

Autistic Women and Girls

Resources for Professionals

Mental Health

These resources have been collated from information collected through an online questionnaire, focus groups, interviews with individual practitioners and autistic women, and other recent research studies. Our aim is to summarise all this information, to present it in a succinct and useful form for busy professionals. Each resource contains a summary of key points, with links to appropriate items within the Right Click programme itself and other resources, from websites, online information and books. If you'd like more information on any of the areas covered, or have a specific enquiry, please contact us at rightclick@scottishautism.org

Key Messages

1. Autistic women and girls commonly experience chronically high levels of stress and anxiety.
2. Autistic girls may struggle with the school environment, they may be marginalised, excluded and bullied with consequent negative impacts on self-identity and esteem; these experiences will continue to have an impact into adult life.
3. Autistic boys and girls experience bullying, but the ways in which they are bullied are often gendered. Professional experience points to social difficulties commonly emerging at 8/9 years for girls.
4. Autistic women and girls who do not receive an early diagnosis may attract other, unhelpful labels, such as Bipolar, Personality Disorder and others.
5. Therapies and interventions may need to be modified for autistic individuals.

Autistic people often experience elevated levels of anxiety. How much of this is intrinsic and how much is environmental has not been previously well researched or understood, however, our levels of understanding and insight are improving. Recent research is highlighting that autistic people often experience chronically high levels of stress with a consequent negative and profound impact on autistic individuals in terms of health and wellbeing.

Autistic people experience difficulties in social communication and interaction within some contexts; where social interaction and non-autistic ways of communicating are needed for inclusion and acceptance, the negative impact on mental health and wellbeing for the individual may be very serious.

Most autistic people experience sensory information processing differences such as hyper - or hypo - sensitivities. Many public spaces and environments such as offices, retail centres, general practitioner surgeries, may be highly challenging, causing stress and creating barriers for the autistic individual.

Anxiety exacerbates the challenges of everyday life everyone has to deal with. A study conducted in Sweden (across a similar demographic population to the UK) found that autistic people live 10-15 fewer years than the rest of the population; these figures are understood to be the consequence of long-term chronic stress, anxiety and suicide along with barriers to accessing appropriate health care.¹

In a recent survey by Research Autism it was found that 98% of autistic adults and their carers said stress is a significant issue for them, with 89% adding that it is difficult or impossible to find effective support in dealing with stress.²

“Stress is the single biggest factor affecting quality of life for autistic people and their families, causing significant impact across all key aspects of life including school, work, health and mental health, relationships and behaviour... and yet little investment has been made in research into understanding and responding to it... this must change.” (Richard Mills, Research Autism)

Constant high levels of stress often lead to chronic health issues, in terms of both mental and physical health. Commonly reported mental health concerns include anxiety and depression, insomnia; others include obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD); anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders; post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); alcoholism; self-harm and suicidality.

The majority of respondents to our Right Click survey had received some kind of mental health intervention, including:

- referred to: psychiatrist, psychologist, child psychiatric nurse, motherhood and mental health team; paediatrician
- counseling (including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT))
- medication, including melatonin
- mindfulness
- trauma therapy
- stress management
- anxiety workshop/classes
- various others: occupational therapy, gluten intolerance investigation
- one respondent had spent time in a residential psychiatric unit with follow-up day care.

- For the majority of respondents, services and interventions offered were partially helpful:

“The counsellors were kind, but didn't really get what the problem was.”

“Both yes & no. Yes: someone was ready to listen to me for an hour. One counsellor was good at helping me analyse what I was saying... counsellors are ready to boost one's confidence & that was helpful. No: in particular the counsellor I had for postnatal depression. She kept suggesting I had baths & my hair done, neither of which brings me particular pleasure, in fact I hate hairdressers, I cut my own hair!”

“None of the talking therapies worked with a child who would not engage. So as a parent, I was left feeling isolated and dealing with things alone.”

What would help?

An overwhelming number of respondents said: “better understanding of autism”. Specifically for women and girls:

“Improved training, awareness and understanding in health-care professionals and services of both autism and autism in females specifically.”

“Specialist mental health support for children and parents from professionals who know about females with autism.”

Other helpful tools:

- social skills education
- meditation
- mindfulness
- yoga
- executive functioning support
- counseling from people with a specialism in autism
- access to peer support from other autistic girls and women

To learn more about autism in women and girls, register for our Right Click Women and Girls programme where there are in-depth discussions on mental health from the perspective of autistic people and professionals.

References

¹ Autistica: www.autistica.org.uk

² Research Autism: [www.researchautism.net/about-us-research-autism/beat-stress-autism-survey-results](http://www.researchautism.net/about-us-research-autism/beating-stress-in-autism/beat-stress-autism-survey-results)

Resources

Scottish Women's Autism Network: www.swanscotland.org

Right Click for Women and Girls: www.scottishautism.org/womenandgirls

Spectrum Women: Walking to the beat of Autism: <https://www.jkp.com/uk/spectrum-women-1.html>

Autism Training: <http://catstewart101.wixsite.com/autismwomenadvice>

Colouring Outside the Lines, Edinburgh: Peer support for families of autistic girls: www.colouringoutsidethelines.org

Cynthia Kim: <https://www.musingsofanaspie.com/about/>

Debi Brown website: www.aspiedebi.com

Alis Rowe, The Curly Haired Girl Project: <https://thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk>

Sarah-Jane Critchley (parent): <https://differentjoy.com>