

Children and adolescents on the autism spectrum

From a young age and through to later life, people on the autism spectrum are more likely than other people to experience mental ill health, most commonly anxiety and depression. Data from surveys shows that up to 46% of children on the autism spectrum between 3-16 years and 70% of children aged 10-14 experience at least one mental health condition. By building an awareness of mental health and by taking action to address it, children on the autism spectrum and their parents and caregivers can improve mental wellbeing.

What is good mental health?

It is about being able to live your life to your full potential, doing things that are meaningful to you and coping physically and emotionally with everyday challenges.

It is important to be aware that, for your child, living with one or more of the 'core' features of autism while navigating nonautistic environments can be stressful and have an impact on mental wellbeing.

How might features of autism influence mental health?

Social skills:

- Children on the autism spectrum may be more vulnerable to bullying
- Feeling rejected by peers can cause stress, impact self-esteem and mental wellbeing

Communication:

- Feeling unrecognised and 'unheard' can be frustrating, disempowering, stressful and isolating
- Children with limited or no language or an atypical communication style may struggle to be understood and interpret other people

Change:

- Many children on the autism spectrum show a strong need for certainty
- Using a fixed style of thinking can provide a sense of control
- Unpredictable, changing environments and dealing with ambiguity can be stressful and hurt their self-belief

Sensory processing:

- Children who experience sensory overload can feel overwhelmed in everyday environments, such as a shopping centre
- A child's heightened stress and anxiety may make them more vulnerable to other factors that impact their mental wellbeing

Executive functioning:

- It is very common for all parents to complain about their child's lack of organisation!
- This may be increased for a child on the autism spectrum who is not skilled in 'executive functioning' (e.g. attention, memory, problem-solving, inhibition, impulse control and multi-tasking)
- The disorganisation can create an added sense of chaos, uncertainty and isolation for a child and their family, which can trigger stress and anxiety of the child (and parents or caregivers)

Adolescence can be stressful

Remember that adolescence can be stressful for any young person, whether or not they are on the autism spectrum. During adolescence, a child is transitioning to adult life and establishing an adult identity, purpose and sense of belonging. With so much going on, it is unsurprising that adolescence is also a time when mental health can suffer.

For teens on the autism spectrum:

- The many changes and transitions taking place can be especially difficult to cope with if they strongly prefer certainty
- Atypical modes of communication, language and social interaction might increase their vulnerability to experiencing social isolation or bullying
- On a positive note: those who prefer to stick to rule-bound behaviours or tend not to be influenced by social cues can display a strong resilience to negative peer pressure

Can I help my child develop and maintain mental wellbeing?

As with our physical health, maintaining mental wellness is an important buffer against illness. Many of the healthy habits you may already have in place for your child can help to reduce and manage their exposure to stress, and help them to cope better!

Strategies you might like to use to help your child include:

- Providing routine, certainty, predictability and organisational strategies
- Develop their ability to adapt to change
- Develop social skills and friendships
- Support and equip your child to deal with bullying
- Develop your child's special interests and hobbies
- Support healthy eating and exercise habits
- Build your child's confidence and self-esteem

Talking about mental health

Being aware and open about mental health in your family can make it easier for you and your child to recognise early signs and take action to address it.

Some ways to make this easier are:

- Keep communication open, be available without being intrusive or 'pushy'
- Show empathy and don't rush into judgements
- Take your child's feelings seriously
- Spend time with your child, take an interest in their activities and encourage them to talk about what's happening in their life

- Give lots of positive feedback to your child
- Help them build a support network beyond yourself
- Encourage and support any positive friendships and relationships with other family members
- Let your child know that you love them. They may not always admit it, but this is likely to be very important to them.

If you are concerned about your child:

- Talk openly and honestly with them and let them know that you are concerned
- Reassure them that you will always be there for them
- Ask what they need from you
- Let them know that there is lots of help available
- Help find an appropriate service and support them in attending

Ask direct questions if you are concerned about suicide. For example, have you been thinking about death? Have you thought about ending your life?

