

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

# Seasonal and Environmental Triggers: Managing Behavioral Changes Through the Year

Every winter looks a little worse. Every school break brings the same rough week. Most caregivers notice the pattern eventually. Almost none of them plan around it in advance.

BY JIM PALASTY · 10 MIN READ · A PATTERN MOST CAREGIVERS NOTICE BUT NEVER PLAN AROUND

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SEASONAL PATTERNS THIS GUIDE HELPS YOU PLAN AROUND

Winter deterioration, spring and fall shifts, summer challenges, and holiday stress. Four predictable windows, each with its own specific strategy.

## How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

A pattern repeats every year

Winter deterioration, spring and fall behavioral shifts, summer sensory challenges, and holiday stress recur predictably, year after year.



STEP 2

Light and circadian rhythm play a real role

Shortened daylight hours and disrupted sleep-wake cycles connect directly to mood and behavior in ways worth planning around.



STEP 3

Environmental triggers compound the picture

Barometric pressure changes, temperature sensitivity, and seasonal allergens all add measurable additional stress.

### What to track through the year

|                                 |                                                    |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Season and date                 | The basic timestamp for any pattern to emerge      |
| Weather and barometric pressure | Note significant shifts alongside behavior         |
| Daylight hours                  | Track alongside mood and sleep changes             |
| Schedule disruptions            | Breaks, holidays, and routine changes specifically |
| Behavioral changes observed     | Specific, dated notes, not general impressions     |

THE WINTER THAT FINALLY MADE SENSE

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Bernard had assumed for years that his daughter simply had a harder personality in winter, an unchangeable fact of her temperament. A year of casual notes in a kitchen calendar revealed a tight correlation between her worst weeks and the darkest stretches of December and January specifically. A consistent morning light routine, added the following fall, noticeably softened what had felt inevitable for years.

A PATTERN THAT FELT LIKE PERSONALITY TURNED OUT TO BE DAYLIGHT. A LIGHT ROUTINE CHANGED WHAT HAD SEEMED UNCHANGEABLE.

## What matters, at a glance

### Winter deterioration

Shortened daylight and disrupted routines around holidays commonly correlate with a real, predictable decline for many autistic adults.

### Spring and fall shifts

Transitional seasons bring their own behavioral changes, often tied to shifting schedules, light, and temperature.

### School and program breaks compound everything

A loss of structure during breaks often coincides with, and worsens, whatever seasonal pattern is already happening.

### The light and circadian connection

Reduced daylight affects circadian rhythm and mood regulation in ways that are well documented and worth actively planning around.

### Environmental triggers add up

Barometric pressure shifts, temperature sensitivity, and seasonal allergens all contribute measurable additional stress on top of everything else.

### Holiday stress is its own category

Disrupted routines, unfamiliar environments, and heightened social expectations make holidays a predictable stress period worth planning for specifically.

#### BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

- |                                                                                            |                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A simple log for tracking date, weather, schedule, and behavior   | <input type="checkbox"/> A full year of data before drawing firm conclusions              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A specific plan for your identified highest-risk seasonal windows | <input type="checkbox"/> Extra structure planned in advance for school and program breaks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Willingness to adjust the plan as patterns shift year to year     |                                                                                           |

#### YOUR MOVE

### When you're planning around seasonal patterns, here is where to start

- 1 Start a simple seasonal log: date, weather, schedule, behavior.
- 2 Review a full year of notes to identify your specific patterns.
- 3 Plan extra structure and support around identified high-risk windows.
- 4 Consider a consistent light routine if winter deterioration is a pattern.
- 5 Build in extra structure specifically during school and program breaks.
- 6 Revisit and adjust the plan each year as patterns shift.

*A pattern that repeats every year isn't random. It's information, if someone finally writes it down long enough to see it.*

#### SEASONAL AND BEHAVIORAL TRACKING RESOURCES

The National Institute of Mental Health ([nimh.nih.gov](https://www.nimh.nih.gov)) publishes research on seasonal affective patterns and circadian rhythm's connection to mood and behavior.

AASPIRE ([aaspire.org](https://aaspire.org)) conducts autism-specific health research relevant to identifying and managing environmental and seasonal behavioral triggers.

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Jim Palasty is the founder of OASIS for Autism and a single father of an adult autistic daughter in Michigan.