

## Mental Health, Autism, and Learning Disabilities

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### Overview

In the UK, as in other countries, many of us are affected by mental health problems at some point in our lives, either directly in relation to ourselves, or indirectly in relation to family or friends. In England, for example, it has been found that in any given week, up to 1 in 6 of us will experience common mental health difficulties, such as anxiety or depression (1).

In people with learning disabilities and those on the autism spectrum, this number may be as much as doubled, and yet the mental health of these individuals is often overlooked. A 2008 study found that at least 1 in 3 adults with autism were experiencing severe mental health difficulties due to a lack of support (2), and other research has found this number to be as high as 80% (3).

While any mental health conditions may affect people with learning disabilities and autism spectrum condition, the most prevalent conditions in this population, however, are anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, and depression.

### Factors Affecting Mental Health

There are a number of factors thought to place people with learning disabilities and autism at higher risk of developing mental health problems:

1. People with a learning disability typically have a reduced ability to learn adaptive behaviours and skills, and often do not have the life skills that may protect them against mental health problems. For example, the ability to identify and regulate their own emotions, communicate with others that they are struggling and to seek support with this.
2. As a group, they are more vulnerable to adverse life events and stresses that have a close association with, or trigger, mental health problems such as deprivation, poverty, and abuse (4).
3. Many people with learning disabilities and autism have other related difficulties, such as sensory impairments, communication difficulties, motor impairments and epilepsy. These associated difficulties can act to increase vulnerability to mental health difficulties, and reduce an individual's ability to access appropriate support.
4. Difficulties in learning and practising new skills can also have a negative impact on self-esteem and confidence, which in turn may be related to depression and anxiety.
5. Environmental changes can provoke significant anxiety

and feelings of threat in people with learning disabilities and autism, particularly if a person has a limited understanding of events.

## Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders are very common amongst people on the autism spectrum; roughly 40% have symptoms of at least one anxiety disorder at any time, compared with 15% in the general population (5).

A combination of factors leading to vulnerability to stress is thought to explain why anxiety disorders are so prevalent in people with autism and learning disabilities. These factors may include: differences in brain structure and function, a history of social difficulties, and difficulties in finding flexible responses to apparent threats.

## Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

OCD falls under the category of anxiety disorders, and can be characterised by experiencing repetitive unwanted or unpleasant thoughts (obsessions) and attempting to control or relieve these thoughts using repetitive behaviours (compulsions).

OCD occurs in around 2-3% of the general population, and prevalence is higher among people with autism. OCD is often overlooked in people with autism as compulsions may be mistaken for repetitive behaviours that are more characteristic of autism.

## Depression

Depression can be characterised as a significant period of low mood that impacts on daily life, such as losing interest in hobbies, losing focus at work, and withdrawing from social relationships.

Around 20% of the general population are estimated to experience a period of depression at some point, and this number is thought to be even higher in people with autism.

## Challenging Behaviour and Mental Health

It is thought that some forms of challenging behaviour may actually be indicators of mental health problems. For example, self-injurious behaviour may be an expression of obsessive compulsive disorder. It could also be the case that some challenging behaviours are a secondary manifestation of mental health problems, and it has been suggested that aggression and self-injury may be in some cases indicative of a mood disorder. Likewise, challenging behaviours and skill loss may be a result of feelings of depression.

## Diagnosis

Diagnosing mental health disorders in children with autism and learning disabilities can be difficult for a number of reasons, including:

- Symptoms of mental health disorders can look like challenging behaviour or autistic traits, for example, compulsions may look like repetitive behaviours, and self-injury may be an indicator of OCD rather than a behavioural issue.
- Mental health symptoms may look different in children with autism and learning disabilities compared to other children, for example, anxiety may present as hyperactivity or demand avoidant behaviour.
- The child may find it difficult to communicate their symptoms or emotions.
- There are very few mental health diagnostic measures that have been adapted for use with children with autism or learning disabilities.

## Treatment

After receiving a mental health diagnosis, there are a number of different treatments available to access. These include:

**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** This is a treatment that is carried out by a trained CBT therapist, and aims to generate an understanding of the way a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours work together. The therapist works closely with the individual and their families, and will help the individual to develop coping skills and ways to challenge their negative thoughts and behaviours.

**Social Skills Training:** This can take the form of individual or group sessions, and helps people with autism and learning disabilities to improve their social skills and understanding. Development of these skills may help to reduce anxiety around social situations, and may also help with depression, due to increasing the person's self-esteem.

**Mindfulness-Based Therapy:** Mindfulness is about focusing on the here and now, to help people to be present in the moment instead of worrying about what happened in the past or what may happen in the future. Many mindfulness exercises focus on controlled breathing or focusing on the senses, and can help to reduce people's anxieties and improve mood.

**Medication:** There are medications available to help with mental health disorders, and these tend to be prescribed by a psychiatrist. This treatment is often used alongside other treatments to help the person with their symptoms while they learn useful skills for improving their mental health.

## What You Can Do

**Promote a healthy lifestyle:** Eating well and exercising regularly can improve a person's mood, boost self-esteem, and contribute to overall good health. Encouraging the person you support to maintain a healthy lifestyle can help alleviate some of the symptoms of mental health disorders, particularly low mood.

**Promote healthy sleep:** Getting a good night's sleep is beneficial to both physical and mental health. Given that an estimated 40-80% of people with autism experience sleep problems (6), helping a person with their sleep can have a positive impact on their mental health. Regular bedtimes, deep breathing and meditation exercises, and limiting technology use before bed can all help towards better sleep.

**Provide structure:** Having daily routines can help alleviate some of the anxieties that people with autism and learning disabilities may face, as structure helps to reduce unpredictability and uncertainty.

**Seek help:** If you are concerned about a person you support, such as you notice a change in their behaviours or mood, then it may be a good idea to speak to their GP.

## Conclusion

Individuals with autism and learning disabilities can be more likely to experience poor mental health as they can be particularly vulnerable to negative life events and might not have the mechanisms for coping with these. The most prevalent conditions in this population are anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, and depression. That said, mental health symptoms are often missed and viewed as attributes of autism or the learning disability; but there are, however, things you can do to support the person suspected of poor mental health, such as considering if they show any changes in behaviour and seeking help, as there are treatment options available.

## Useful Resources and Support

- Mencap - <https://www.mencap.org.uk/>
- Mind - <https://www.mind.org.uk/>
- YoungMinds - <https://youngminds.org.uk/>
- National Autistic Society - <https://www.autism.org.uk/>
- SANE - <http://www.sane.org.uk/>

## References

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- 2) Rosenblatt, M (2008). I Exist: the message from adults with autism in England. London: The National Autistic Society, p3
- 3) <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/autism-spectrum-disorder>
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- 5) <https://www.autism.org.uk/about/health/mental-health.aspx>
- 6) <https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/equality-human-rights/mental-health-of-people-with-autism/>
- 7) <https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Mental-health-autism-E-LEAFLET.pdf>
- 8) <https://network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/insight-opinion/mindfulness-adults-autism-spectrum-conditions-professional-perspective>

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