

# AUTISM & MENTAL HEALTH



Key Stats On Mental Illness and Autism

Mental illness and Autism

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# KEY STATS ON MENTAL ILLNESS AND AUTISM

1

In the general population, 25% of people will develop mental health problems in their lifetime. In the autistic population, this figure rises to 70% - 80%.

2

Around 15% of autistic adults with mental health problems are hospitalised (compared to 2.8% of non-autistic people).

3

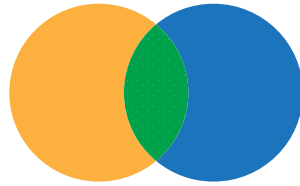
Up to 66% of autistic adults have considered suicide.

4

Over 70% of autistic adults experience difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep

5

Around 34% of autistic adults are on 2 or more psychiatric medicines.



These figures can seem quite worrying. Autism is **not** a mental illness in itself and there are things you can do to lessen the risk of mental illness. However, living in a neurotypical world as a neurodiverse person is **hard** and **demanding**, and you shouldn't feel ashamed if you require **support** for your mental health.

**REMEMBER:** Autism can be bring difficulties but is can be your **SUPER POWER** too!

# MORE ABOUT

## Mental Illness

### **Sleep Issues**

People with Autism tend to have more sleep issues due to a variety of reasons. These include increased anxiety or difficulty relaxing, sensory difficulties such as sensitivity to light and sound, gastro-intestinal (GI) issues which can cause discomfort and struggling with changes in routine, to name just a few.

### **Anxiety Disorders**

40 - 50% of those with Autism have experienced anxiety disorders. Autistic people are more susceptible to anxiety because of social and sensory issues, misunderstanding from others, experience of non-acceptance and difficulty during change.

### **Eating Disorders**

Roughly 20% of those with anorexia nervosa are autistic. There are other types of eating disorders too, such as Bulimia, Binge Eating Disorder, avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID) and Pica. Individuals with Autism are more susceptible to eating disorders because of sensory difficulties, obsessions, strict rules and routines, the need for control or to manage difficulties in emotions.

## **Depression**

Over 50% of autistic adults said depression has had a high impact on their life. This high figure may be due to low self-esteem, social isolation, loneliness, alexithymia (see below) and relationship difficulties

## **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**

Up to 17% of people with Autism have OCD. It is often underdiagnosed in people with autism because of the overlap of difficulties in both conditions. OCD is characterised by obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours.

## **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)**

About 20 - 37% of those with Autism also have ADHD. When the conditions coexist, there is usually greater functional impairments. ADHD can causes problems with inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity.

## **Alexithymia**

Difficulty identifying, naming and describing emotions

# TIPS FOR

## improving your mental health

Set **manageable** goals, be aware of your energy levels - think about **spoon theory**.

Build in time to **rest** and **recover** & to do **calming activities**

Engage in activities that you **enjoy!**

Take **regular breaks**. Make a plan but don't overload yourself.

Try and find times and places you feel comfortable in which to **unmask** - be yourself!

Spend time with **friends** and **family**. Ask for help and seek **professional support** if needed.

**Exercise regularly** in a way that you enjoy. Everyone is different and exercise doesn't have to be daunting or overwhelming.

Understand your triggers and make a crisis or **wellbeing plan** if you feel this would help.

# LIST OF Calming Activities

- |   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
|    | Yoga or meditation   |    | Watch TV   |
|    | Snuggle under a weighted blanket                             |    | Mindfulness activities                             |
|    | Listen to music  |    | Counting - i.e. count number of red things in room |
|    | Hand fidgets - squishees, fidget spinners                    |    | Walk outside                                       |
|   | Stim or pace to help regulate                                |   | Breathing exercises                                |
|  | Sensory box  |  | Colouring or creative activities                   |
|  | Talk to friends or family about something that interests you |  | Look at photos                                     |
|  | Read a book  |  | Appreciate nature                                  |
|  | Watch the sunset or sunrise                                  |  | Swing on a swing                                   |
|  | Do a puzzle or play a game that you enjoy                    |  | Sleep or nap                                       |
|  | Write or draw in a journal                                   |  | Try and think of three positive things each day    |



# WHAT IS SPOON THEORY?

Spoon theory is a **metaphor** which is used to help us to moderate how we use our **daily energy**. It is particularly useful for those with a disability, which could be or include autism. It was first used by a women with lupus called Christine Miserandino.

This technique is a great way to promote **self-care** by helping us to understand that we need rest and therefore need to allocate our limited energy efficiently in order to promote wellbeing.

Think of each spoon as a **spoonful of energy**; some tasks are small and require one spoon and others require a lot. The theory is when you have a disability, you have a **finite amount** of spoons of energy - quite often your amount of spoons starts off less than those without a disability. Also, you may have different amounts of spoons on different days. As you go through your day, you **spend** spoons of energy. Once all the spoons of energy are spent. you lack the energy to do anything else and if you do, this will impact the next day.

It is a metaphor that describes how, with a disability, you need to **plan** and **prioritise** which high energy tasks you want to undertake. You can replenish spoons with **sleep** or **rest**, **time alone**, **special interests** and **calming** or soothing activities. This is a good way of explaining to others about energy levels and how high energy tasks, such as socialising, can affect you.





# WHAT IS MASKING?

Masking means to 'hide' or 'disguise' parts of ourself or personality to fit in with those around you. Everyone does it to some degree, but autistic people tend to mask more and it can have harmful effects on our wellbeing.

For instance, masking can involve supressing soothing behaviours such as stimming or talking less about our special interests. It can also mean copying the behaviour of those around us, such as maintaining eye contact or following scripts for social interaction. This can be very draining and can impact our mental health.

People tend to mask because they feel they need to conform to social norms in order to be accepted or to keep other people happy. However, when you mask you're not truly being yourself. To unmask, it can be helpful to tell people about autism and your neurodiverse behaviours. It is vital to try and accept yourself for who you are, increasing your self-esteem and self-worth.

Pretending to be interested in a topic

Practicing conversations and facial expressions

Overthinking past conversations

Hiding distress towards sensory stimuli

Socialising when you don't want to

Hiding stims

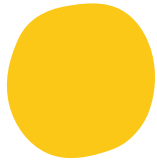
Bottling up thoughts and feelings

Using a different tone of voice

Taking on the persona of another person i.e. a TV character

# WHERE AND WHEN

## TO ASK FOR HELP



It is OK to ask for help! If you are feeling more anxious than usual, finding it hard to enjoy things or having difficult thoughts and feelings, then it may be time to get help.



There are lots of people that can help, such as your GP, your friends and family, the specialist mental health teams or charities.



There are lots of treatments for mental health issues, which may include talking therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), medications, skills training such as mindfulness or other therapies which could help.

# CRISIS PLANNING



Having a wellbeing plan can help you know what to do at critical moments during your mental illness or during your recovery



Take the time when you are feeling strong to make this plan in advance. Recovery and mental illness is not a smooth path and it is best to anticipate hard moments before they appear.



Think about what triggers you may have, warning signs and steps you will take to avoid harm and who can help in the moment of crisis



Also think about your goals, aims, and what is important and valuable to you. This could help in the crisis to remind you of things that are important to you.



If you want a worksheet to help you with a wellbeing plan, the independence trust can provide you with this.

## Space For Notes:

### **This leaflet was created by:**

Zoe Mitchell

“ As an autistic individual myself, I have created this leaflet from a neurodivergent perspective whilst working for the CASA team. I hope you found it useful and informative. If you have any questions or suggestions, please talk to us! ”