

The Effects of Mental Health on Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Autism Characteristics

According to the CDC, it is estimated that **1 in 68** school-aged children have been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). *Autism is 5 times more common in boys than girls.* ASD is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. A diagnosis of ASD now includes several conditions that used to be diagnosed separately: autism, PDD-NOS, and Asperger syndrome. These conditions are now all called autism spectrum disorder.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition. This means that development of the central nervous system is disrupted and can cause impaired motor functioning, learning, language, and non-verbal communication. Children with ASD can also be diagnosed with disruptive behavior disorder. This is when a child can exhibit anger, irritability and many other extreme emotions. No two children will behave the same.

There is no known cause of autism and there is no 'cure'. Children and adults with ASD may experience deficits in social skills, are sensory sensitive, and may exhibit behavior difficulties.

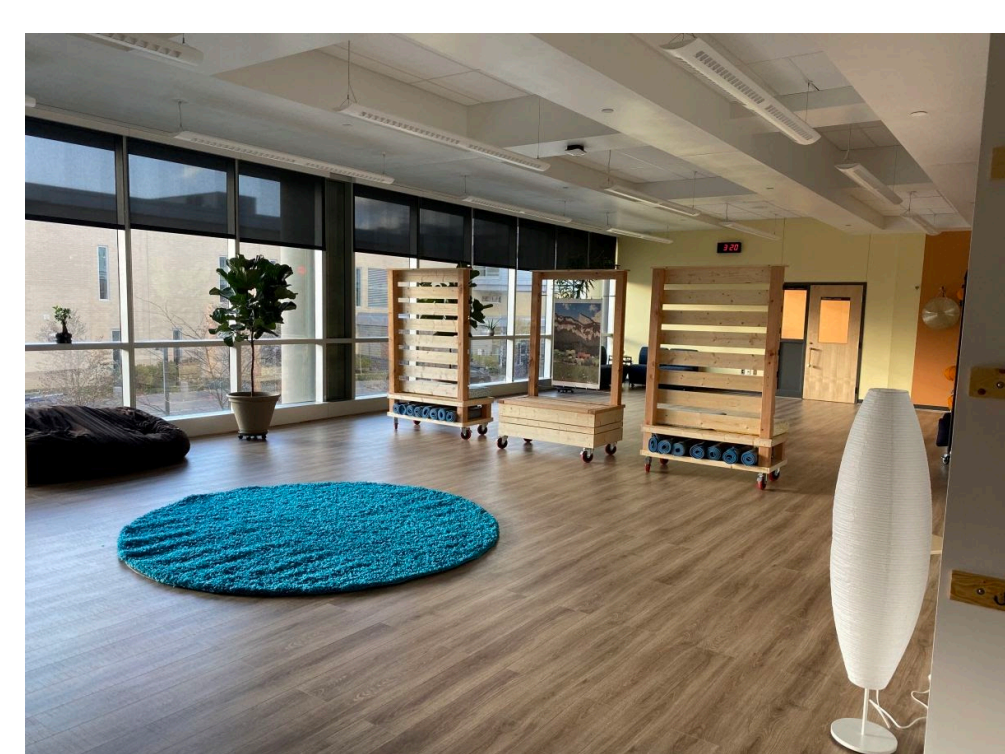
Prevention Strategies

To support students who have autism and mental health there are a number of different strategies that can be implemented. The following are a few ideas to try:

1. First, and foremost, care and support from teachers, families, and support groups.
2. Providing a structured routine and an efficient classroom or environment.
3. Creating a sensory room in the building to allow students to use throughout the day. This will create a safe space for calming and relaxing strategies to be implemented.



4. Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum implemented into the school day (CASEL, 2020).
5. Mindfulness Room to give students the option to go to when they are stressed, overwhelmed, or need a place to relax. For example: Mt. Lebanon High School MinDen:



Causes of Mental Health

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, act and feel in every aspect of our life. Many factors contribute to mental health problems, including biological factors, life experiences and family history.

Although, mental health can be very serious, people can get better and even recover completely. Some early warning signs include:

- Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- Pulling away from people and usual activities
- Having low energy
- Yelling or fighting with family and friends
- Severe mood swings
- Thinking of harming oneself or others
- Inability to perform daily tasks

Common mental health disorders include ADHD, Depressive disorder, obsessive compulsive and related disorders, impulse control and conduct disorder, anxiety disorder, schizophrenia and psychosis, bipolar and related disorder, and lastly, sleep-wake disorder. For the focus of our research, we looked specifically at anxiety and depression with persons with autism spectrum disorder.

Anxiety is more common in the autism population. Typically, when an individual is experience anxiety, behaviors being to impede their life. These challenges behaviors include temper tantrums, aggression and self-injurious behaviors. Individuals will experience real symptoms like a racing heart, muscle tightness and feeling frozen in time.

Depression impacts nearly 7% of children with autism. Rates of depression increase with age in children with autism. Common symptoms include loss of interest, sadness, hopelessness, feeling worthless, and feeling lonely. Growing evidence has shown an increased risk for suicidal ideations and behaviors in children and adolescents with ASD.

There are three common causes that lead children to higher rates of mental health. These include sensory sensitives, social anxiety disorder and routines/daily life. The following describes each in more detail:

Sensory Sensitivities- This is known as the five senses. An example is when a fire alarm goes off for a fire drill.

Social Anxiety Disorder- This is the extreme fear of crowds, new people, or social environments or situations. In turn, this can cause social isolation and behavioral issues.

