

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 community¹. 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 following²:

- 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 basis³.

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 diagnosed⁴. 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 include⁵:

- 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 includes⁶:

- 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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