Medical and Psychiatric Issues that May Accompany Autism

Many children and adults diagnosed with autism have additional medical issues, including epilepsy, sleep dysfunction, gastrointestinal disorders or genetic disorders like Fragile X syndrome. As an adult, you may not have experienced these conditions that often arise at a very young age. But in addition to these disorders, many individuals with autism also have a variety of psychiatric and mental health challenges. Some research suggests that autism shares a genetic basis with several major psychiatric disorders, including attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety and schizophrenia.

It is important to note that while some research suggests that just over two-thirds of children with autism have been diagnosed with one or more psychiatric disorders, healthcare professionals not familiar with autism tend to over-diagnose psychiatric problems in this group. This may be due to overlap between autism symptoms and those associated with psychiatric disorders. It is critical to receive accurate diagnoses of these conditions because medication or therapy to treat them may significantly improve autism symptoms and quality of life.

This section contains more information about some of these challenges faced by individuals on the autism spectrum.

“My anxiety can be so profound because of the fear of social expectations, sensory violations and unexpected changes. These are all so unbearable that I can feel frozen and unable to move forward. A simple request of me can sometimes be the core trigger of a meltdown.”

- Sondra Williams

Anxiety

Recent studies suggest that 30% of individuals with autism struggle with an anxiety disorder such as social phobia, separation anxiety, panic disorder and specific phobias. Some experts suspect that outward symptoms of anxiety – such as swearing and acting out – may be especially prominent among people on the spectrum. Even in the absence of an anxiety disorder, many individuals with autism have difficulty controlling anxiety when something triggers it. Anxiety can range from occasional, mild and completely understandable to unremitting, severe and irrational.
The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved any medication expressly for the treatment of anxiety in persons with autism, however some drugs approved to treat anxiety disorders in the general population are commonly used to help individuals with autism, such as Prozac and Zoloft. Medicines for relieving anxiety are best used in combination with counseling or other behavioral interventions. Individuals with autism may respond best to tailored treatments specific to those with both diagnoses.

If you suspect you may have an anxiety disorder, ask your doctor for recommendations for mental health professionals who may specialize in treating anxiety.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), ADHD affects about 4.1% of American adults age 18 and older and 9.0% of American children age 13 to 18. Those rates are estimated to be much higher among the autism population as many children and adults with autism struggle with ADHD. While there has not been a study on ADHD specifically among adults, recent studies suggest that 1 in 5 children on the spectrum also has ADHD. Another study found that just 1 in 10 children diagnosed with both autism and ADHD was receiving medication to relieve the ADHD symptoms, as many symptoms can likewise result from autism.

According to NIMH, inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity are the key behaviors of ADHD. Inattention can result in individuals being easily distracted and having difficulty focusing on one thing, processing information, listening and following directions. Sometimes ADHD can go undiagnosed if symptoms are viewed as emotional problems, challenging behaviors or difficulties at school and in the workplace. Symptoms of hyperactivity may include fidgeting and squirming, difficulty with quiet tasks or activities and trouble sitting still during meals, class or other activities. Impulsivity, a third hallmark of ADHD, can cause an individual to be very impatient, blurt out inappropriate comments, act without regard to consequences and have difficulty showing his or her emotions without restraint.

If you suspect you may have ADHD, it is important to be evaluated by a licensed mental health professional because treatment of the disorder, which often involves medication, can be very helpful in correcting these symptoms. To be diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, you must have symptoms that began in childhood and continued throughout adulthood. For some adults, a diagnosis can bring a sense of relief as it can help explain behaviors that have been present for most of their lives.
Individuals with autism may be particularly prone to depression, another disorder of the brain, in adolescence and adulthood. It can be difficult to diagnose, however, because many people on the spectrum are less likely to communicate the feelings used to diagnose depression. Seeing a mental health professional who has experience with autism is very important when seeking a depression diagnosis. Many people with depression never seek treatment, but when diagnosed properly, both cognitive behavioral therapy and medications can significantly improve the individual’s feelings. If you feel you may be depressed, learn more about the signs and symptoms from the National Institute of Mental Health and ask your doctor for a referral to a mental health professional.

Bipolar disorder, once commonly called manic-depression, involves episodes of abnormally high energy alternating with depression over a period of time. Among individuals with autism, the symptoms of bipolar disorder commonly include abrupt increases in “pressured speech”, pacing, impulsivity, irritability and insomnia. Some studies have found that as many as 27% of those with autism may have bipolar disorder, compared to its prevalence in the general population of around 4%. Psychiatrists often prescribe psychoactive medications to treat bipolar disorder. Studies suggest that mood-stabilizing medications may be safer treatments for those with autism.
**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder**

Doctors or therapists unfamiliar with autism often mistake some of autism’s core symptoms like repetitive behaviors and restricted interests with those of **obsessive-compulsive disorder** (OCD). But it is important to distinguish between the two. A distinguishing hallmark of OCD is that the compulsive thoughts or behavior cause anxiety. By contrast, persons with autism are not generally bothered by their repetitive behaviors and restricted interests, which tend to bring them comfort and enjoyment. The estimated prevalence of OCD in those with ASD ranges from 8 to 33% depending on the study, compared to the general population prevalence of 2%. For an OCD diagnosis, it is important that the mental health professional has knowledge of autism and its symptoms. As is the case with other disorders, a combination of medication and cognitive behavioral therapy can significantly improve the symptoms of OCD.

**Sensory Integration Dysfunction**

Many individuals with autism experience unusual responses to sensory stimuli or input due to difficulty in processing and integrating sensory information. Vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste, the sense of movement and the sense of position can all be affected, meaning while information is sensed normally, it may be perceived much differently. Stimuli that seem “normal” to others can be experienced as painful, unpleasant or confusing by an individual with autism. **Sensory Integration Dysfunction** (SID), the clinical term for this characteristic, can involve hypersensitivity, such an ability to tolerate being touched, or hyposensitivity, such as an increased tolerance for pain or constant need for sensory stimulation. Treatment is usually addressed with sensory integration therapy, which is provided by certified occupational and physical therapists.

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**This Sounds Familiar… Now How Do I Get a Diagnosis?**

If you feel you might have autism, it is important to find a mental health professional with experience diagnosing the disorder, preferably in other adults. Bring your concerns to your general practitioner and ask for recommendations for a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker who can help you. It may help to bring a list of the symptoms of autism you feel you may have, including examples of some of the behaviors and feelings that trigger your concerns. You can also try searching the **Autism Speaks Resource Guide** for mental health professionals in your area at autismspeaks.org/resource-guide. While some may only diagnose children, they may be able to point you in the right direction.

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“Autistic people like me have many sensory processing issues that stand in the way of being flexible. People with autism can be extremely sensitive to noise, lights, smells and many times touch. I need direct instruction about what the rules of expected behavior are in the different environments. Kind are those who are truly patient.”

- Jeremy Sicile-Kira