Source: www.headspace.org.au/

Signs that your child might need more help

It can be hard to know the difference between normal behaviour such as occasional moodiness and irritability and an emerging mental health problem, especially during adolescence. Feeling down, tense, angry, anxious or moody are all normal emotions for young people, but when changes are new or out of character, noticeable and last for at least a few weeks, these might be a sign of a mental health problem.

Be alert to the signs below, and if you are concerned: seek help and advice early. The sooner you get help, the sooner things can begin to improve.

Things to look out for in your child:

- Not enjoying or not wanting to do things that they would normally enjoy
- Noticeable changes in, or withdrawal from their usual level of communication with family and friends
- Significant changes in appetite or sleep
- Unusual weight gains or losses
- Being more easily irritated or angry for no reason
- Sudden unexplainable changes in mood, both positive or negative
- Not participating or performing at school, TAFE, university or work at their normal level
- Involving themselves in risky behaviour that they would usually avoid, such as taking drugs or drinking too much alcohol
- Withdrawal or unexplainable breakdown from their usual relationships; sudden urges to seek solitude from normal social gatherings or family activities

Staying healthy and supported as a parent

When you are caring for a child on the autism spectrum, it can be easy to forget, but you can help your child cope with stress and anxiety by looking after yourself too.

- Build your resilience and the energy you have to support and seek help for your child and family by eating healthily, exercising and taking time out for you
- Remember that mental health professionals are available to support you through challenging times too

- Seeming unusually stressed, worried, down or crying for no apparent reason
- Expressing unusually negative, distressing or bizarre thoughts

Diagnosing mental health conditions for children on the autism spectrum

There are several reasons why diagnosis of mental health conditions in autism can be more complex than for nonautistic children:

- Each child's experience of autism varies
- Thoughts, feelings and behaviours that might indicate a mental health condition in a nonautistic child can be normal for a child on the autism spectrum
- Autism traits can mask the symptoms of mental health concerns, and vice versa, because there are features could look like anxiety, depression or other mood and behavioural disorders
- It can be challenging to determine the true source of symptoms, because of the interacting factors (biological, social, psychological, environmental) that influence the behaviour of a child on the autism spectrum
- The process of understanding and analysing mental wellbeing can be more difficult when a child does not readily 'self reflect' or express their thoughts and emotions

E.g. a diagnostic test might suggest that a child shows a limited range of emotions. Sometimes, this could be masking signs of depression. Other times, behaviour such as limited facial expressions could be misinterpreted as a sign of depression when in fact it is a feature of the child's autism.

It is helpful to have an understanding of what autism looks like for the individual child and how they normally behave, to achieve diagnosis. This can be achieved by combining professional expertise with the experiences of family and caregivers who best understand the child's usual behaviour.

What evidence-based mental health interventions can help children on the autism spectrum?

With modification, a number of approaches that are effective in helping nonautistic young people cope with mental health concerns can also be effective for young people on the autism spectrum.

Examples of modifications include:

- Visual and written supports (e.g. thought bubbles, images)
- A concrete and structured approach such as role plays or worksheets
- Focus on changing behaviour, rather than thoughts
- Making rules explicit and explaining why
- Using plain English, and avoiding ambiguity or hypothetical situations
- Involving family members, carers or buddies (if agreed upon)
- Maintaining attention by offering breaks and including special interests into the therapy

Evidence-based mental health interventions include:

- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a structured talking therapy that helps people understand the links between thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviour. With modifications, it can be helpful for young people on the autism spectrum to manage anxiety
- Mindfulness-based therapies use strategies that aim to increase awareness of the present moment to help cope with anxiety or stress. There is indication that mindfulness is effective for children on the autism spectrum, by increasing self-insight, reducing rumination and emotional reactivity.

