

The Link Between Autism and Mental Health

Approximately 1 in 36 children and 1 in 45 adults in the U.S. have autism, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Research indicates they face a higher risk of suicide and exhibit elevated rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

What is Autism?¹

Autism is a developmental disorder with symptoms that appear within the first three years of life. Its formal diagnostic name is autism spectrum disorder. The word “spectrum” indicates that autism appears in different forms with varying levels of severity. That means that each individual with autism experiences their own unique strengths, symptoms, and challenges.

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) definition recognizes two main symptom areas:

- Deficits in social communication and interaction
- Restricted, repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities

Individuals with autism may present a range of symptoms that can include, but are not limited to:

- Reduced eye contact
- Lack of facial expressions
- Not engaging in imaginative play
- Repeating gestures or sounds
- Closely focused interests

Suicide Risk

Research shows autistic individuals face a higher risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors than non-autistic peers.² This increased risk is partly linked to co-occurring conditions like depression and anxiety. Autistic children are about twice as likely to experience suicidal ideation or attempts, with some reported as early as age eight.³ Autistic adults also show markedly higher rates of suicidal ideation and attempts, especially when diagnosed later in life.

Resources

Autistic Self Advocacy Network
autisticadvocacy.org

Autism Society Ohio
autismohio.org/resources

Autism Speaks
autismspeaks.org

National Autism Association
nationalautismassociation.org

Ohio Center for Autism and Local Incidence
ocali.org

“Autistic children are about twice as likely [than non-autistic peers] to experience suicidal ideation or attempts, with some reported as early as age eight.”

WARNING SIGNS

THERE ARE WARNING SIGNS AN AUTISTIC INDIVIDUAL IS EXPERIENCING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS, SUCH AS:⁴

INCREASED EMOTIONAL DISTRESS THAT CAN PRESENT ITSELF AS IRRITABILITY OR AGGRESSION

INCREASING SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL OR ISOLATION

PERSISTENT FEELINGS OF SADNESS OR HOPELESSNESS

SELF-INJURY OR DISCUSSION OF SELF-HARM

CHANGES IN EATING OR SLEEPING PATTERNS, INDICATING DISTRESS

Supporting Autistic Youth

Supporting autistic youth's mental health requires understanding their emotions, triggers, and access to appropriate support.⁵

Understand triggers. It's crucial for professionals and family members to observe and understand what upsets autistic individuals. By having open conversations and asking thoughtful questions, we can identify the root of their distress. Together, we can empower them with effective strategies to manage their feelings, fostering a supportive environment where everyone can thrive.

Evidence-based treatments. Emotional dysregulation can lead autistic individuals to use unhelpful coping strategies like rumination or shutting down in anxious moments. When triggers are managed but symptoms remain, it's a good time to explore evidence-based treatments like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is effective for anxiety, depression, OCD, and eating disorders, helping individuals navigate their emotions more positively and confidently.

Self-acceptance and peer acceptance. Depression can often stem from isolation or hiding one's true self, especially in autistic youth. However, support systems are crucial in overcoming these challenges. Many autistic individuals find empowerment through understanding their diagnosis, leading to self-acceptance and confidence. Families, teachers, and professionals can encourage social skills and extracurricular activities, helping children connect with peers who share their interests.

References

- 1 Autism Research Institute. What is Autism? Available at: <https://autism.org/what-is-autism/>.
- 2 iReid M, Delgado D, Heinly J, et al. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors in people on the autism spectrum. *Curr Psychiatry Rep.* 2024;26(11):563-572. doi:10.1007/s11920-024-01533-0.
- 3 Kennedy Krieger Institute. New research shows alarming number of suicidal thoughts among young children with autism spectrum disorder. April 4, 2024. Available at: <https://www.kennedykrieger.org/stories/news-and-updates/research-news-releases/new-research-shows-alarming-number-suicidal-thoughts-among-young-children-autism-spectrum-disorder>.
- 4 Autism Speaks. Mental health crisis prevention and support. Available at: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/mental-health-crisis-prevention-and-support>.
- 5 Organization for Autism Research. The Intersection of Autism and Mental Health. Available at: <https://researchautism.org/oracle-newsletter/the-intersection-of-autism-and-mental-health/>.

ABOUT

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



(614) 429-1528 / OhioSPF.org

