

Research summary: Anxiety and Depression from Adolescence to Old Age in Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Our team recently published a journal article reporting on a study that looked at the relationship between anxiety and depression, age, sex (male, female), and autism symptoms in autistic adults. So far there has been little research into mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression across the lifespan of autistic individuals. To inform and provide appropriate supports we need to better understand the challenges experienced by autistic individuals and looking at mental health across the lifespan can help us do that. It is also important to understand what factors can be related to good and poor mental health, so we can investigate that relationship and understand it.

The study reported information from 255 individuals with a diagnosis of autism, who had completed an online survey. Individuals were aged between 15 and 80 years old, with 151 males, and 104 females. Participants completed questionnaires about anxiety (e.g., 'During the past 7 days, I have felt anxious, worried, or nervous'), depression (e.g., 'Over the last two weeks, I have been feeling tired or having little energy'), and their autism symptoms (e.g., 'I prefer to do things the same way over and over again'). They were also asked about their current employment status and highest level of completed education.

The team found that anxiety and depression were common, with 38% of participants reporting anxiety and 38% reporting depression, including some people who experienced both anxiety and depression. When the sample was split into age groups of adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and older adulthood, anxiety and depression were similarly common in all groups. This is different to reports in non-autistic populations where anxiety and depression rates are generally lower, and may vary with age.

We also found that females had higher anxiety and depression scores than males; people with more autism symptoms reported higher anxiety and depression scores; and individuals living alone were more likely to report higher depression scores. This is similar to what is reported in non-autistic populations. Anxiety and depression were not related to education or employment, but in the non-autistic populations associations between Depression and employment are reported.

These findings highlight that anxiety and depression is common across the lifespan for autistic individuals, and therefore it is important that mental health is regularly assessed, and that interventions aimed at improving mental health for autistic people are designed and trailed.

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