Routines/Daily Life- When something is off in a routine for a child with autism, this can cause emotions to heighten or worsen. An example: Having a break everyday at the same time, but then a schedule change does not allow for the break.

Comorbidities with Autism

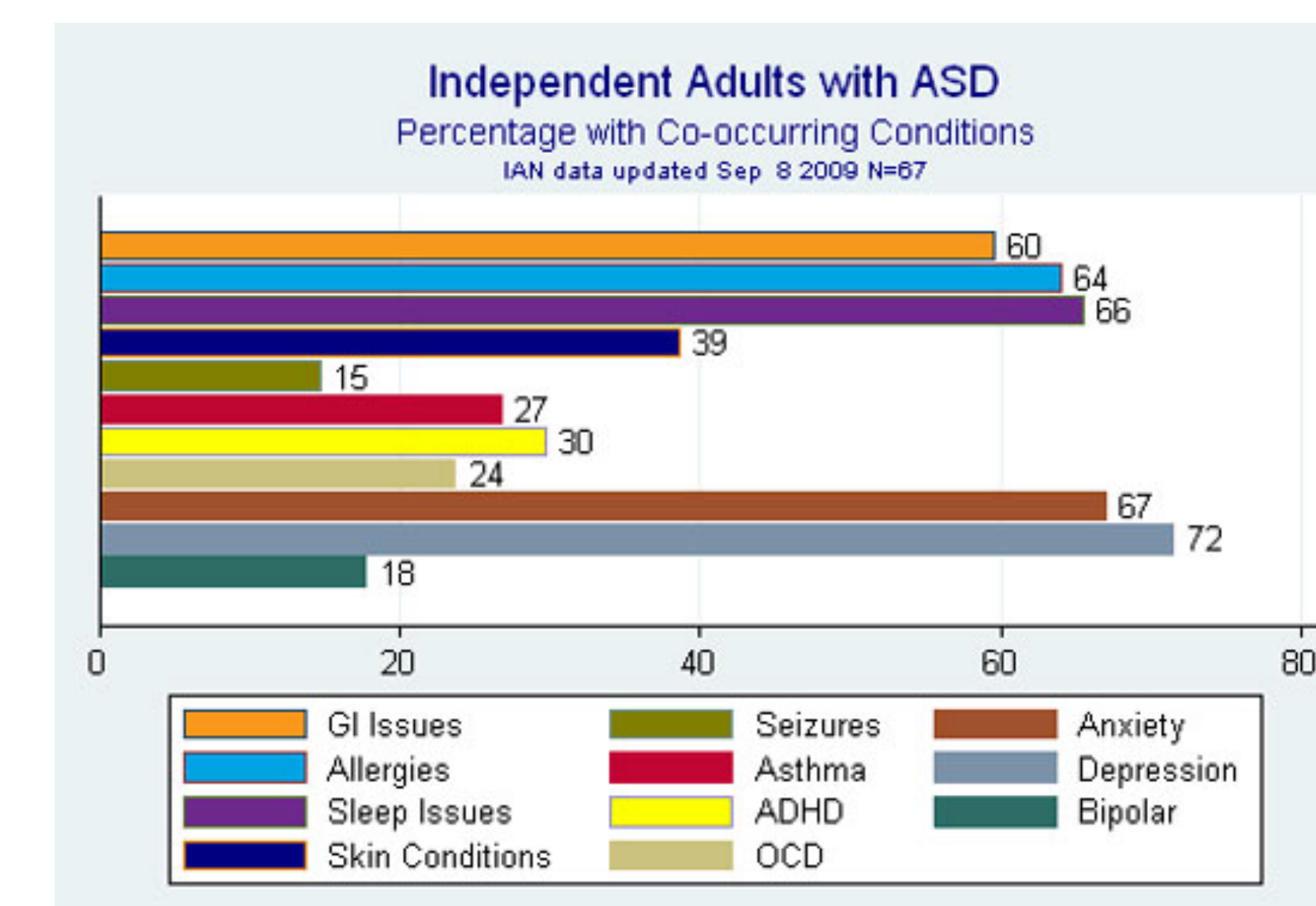
ASD has a number of co-occurring physical and mental health conditions that are crucial for people to be aware of. These include: Epilepsy, sleep disorders, ADHD, gastrointestinal disorders, feeding/eating challenges, obesity, anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder.

As many as 85% of children with autism also have some form of comorbid psychiatric diagnosis, and 35% are taking at least 1 psychotropic medication as treatment.

“Up to 72-73% of individuals with ASD have at least one co-occurring mental health disorder in addition to ASD”
(Ratcliffe, Wong, Dossetor, & Hayes, 2015, Para. 3)

Many factors lead to increased risk for comorbid psychiatric disorders. Unfortunately, children and adolescents with autism are at a higher risk of being bullied and are more likely to experience adverse life events. These life events can increase stress and risk for depression and anxiety. Emotional regulation deficits may also be an underlying feature of ASD.

With a high prevalence of medical disorders, there is a significant increase with mortality rates. Death rates are nearly three to ten times higher than the general population. These deaths tend to be the result of medical comorbidities, such as epilepsy, gastrointestinal conditions and respiratory conditions.



Conclusions

There is a direct relationship between Autism Spectrum Disorder and Mental Health Disorder. It is important to provide supports to both children and adults with ASD in our schools and communities. By including preventative strategies, together we can help to lower the statistics and in turn, help individuals with autism spectrum disorder live a full life.

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