

# Anxiety and depression in Autistic adults

Research shows that Autistic people experience anxiety and depression at higher rates than the general population. This information sheet provides an overview of anxiety and depression, how they may present in Autistic people and how to support someone experiencing these mental health challenges.

## Our purpose a different brilliant®

Understanding, engaging and celebrating the strengths, interests and aspirations of people on the autism spectrum.

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a mental health condition that involve excessive worry, fear or nervousness that interferes with daily life. It is not only about feeling anxious in response to a stressful situation. It is persistent and has a significant impact on a person's life.

The common signs of anxiety in Autistic people include:

- increased repetitive behaviours
- withdrawal from activities or social interactions
- avoidance of certain environments, people or tasks
- difficulty with concentration
- sleep issues, especially trouble falling asleep
- somatic complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches, breathing difficulties)
- heightened sensory sensitivity.

There are different types of anxiety disorders, including:

- generalised anxiety disorder: persistent and excessive worry about various everyday events
- social anxiety disorder: fear of social situations and interactions
- panic disorder: recurrent panic attacks
- phobias: intense fear of a specific object, animal or situation.



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## What is depression?

Depression involves persistent feelings of sadness, loss of interest and low energy. These disorders are different from normal mood fluctuations and can vary in severity and duration.

The common signs of depression in Autistic people include:

- a pervasive feeling of sadness, emptiness or irritability
- fatigue or loss of energy
- increased irritability or meltdowns
- loss of interest in previously enjoyable routines (e.g. special interests)
- changes in sleep or appetite
- feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness
- difficulty concentrating
- thoughts of death or suicide.



## What are the potential causes and risk factors of anxiety and depression?

- **Genetics:** A family history of anxiety and/or depression can increase the risk of developing a condition.
- **Traumatic or stressful life events:** Experiences like abuse, loss of a loved one and other major life stressors can trigger or worsen symptoms.
- **Physical health conditions:** Having a chronic illness like cancer or chronic pain can contribute to both anxiety and depression.
- **Substance use:** Alcohol and drug use can cause or worsen symptoms.
- **Socio-economic situation:** Difficult social and economic circumstances can contribute to the development of anxiety and depression.



## Why are Autistic people more vulnerable?

Research consistently shows that Autistic individuals are at higher risk for both anxiety and depression compared to non-Autistic individuals.

One research study showed that 42% of Autistic adults had an anxiety disorder and 37% had a depressive disorder (Hollocks et al., 2019).

Many Autistic individuals experience both conditions at once.

The contributing factors for developing anxiety and/or depression in Autistic individuals include:

- **Sensory sensitivities:** Overstimulation can lead to chronic stress.
- **Social demands:** Having social and communication differences in a neurotypical setting can lead to burnout and social isolation.
- **Camouflaging and masking:** Hiding Autistic traits to fit in can be exhausting and damaging to mental health.
- **Bullying and trauma:** Autistic people often experience higher rates of bullying and victimisation. These traumatic experiences can exacerbate mental health issues.

Some Autistic people may have unique presentations of anxiety or depression. For instance, some people may not express sadness verbally, but instead show distress through increased shutdowns or reduced communication. In some cases, depression can look like increased flat affect or repetitive thought patterns rather than tearfulness or visible sadness.



## Supporting Autistic people with symptoms of anxiety or depression

It is essential that professionals support Autistic people in a neuroaffirming way. Practitioners should have a solid understanding of autism through a neuroaffirming lens, respecting Autistic identity and differences.

Importantly, not all approaches will work for every individual. It may take time to explore and trial what feels right and effective for each person, based on their individual experiences, needs and preferences.

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What you can do if you need support:

## Seek professional psychological support

- Mindfulness, compassion-based therapies and acceptance-based therapies (ACT)
- Adapted Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can be adapted for Autistic individuals (e.g. incorporating more concrete, visual supports)
- Neuroaffirming approaches that validate neurodivergent identity
- Trauma-informed approaches for those with traumatic histories (e.g. Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR))

## Medical support

- Medication (e.g. selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)) may be helpful, but should be carefully prescribed and monitored by a clinician experienced with Autistic patients

## Environmental adjustments

- Structure and routine to reduce uncertainty
- Sensory-friendly environments (e.g. reduce light, noise, smell)
- Reduce demands during high-stress periods

## Self-care and coping strategies

- Sensory regulation (e.g. weighted blankets, noise-cancelling headphones, sunglasses)
- Stimming (e.g. rocking, flapping, fidgeting) as a form of self-soothing
- Special interests as a source of joy and emotional regulation
- Nature, exercise and creativity for mental wellbeing
- Social connection with like-minded individuals.

## Useful resources

### Web

**Autistica:** [Depression and autism](#)

**Autism Awareness Australia:** [Understanding mental health in autistic adults](#)

**R U OK?:** [Neurodivergent](#)

**raisingchildren.net.au:** [Resource for supporting Autistic teens](#)

### For further support

Contact:

[Beyond Blue](#) 1300 22 46 36

[Lifeline](#) 13 11 14

[headspace](#)

### Based on the idea of a different brilliant®, Aspect's approach:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.