Resources

- *Headspace provides support to young people aged 12 to 25 years who need help with mental health, physical health (including sexual health), alcohol and other drugs or work and study support.*

eHeadspace provides online support and telephone counselling for young people and families.

www.headspace.org.au

Headspace centres provide face-to-face services including psychologists, social workers, counsellors, alcohol workers, drug workers and vocational workers. tel 1800 650 890

- *Beyond Blue provides support, information and counselling to help people deal with anxiety, depression and other mental health problems.*

www.beyondblue.org.au tel 1300 22 4636

This Beyond Blue symptom checker can help you decide if you should seek assistance from a health professional
<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety-and-depression-checklist-k10>

Getting help and more information

Visiting your doctor is a good place to start if you're concerned that your child might need help with their mental health. Your GP can refer you to a mental health professional who can provide support and make a formal diagnosis. There are professionals who specialise in helping children on the autism spectrum, who are well-equipped to provide an expert diagnosis and advice for your child.

If your child is at a special education school, the school may provide psychological or counselling services. In mainstream government and independent schools, a school counsellor can be a helpful source of information about mental health services in your local area. In Australia, mental health services are generally available at local family and youth health centres operated by State governments.

- *The Black Dog Institute provides information and support for all people of all ages to cope with mental illness, particularly mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder.*
<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au> tel (02) 9382 4530
- *Reach Out provides online mental health help and support for young Australians aged under 25, with information, videos and fact sheets.*
<http://au.reachout.com>
- *Kids Helpline provides telephone and online counselling services to support young people aged 5 to 25 years.*
www.kidshelpline.com.au tel 1800 55 1800
- *Lifeline provides 24/7 crisis support telephone and online counselling, including suicide prevention.* <https://www.lifeline.org.au> tel 13 11 14
- *Mental Health First Aid Australia is a national not-for-profit organisation that develops, evaluates and provides evidence-based courses, including teaching mental health first aid strategies to members of the public. Mental health first aid (MHFA) is the help provided to a person who is developing a mental health problem, or in a mental health-related crisis, until appropriate professional treatment is received or the crisis resolves.*
<https://mhfa.com.au/cms/home> tel 03 9079 0200

Books

- A practical guide to mental health problems in children with autism spectrum disorders. It's not just their autism by Khalid Karim, Alvina Ali and Michelle O'Reilly. 2014. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
A clear, practical and informative guide to give the readers an understanding of how living with autism and

mental health interact, and provides practical strategies for managing. It draws on real-life examples from author's clinical and personal experience of living with a child on the autism spectrum.

- The parents' practical guide to resilience for preteens and teenagers on the autism spectrum by *Jeanette Purkis and Emma Goodall*. 2018. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
This easy-to-use resource empowers parents of young people on the autism spectrum aged 11-20 to help them build resilience in their child, with suggestions and activities to guide parents in helping their child build resilience and independence.
- The parents' practical guide to resilience for children on the autism spectrum: two to ten years by *Jeanette Purkis and Emma Goodall*. 2018. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
This book aims to empower parents to build resilience in their child on the autism spectrum aged 2-10. There is information about developmental stages, and understanding how to manage life milestones.
- Asperger syndrome and anxiety: A guide to successful stress management by *Nick Dublin*. 2009. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Other resources

Positive Partnerships is an Australian Government funded consortium of autism organisations that provides support for school age children on the autism spectrum, including workshops, webinars, online learning, information and resources for parents, carers and educators. Aspect is the lead agency in the consortium.

<http://www.positivepartnerships.com.au>

The NSW Council for Intellectual Disabilities has a plain language, non-technical tips to help mental health that's very readable for young people and people with an intellectual disability.

<https://cid.org.au/resource/tips-help-mental-health>

Launchpad, Aspect's website specifically for young people with autism who are about to leave school has information, tips and resources, both for young people and their parents, about mental health and related topics such as health and social life.

<http://www.autismlaunchpad.org.au/health>

Secret Agent Society, The Secret Agent Society (SAS) is an evidence-based social skills program designed for children who find it difficult to understand their own emotions, and those of others. The program helps children develop the skills needed to express their feelings in appropriate ways, using role playing missions and computer games to teach children how to make friends, manage bullies and ask for help when needed.
<http://www.sst-institute.net> tel 07 3720 8740