health hazard in certain work environments.

Looking after your hygiene includes:

- Washing your hands. You should do this every time you use the restroom, before touching or preparing food, before touching a baby, after touching animals, after blowing your nose, before touching any cuts or wounds, or if you touch something dirty.
- Taking a shower or a bath. You should do this regularly. If it's something you struggle with, aim to do it at least every second day. If you get sweaty, notice you're smelling bad or you get dirty, it's important to try cleaning yourself in some way, even if this is just taking a soapy cloth and cleaning yourself without needing to get into the shower.
- Brushing your teeth every day. Ideally also flossing if you can manage. This will help to prevent tooth decay and gum diseases.
- Sneezing or coughing into your elbow so that you're not spreading germs onto other people.
- Changing sanitary products regularly. If you use tampons you should change these every 4-8 hours. If you use a pad, you should change this every 3-4 hours. If you use other products, follow the directions given.
- Cleaning up after yourself if you engage in sexual activity.

Self responsibility

Part of becoming independent is becoming responsible for yourself. Being autistic, neurodivergent or having other disabilities, you may always rely on people for certain things in life but learning self-responsibility is an important step in becoming as independent as possible.

What does this mean?

This means that you may not have someone telling you when or how to do things such as cleaning your room, managing your time, remembering to get your work done, or budget correctly. You are responsible for yourself, your life, your health, and what that looks like. For example, if you live in a flat, you are responsible for making sure you pay your rent on time, otherwise you could lose your accommodation.

However, needing support with this doesn't necessarily mean that you can't take on responsibility for yourself. If you need disability supports or find that you need ongoing support from friends and family, self-responsibility may look different. Instead it may be that you are responsible for letting people know what support you need to live the life you want to live. So, needing support to remember to pay rent on time or to budget correctly may be something you discuss with your family or with local support organisations, and perhaps you take the time to develop the necessary skills to eventually be able to budget on your own.

It's also important to listen to yourself and what you believe you are capable of. The world tells us that autistic people, neurodivergent people and other disabled people are not capable of doing many things. If you believe you can do something, or you want to challenge yourself and see if you can, it's okay to advocate for yourself, or find someone to advocate on your behalf. Refusing supports to allow yourself to try to be more independent, doesn't mean you can't go back and get help later. It doesn't mean you failed. It just means you tried against what the world was telling you and that is amazing!

Stress/emotional management

Being independent can be stressful and it can take time to learn how to manage this or even identify when you're becoming stressed in the first place. It's important to remember two things:

1. It's okay to ask for help
2. You are responsible for your emotions and how you react to things.

While being independent doesn't mean doing everything on your own, you need to remember that you are the one responsible for your actions. Learning to put tools and strategies in place to regulate yourself and handle big emotions is really important because there will be situations where the way you react can have a bigger impact on your life. For example, it could be difficult to maintain a job if your response to frustration is to yell and lash out at people. Similarly, it might be difficult to maintain friendships if you're quick to anger.

As autistic people, we often have heightened levels of stress and there are many additional factors we have to consider such as sensory input, communication differences, social differences etc. (the same goes for other disabled communities). It helps when we have understanding people in our lives who know this and can put accommodations in place that reduce the chances of things reaching the point of overload. However, no one can read our minds and know exactly what is going on at any given time and we still need to recognise that how we react to people when we're upset, can influence their emotions too.

If you find that you're getting overwhelmed or overloaded, in most situations, it's a good idea to communicate that or try find a moment to remove yourself from the stressor. If you can avoid taking it out on other people, that is good but if you have trusted people who can help you regulate, then that is also fantastic. Understand though that when people aren't in the space to support you, it's not necessarily anything personal, it may just be that they also need to look after their own emotional wellbeing.

When to see a doctor

This resource was not written by a doctor and can only give general healthcare advice. If you are concerned, go see a health professional or call Healthline for advice. Below are just some general guidelines/examples to know when it's time to see a doctor:

- Unexplained significant weight loss
- Significant fatigue or being unable to sleep
- Persistent nausea
- Persistent vomiting or diarrhoea – You can easily become dehydrated if vomiting and diarrhoea continue. If you can't get it under control, you may need to go to the emergency department. If it's only lasting a few hours to a day, you're probably best to stay home and avoid getting anyone else sick. But if it goes on longer than that, you should get checked out.
- Changes in the bathroom, using the toilet more often, cloudy urine, pain when using the toilet, bleeding with bowel motions etc.
- Any sign of external infection. Pus filled wounds for example.
- Unexplained significant pain
- Chest pain is always a cause for concern. If you have chest pain that radiates to any other part of your body, is severe or stabbing, or your heart rate or rhythm has changed, or you feel faint, call an ambulance.
- Severe pain that you cannot manage with paracetamol which is impacting your ability to function.
- Possible fractures or broken bones
- Other significant injuries
- Significant bleeding
- Significant injuries that require immediate attention or additional support, such as potential injury to the spine.
- Shortness of breath.
- Fever
- Persistent coughing