



Autism and mental health

A guide to looking after your mind

Your mental health is just as important as your physical health. It affects how you think, feel and act.

A quarter of the general population have problems with their mental health at some point in their life. In autistic people, this number is much higher with almost 80% of autistic adults experiencing mental health issues during their lives. For many people with autism, mental illness can be more difficult to recognise and treat effectively. It's widely recognised that much more needs to be done to support autistic people with their mental health.

That's why we've produced this short guide to help autistic people and their families to understand mental health problems in autism, learn to manage them and know where to get help.

What sort of mental health problems affect autistic people?

Research shows that autistic people are at increased risk of mental health problems. Anxiety and depression are particularly common. This might be because autistic people's brains are slightly different, or it could be due to the problems that they have interacting with the world around them. Either way, it's a serious problem which impacts lives. The issues are likely to be different for every person.

Most people find it hard to talk about their mental health and autistic people may have specific challenges in understanding and communicating their feelings. But it's crucial that anyone

experiencing stress, depression or anxiety finds someone to talk to, whether it's a relative, carer or doctor. Talking about problems is the first step to overcoming them.

Practical tips to manage your mental health

See your doctor

Going to the doctor can be stressful, particularly for autistic people who feel that health professionals do not understand their needs. But visiting your doctor when you are having mental health problems is an important step towards looking after yourself.

There are simple things you can do to reduce anxiety about going to the doctor. Visit before your appointment so you get to know the journey and the environment. Ask to book the first or last appointment of the day so you won't have to wait too long. Book a double appointment as extra time may be needed. See if there is a quiet area to wait in rather than the busy waiting room. If you make reception staff aware of your autism, they should do everything they can to help you. You can read more about preparing for a visit to the doctor here: autism.org.uk/about/health/doctor

Get the most appropriate treatment

Hopefully you can get support which matches your needs and is autism-friendly. If you are diagnosed with a mental health problem, you may be offered psychological treatment (like talking therapy), or medication or both. You can discuss these issues confidentially with your doctor or therapist. If you wish, you can ask for a family member or carer to be involved in the treatment.

Make sure you always tell professionals about your autism because it may affect the treatment you are prescribed and how your doctor communicates with you.



Try mindfulness

One technique that can help those with anxiety is 'mindfulness'. This practice aims to retrain the way you think to help you pay attention to the present moment. It's about listening to and accepting your thoughts and feelings. It can help you to enjoy the world around you more and understand yourself better. You can practice mindfulness techniques anywhere and should do so daily in order for it to be successful. There are books, apps, and online videos and courses to teach yourself to be mindful, or you can find a professional trainer. The Mental Health Foundation provides information and resources at bemindful.co.uk



Exercise regularly

Regular exercise is essential as part of a healthy lifestyle. It makes you feel good. Exercise may also help you manage your anxiety and mood, as well as improving self-esteem.



Eat well

Eating well is important because it affects how you feel in your body and mind. You should eat as many different foods as you can, including plenty of fruit and vegetables, fish and starchy carbohydrates such as potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and cereals. You should try and have six to eight drinks a day, and water is the best choice because it contains no calories.



Get a good night's sleep

A good sleep every night is crucial to your physical and mental health, but 40–80% of autistic people have sleep problems. Make sure your sleep environment is comfortable and not too bright, hot or cold. Try to go to bed at the same time every night so your body gets into a pattern. If you are anxious, concentrate on taking long deep breaths until you feel calmer. If you have tried all of these things and still have sleep problems, visit your doctor.



Structure your days

Life can be overwhelming. Having structures in your life can be helpful. Having a daily routine makes the world a more predictable place and reduces anxiety. Research shows that uncertainty can be difficult for autistic people, and so you can make this more bearable by planning it in advance.



Talk to support groups or family

It might be difficult to tell people how you are feeling, but talking to someone can really help you to feel better. If you can't talk to a family member or a friend, contact a support group. Many autistic people have found that sharing their experiences with other autistic people has been particularly valuable. You'll find the contact details of organisations that offer advice and support in this leaflet.



Know how you're feeling

It can be difficult to recognise mental health problems, even if you are feeling bad. For some autistic people, limited verbal communication can make it hard to easily communicate their thoughts and fears. The company Beyond Words has created a series of books that explain health problems in pictures: booksbeyonwords.co.uk



What to do if you have suicidal thoughts

Many people think about suicide at some point in their life – either in an abstract way or actually making plans.

It can be difficult to tell someone if you are having suicidal feelings. Being autistic brings extra challenges. Many autistic people who feel suicidal do not feel depressed. This means that it falls to their family and carers to be watchful. Feeling suicidal is often a sign that you are not well. The earlier you tell someone about these feelings, the quicker you'll get some help and start to feel better.

