



VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER  
TREATMENT & RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

# Autism and Mental Health

How does mental health play a role in autism and why does it often go unnoticed or is misunderstood?



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*How does mental health play a role in autism and why does it often go unnoticed or is misunderstood? This tip sheet is designed to explain the relationship between mental health concerns and autism as well as addressing their co-occurrences.*

❑ **When we talk about autism, we typically approach it from a behavioral perspective.**

We recognize the two main characteristics of autism based on common patterns of behavior.

Criteria for autism according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – 5th Edition (DSM-5):

1. Persistent difficulties with social-emotional reciprocity, reading non-vocal cues, and maintaining relationships.
2. Demonstrate repetitive movements, prefer reliability/routines, have highly focused interests, and/or have different reactions to sensory input.

These characteristics are not unique to just autism and can also overlap with other mental health diagnoses.

❑ **While identifying and recognizing these behaviors are important, it is also important to recognize how mental health plays a role in autistic presentation.**

Because there is a high rate of co-occurring mental health concerns experienced by autistic individuals, not all characteristics may be attributed to just autism alone. For example, having difficulty communicating with others is present in both autism and social anxiety. Likewise, repetitive patterns of responding are sometimes found in both autism and OCD. Because there is an overlap between autistic characteristics and mental health symptoms, it is possible that their mental health concerns are overlooked. Therefore, it is important for services to be available to address mental health as well as functional skills in order to truly improve an individual's quality of life.

❑ **There can also be a cyclical relationship between mental health concerns and autistic behaviors.**

As stated above, mental health concerns can display themselves through traits that may seem more in line with autism. However, autistic traits can also impact mental health. For example, difficulty with socializing may contribute to that individual's feelings of depression, especially if this leads to isolation and disconnection. Mental health symptoms can overlap with these traits (e.g., social withdrawal and/or avoidance), which can then further intensify mental health symptoms.

## ❑ **Why does this matter?**

It matters because it ultimately impacts how we provide services. While behavioral therapies (e.g., ABA) are most often prescribed to help autistic individuals learn skills to improve quality of life, other therapy modalities (e.g., individual counseling and therapy, medication) may be more effective with treating underlying emotional/mental-health symptoms.

Despite the increase in mental health awareness, there is still a lack of therapy adaptations for neurodivergent communities. For example, there are not a lot of treatment manuals which provide adaptations specifically for autistic individuals (e.g., ACT, DBT). This is important to address because autistic individuals may have difficulty identifying and communicating their mental health concerns/needs without professional help.

“There needs to be more evidence-based articles that provide insight into what interventions can do to those who take part in these experiments. [...] Providing individuals with autism the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas will allow more professionals to take notice of this. In turn, this will allow many individuals the ability to spread awareness for how we feel.”

*~Armando Bernal, self-advocate*

In order to provide the best support for autistic individuals, it is important we take all variables—private and public events—into consideration.

## ❑ **Read more about the balance between autism and other mental health concerns with these brief infographics/blog posts:**

- » [ADHD](#)
- » [OCD](#)
- » [Trauma](#)
- » [Anxiety](#)
- » [Depression](#)

## ❑ **Summary:**

Autistic individuals are at an increased risk for mental health concerns compared to neurotypical individuals. There are many resources to show how common mental health concerns co-occur with autism, yet not as many resources to explain what to do with this information. Mental health symptoms can be overlooked in autistic individuals when providers are only focused on the autism diagnosis criteria. However, there is a cyclical relationship between mental health concerns and autistic characteristics that are unique and deserve to be studied more in order to provide the best support.

### Additional Resources:

If you are viewing this document on a web browser or in Acrobat, click a title to open the link.

A Causal and Mediation Analysis of the Comorbidity Between Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	Get Ready to Learn About ASD and Trauma
ADHD and Autism: Differential Diagnosis or Overlapping Traits? A Selective Review	Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder in Autism Spectrum Disorder Across the Lifespan
Autism Spectrum Disorder and Anxiety/Depression	Prevalence of Co-occurring Mental Health Diagnoses in the Autism Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis
Childhood Diagnoses in Individuals Identified as Autistics in Adulthood	Psychiatric Co-occurring Symptoms and Disorders in Young, Middle-Aged, and Older Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder
Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Who Have Experienced Trauma	Social Anxiety in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review
Co-occurring Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder and Autism Spectrum Disorder in Young People: Prevalence, Clinical Characteristics and Outcomes	The Co-occurrence of Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Children – What Do We Know?
Co-occurring Psychiatric Disorders in Preschool and Elementary School-Aged Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder	Trauma and Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Reference Guide
Depression in Youth With Autism Spectrum Disorder	Trauma and Autism Spectrum Disorder: Review, Proposed Treatment Adaptations and Future Directions

For more information about co-occurring mental health concerns and autism, please visit our website ([triad.vkclearning.org](http://triad.vkclearning.org)) and register to watch our basic online training sessions for School-Age Services (K-12) under the “Mental Health Focused for Professionals” category.

This resource was created with direction, input, and feedback from TRIAD’s Advisory Committee. For more information about this committee, please visit our website on [Community Informed Practice](#).