

Appendix 1

Glossary of terms

Autism Spectrum Condition

Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a child or young person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people.

All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support. All people on the autism spectrum learn and develop. With the right sort of support, all can be helped to live a more fulfilling life of their own choosing.

Mental health and autism

Even though mental illness can be more common for people on the autism spectrum than in the general population, the mental health of children and young people with autism is often overlooked. Some of the more common mental health difficulties experienced by people with autism are anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and depression.

Anxiety disorders

There is a relatively high rate of anxiety disorders amongst people on the autism spectrum. Roughly 40% have symptoms of at least one anxiety disorder at any time, compared with up to 15% in the general population. Understandably, this can lead to sadness or depression.

It is thought that a combination of factors, leading to vulnerability to stress, is likely to explain why anxiety disorders are so common in autistic people. Biological differences in brain structure and function, a history of social difficulties (leading to decreased self-esteem and a tendency to think of threats as greater than they are) and problems with finding flexible responses to apparent threats are all likely to contribute.

Many people on the autism spectrum may have difficulty describing the symptoms they experience. A sudden change in behaviour could mean they have developed an anxiety disorder, even if there is no complaint of the typical symptoms.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)

OCD is an anxiety disorder. If someone has OCD, it means that they experience repetitive thoughts and behaviours that are upsetting to them. OCD occurs in about 2-3% of people who are not autistic and is more common in people who are autistic. It is thought that our genes (DNA) and our psychological predisposition can make us

vulnerable to developing OCD, which can run in families. OCD can be distressing, exhausting and can get in the way of everyday life for the person who has it and their families. However, it is treatable.

There are two main parts to OCD: obsessions (thoughts) and compulsions (behaviours). OCD can be overlooked in people on the autism spectrum as it may be mistaken for repetitive behaviour.

Depression

When people feel sad and low these for more than a few weeks and get in the way of day-to-day functioning, this can indicate a period of depression. This is no different in an autistic person than a non-autistic person. It is estimated that at least 20% of the population will experience a period of depression at some point but it is even more common in people on the autism spectrum.

People who are depressed can experience a range of symptoms which vary from person to person in their combination, and can be mild or severe. It may be especially hard for depressed people on the autism spectrum to seek help because they might find change daunting and anxiety-provoking, feel worried that they will be blamed, or feel unsure about how to describe their symptoms. Anxiety and depression can also make people more generally introverted, withdrawn and isolated. All people with depression may have difficulty sharing their thoughts and feelings. But because people with autism can have difficulty labelling their feelings, it can be especially hard to communicate symptoms or concerns.

Learning difficulty

The term 'learning difficulty' includes children and young people who have 'specific learning difficulties', for example dyslexia, but who do not have a significant general impairment of intelligence.

Information from: <https://www.autism.org.uk/>