

## AUTISM AND MENTAL HEALTH

### QUICK FACTS

- Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, with characteristics first emerging in early childhood.
- Autistic people experience a range of differences in the areas of social behaviour and communication, interests and behaviours, and often experience co-occurring mental health conditions.
- Autistic people can benefit from working with mental health professionals who understand autism, are strengths-based, and supportive.

**An important note:** at SANE, we have chosen to use identity-first language in this factsheet, which is preferred by many people in the autistic community<sup>1</sup>. However, we recognise that some people prefer person-first language like 'person with autism', or the term 'autism spectrum disorder', and we respect individual choices and preferences.

### WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition. The official diagnostic term is 'autism spectrum disorder'. Some people also use the term 'Asperger's syndrome', which was a previous term related to autism, though this is no longer given as a diagnosis in Australia.

Autism is form of neurodivergence, meaning that autistic people think, learn, experience, and interact with the world around them in a different way to other people. These days, more people are understanding and embracing autism, and celebrating the strengths of autistic people.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTISM

As a neurodevelopmental condition, signs of autism first appear in early childhood. Autism involves the following<sup>2</sup>:

- Challenges with social communication and interaction. This can include challenges with conversations, non-verbal communications and body language, and difficulties in

relationships.

- Restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests or activities. For example, repetitive motor movements or speech; a strong preference for sameness and routine; intense or focused interests; or sensitivity to sensory stimulation like sound or temperature.

## **CAUSES OF AUTISM**

It's unclear what causes autism. There is no single cause, and lots of different factors can contribute. It's known to run in families and there is a strong genetic basis<sup>3</sup>.

## **HOW COMMON IS AUTISM?**

It's estimated that around 0.7 per cent of Australians are autistic, and children and young people are most likely to be diagnosed<sup>4</sup>. People are getting better at recognising autism, particularly in adults who might have had their symptoms missed in childhood.

Autism occurs on a spectrum and can be described as a constellation of traits. This means that each autistic person is different. Some autistic people experience significant challenges in their day-to-day life, and may identify as having a disability, whereas others do not.

Many autistic people also experience co-occurring mental health issues. These are commonly due to a range of reasons, including overlap in symptoms, possible shared life experiences and genetic factors, and the impact of stressful or traumatic events like bullying.

Common co-occurring mental health and developmental conditions include<sup>5</sup>:

- ADHD
- Depression
- Anxiety disorders
- OCD
- Bipolar disorder

Some autistic people may also experience other conditions like intellectual disability, speech and language challenges, sleep problems, and physical health problems.

## **SUPPORT FOR AUTISM AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Many autistic people can benefit from accessing mental health support. But there can be barriers to getting the right help – for example, some mental health professionals may not have a good understanding of autism, or have the right training to provide support.

Good mental health support for autistic people includes<sup>6</sup>:

- Mental health professionals who are knowledgeable about autism, and understand the strength and resilience of autistic people.
- Accessible, high quality support services that are appropriate for people who might have communication challenges or sensory sensitivities.
- Good coordination and collaboration between different teams and support providers.

People experiencing both autism and mental health issues can also benefit from:

- building a relationship with a supportive GP, and other mental health professionals
- developing a support network of trusted friends or family members
- looking after their physical health by getting enough exercise and sleep
- connecting with others with similar experiences, such as through peer support
- Accessing other types of support, such as community and employment support, if needed.

**Autistic people have a range of strengths and have the right to access connection and mental health support that meets their needs.**

**To connect with others who get it, visit our online Forums. They're safe, anonymous and available 24/7.**

**VISIT [SANE FORUMS](#).**

## RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

- [Amaze](#)
- [National Disability Insurance Scheme \(NDIS\) and autism](#)
- [Yellow Ladybugs - support for autistic girls and gender diverse young people](#)

## REFERENCES

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