When you are feeling suicidal, it's a good idea to remove anything you could use to harm yourself. Talk to someone – a family member, a carer, a helpline or even a pet. Mind, the mental health charity, have useful suggestions for what to do when you're feeling suicidal. See: mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/suicidal-feelings

The following organisations offer advice and support online or over the phone:

Samaritans:

116 123 (freephone) or
jo@samaritans.org/samaritans.org

Mind:

0300 123 3393 or info@mind.org.uk
or text **86463** mind.org.uk

The National Autistic Society:

0808 800 4104 autism.org.uk

You can also take a look at our other information leaflets at:

autistica.org.uk/autism/useful-information

Get involved in research

To improve our understanding of autism we rely on volunteers to take part in research studies. Taking part in research can be something as simple as completing a survey, or trying a new drug or therapy intervention. How you decide to be involved is up to you. If you, your child or your family would like to take part in research, please visit: autismspectrum-uk.com

Support our work

Autistica are working hard to fund vital new studies so we can help everyone affected by autism to live longer, healthier, happier lives. If you would like to support our work, visit autistica.org.uk/get-involved/ or contact us at info@autistica.org.uk

AUTISTICA

Building brighter futures through autism research

St Saviour's House, 39-41 Union Street, London, SE11 5SD. T: (0)203 857 4340
www.autistica.org.uk E: info@autistica.org.uk
Registered in England. Company No: 05184164. Charity No: 1107350

Keep in touch

To receive email updates from Autistica simply complete this form.

Send this page in a stamped envelope labelled:

Autistica

St Saviour's House
39-41 Union Street
London
SE1 1SD

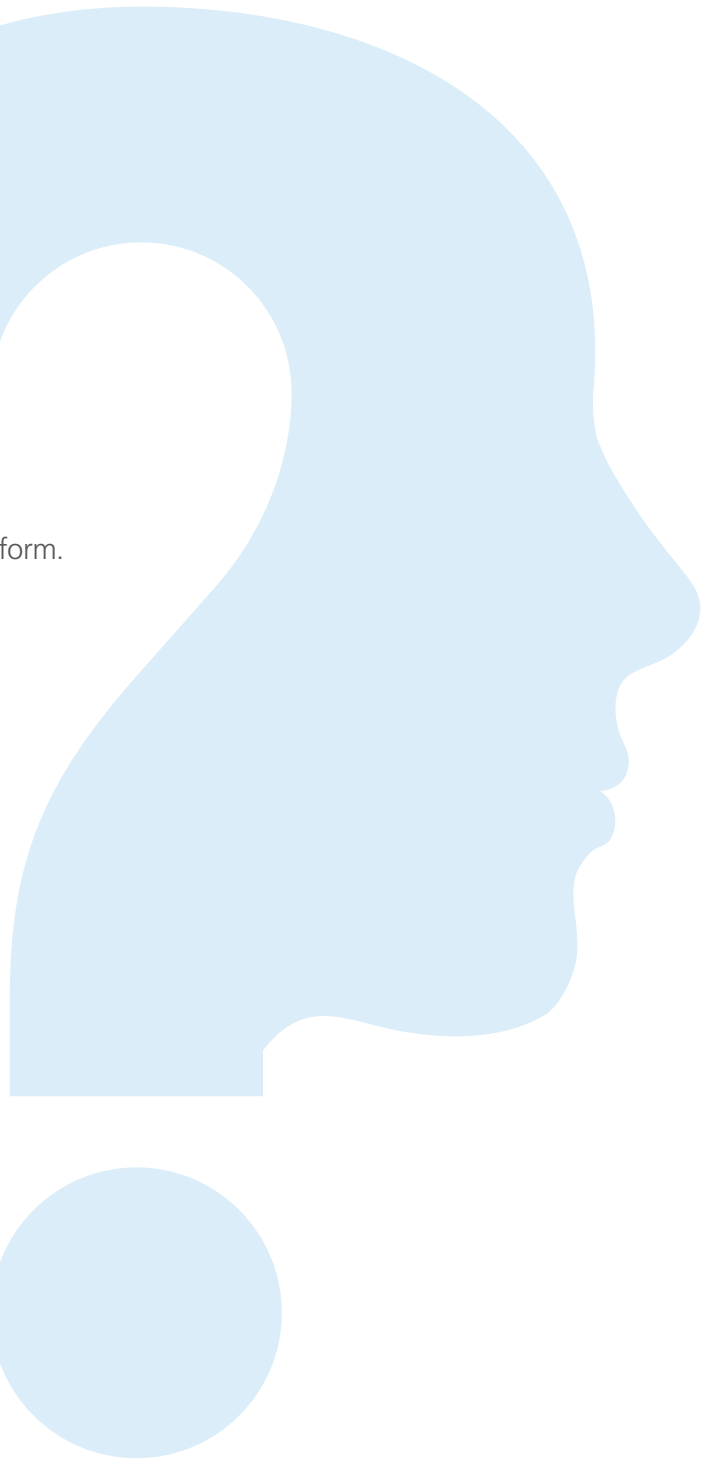
If you're viewing this online, you can sign up to receive information and updates from Autistica [here](#).

Alternatively, phone us on **020 3857 4340**.

Tell us about your autism connection so that we can personalise the information we send you:

- I am autistic
- I am a parent
- I am a family member
- I am a professional
- I am a researcher

Other _____



Your details

Name:

Email*:

Address: (optional)

Telephone: (optional)

Mobile: (optional)

*Email is Autistica's standard method of communication. If you wish to receive regular updates from Autistica, you will need to provide an email address.

Your details are always held securely and we will only send you the information that you have opted for, but if you'd rather not hear from us please tick the relevant box:

- No information by post No information by phone No information by email

AUTISTICA

Building brighter futures through autism research