

Understanding Autistic mental health

This video series was produced from the Autism Mental Health Literacy Guide by the Autism Mental Health Literacy Project (AM-HeLP) Group.

This video is one of six in the series about different aspects of autism mental health literacy. For this video, we will talk about: “Understanding Autistic Mental Health”

Challenges with mental health are very common. In fact, 1 in 5 people experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives and rates are estimated to be higher for Autistic adults.

Social, psychological, and biological factors play important roles in mental health. This video will talk about some of these factors and how they can contribute to Autistic mental health.

Growing up in a society that is not understanding, accepting or supportive can impact Autistic mental health - how Autistic people see themselves, others, and their lives.

Testimonial – “I feel like there’s always some social game being played that I’m not aware of. People constantly say things that they don’t mean, leaving me mistrusting with most people. I finally got to the point in my life that I looked at everyone with suspicion because I would make plans to meet someone for an activity, and they’d show up half an hour late or worse.” – Tim Martens, Adviser

Masking, also known as camouflaging, is when an Autistic person finds ways to “pass” as non-Autistic in everyday social interactions. The need to mask can make an Autistic person exhausted because it takes so much effort. This can lead to many mental health problems, like anxiety, depression, and poor self-image.

Testimonial – “I feel really worn out and exhausted from masking and being social at work to the point where I get home and just pass out. I get frustrated because I don’t really work that many hours and yet I’m so tired afterwards. It often means the rest of my night is spent recuperating/sleeping off the workday and I don’t have the energy to do other things. Or I stay up very late trying to make up for that recuperation.” – Elsbeth Dodman, Adviser

There are many social factors that impact Autistic mental health. Examples of important social factors are social networks, family, friends, stigma, negative life events, economic disadvantages, housing, education and workplace issues, and the kinds of services or supports people have. We will explore just a few of them here:

Some Autistic people can thrive when connected with healthy social groups, family or friends, like to Autistic peers who are supportive and help them feel that they matter and belong. However, Autistic people may struggle with accessing these social connections. Some Autistic people may be in abusive relationships or become involved with inappropriate peers or unsupportive family members.

Testimonial – “One thing that gives me a lot of trouble interacting with non-Autistics is all the social rules about subtext and hidden meaning that are used in interpreting communication. They use various social rules about 'hidden meanings' to interpret things. As an Autistic who tends to be very literal, it can lead to a lot of problems.” Written by an AM-HeLP Adviser, read by: Aaron Bouma, Adviser

School and work are major sources of stress and can have a long-lasting impact on many Autistic people. School and work can be full of isolation and social confusion. Bullying and discrimination are big issues. There are many demands placed on students when they go through school and when students need to transition from one school or situation to another. Schools and workplaces need to supply a supportive environment to address these challenges.

Testimonial – “Within employment there’s always the extra push to mask and do even more than my best. Never ever complain. Only use positive language. Don’t slouch – smile. Never give your employer a reason to regret hiring you. The job you have is likely the ONLY job you have and with the unemployment rates so high it’s not like you can just walk out and get a new one tomorrow. You have to show them that hiring an Autistic person wasn’t a mistake.” – Written by an AM-HeLP Adviser, read by: ShanEda Lumb, Adviser

Autistic people often report difficulties when accessing supports. Adequate autism-informed mental health supports are rare and hard to come by. There may be barriers in finding them, affording them, or having long waitlists. It can also be stressful to access supports. Many services may not have the right kind of experiences, training, and skills to work with Autistic people, which can make Autistic people feel misunderstood or not taken seriously.

Testimonial – “When I have sought help for my mental health problem, virtually all of the programs that I have been referred to have been designed for non-Autistic people and involve things like group therapy and meditation, both of which are distressing to me. Even if I give them a try and find them unsuitable, I am often labelled as non-compliant and there are no alternatives made available to me. Even though I recognize that I have a mental health problem, and I am asking for help, there simply isn’t any help available for someone like me and this has had devastating effects on my mental health.” – Elsbeth, Adviser

There are psychological factors that impact Autistic mental health. For example, one’s self-worth or self-image, planning or organizing skills, areas of focus, interests, and passions. Here, we will explore a couple of these factors.

When Autistic people feel that they are appreciated for their strengths and uniqueness, and are kind and accepting of themselves, they can have a positive view of who they are. When you negatively judge yourself because of how others judge and treat you, you can feel ashamed, distressed and more likely to experience negative mental health.

Testimonial – “As a result of the social isolation, my self-worth and image were at its lowest point in high school. However, it has increased steadily since then. It’s still sometimes a learning curve for me to remember that not everything that went wrong in that interaction was my fault. However, as I said, my self-esteem and image has increased steadily within the past 9 years, much more than it did in the first 18 years of my life.” – Courtney Weaver, Adviser

It is important for any person’s mental health to be able to pursue their passions. When an Autistic person’s interests are seen as problems, rather than as hobbies or expertise, this can make a person feel shame or feel that they are wrong to have that interest. Many Autistic people can focus very intently on specific passions, and this can be a source of joy and positive mental health.

Testimonial – “Our daughter danced for 20+ hours a week. It was her obsession, but also her greatest love, and her only source of physical activity. It was her “safe” place and world where the work that she put in was equal to what she got out. Dance was a world that she understood. Unfortunately, it also caused her tremendous physical pain. At almost 18-years old, she was diagnosed with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome and was forced to cut down on the intensity and frequency of dance. Given that she is all or nothing, her inability to give 100% of herself meant stopping entirely. Her grief was unbearable and continues to this day, years later.” – Lianne G., Adviser

There are biological factors linked to Autistic mental health. For example, genetics, sensory differences, and physical health. We’re going to explore a couple of them here:

Autistic people tend to have sensory differences and may either seek sensations or avoid them. When an Autistic person gets the right kinds of sensory input (the information from seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or feeling, sensing), they can feel good. It can be calming or enjoyable. Some Autistic people stim, which can be a way to feel calm – it can also be a way of expressing themselves.

When a person can exercise, have good nutrition, and generally has good physical health, they are also more likely to be have positive mental health.

Testimonial – “I keep very fit. Workout 4 times a week or more. It helps physical health but also mental health as well as anxiety.” – Aaron Bouma, Adviser

Physical health problems or poor physical health can affect mental health. These are conditions like chronic pain, digestion issues, irritable bowel syndrome or sleep problems.

Testimonial – “I have a condition called Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, which many Autistic people have. I do not receive adequate care or treatment for this disorder, which causes me pain virtually all of the time. This has devastating effects on my mental health as pain makes all of my sensory issues so much worse.” – Anonymous Adviser

The social, psychological, and biological factors we discussed in this video play a role in how Autistic people experience mental health.

You can find more information about these factors that impact Autistic mental health and more examples in the AM-HeLP Guide. Knowing more helps more.

Knowing more, helps more.

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More information can be found in **Section 4** of the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism.

To learn more about AM-HeLP and to read the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism visit: <https://www.yorku.ca/health/lab/ddmh/am-help/>

Watch the animated video: <https://youtu.be/BhGOblby-J0>

Credits

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