



Anxiety on the spectrum in adulthood

By KIRSTY AINSWORTH and CHLOÉE PAQUETTE-HOUDE

Mental health issues are experienced by a large proportion of autistic individuals. Research suggests that around 80% of those on the spectrum meet criteria for at least one psychiatric condition at some point in their life. Anxiety, in particular, has been highlighted as one of the most common co-occurring mental health conditions in the autistic population, with 50% of adults with autism meeting criteria for an anxiety disorder diagnosis. These figures are striking given that only 18% of the general population will meet criteria for anxiety.

Anxiety in autism is complex, and likely affected by differences in social cognition. This link is bidirectional, meaning that differences with social cognition can impact anxiety levels in autistic people, and in turn anxiety levels can have an effect on social cognition. Research suggests that although anxiety is not a fundamental part of autism, the anxiety symptoms present in autistic individuals may be different from non-autistic individuals. Hence, there is not only an unusually high *prevalence* but also an unusual *presentation* of anxiety in the autistic population. If the

manifestation of anxiety itself presents differently on the spectrum, how can we ensure that autistic individuals are being sufficiently supported to help reduce feelings of anxiety? In order to address this, it is important that we explore the way in which anxiety is treated. The research project reported here gathered information from mental health practitioners on their experiences of treating anxiety in their autistic clients.

We interviewed eight general mental health practitioners currently working with adults with autism and anxiety. The interviews explored the barriers that may prevent anxiety treatment from being as effective when working with autistic clients. Using what is called a *thematic analysis*, researchers were able to identify several key themes from the interviews.

Practitioners consistently mentioned adapting their 'usual' practice for anxiety to better suit autistic individuals. These modifications took many forms, including a greater focus on emotional learning, greater emphasis on concrete behavioural aspects of standardized therapy, and altering the structure of

There is not only an unusually high prevalence but also an unusual presentation of anxiety in the autistic population.


Original Paper:

Ainsworth, K., Robertson, A. E., Welsh, H., Day, M., Watt, J., Barry, F., Stanfield, A. & Melville, C. (2020). Anxiety in adults with autism: Perspectives from practitioners. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 69, 101457.

Another major theme present in the data was: difficulty with the use of standardized anxiety measures in autistic clients.

sessions. Despite this, practitioners noted that modifications were developed in a somewhat independent, spontaneous fashion that generally required instinctive thinking. However, these instincts depended largely on the practitioner's experiences and thus could vary widely from one practitioner to another. In addition to this, these interviews reflected the experiences of *general* mental health professionals (not autism experts), thus, adaptations lead by intuition may be largely based on experiences with non-autistics.

Another major theme present in the data was: difficulty with the use of standardized anxiety measures in autistic clients. Practitioners recognized that current anxiety measures did not accurately reflect anxiety

levels in their autistic clients, especially when their clients had developed ways to compensate for their difficulties. These compensatory strategies could outwardly make an autistic person look more functional than they actually are. Overall, practitioners described either using the measures, but finding them unsuitable for autistic adults, or not using them at all. Hence, the ability to measure the efficacy of psychological therapy for anxiety in autistic individuals may be compromised. To conclude, further research is needed regarding anxiety in autism, both for its better characterization and measure, but also to develop treatments and guidelines for clinicians that would be specific to autism. 



Sylvie Lauzon
Executive director
Fondation les petits trésors

Research in healing



Though research may at times seem abstract to us, it has consistently managed to answer questions which seemed impossible just moments before. Research ultimately leads to better care, and sometimes cure. This knowledge allows the scientific and medical community to develop new treatments, new therapies and new tools. For example, thanks to research, the vast majority of children with leukemia recover, whereas just over 50 years ago, more than half of them would die.

The Petits Trésors Foundation is very proud to support the publication of Sur le Spectre magazine. The magazine discusses current projects and trends in autism research, but above all it makes this accessible. Valérie Courchesne and her team turn their research into fascinating stories!

Over the years, the Montreal Cognitive Neuroscience of Autism Research Group, which Valérie is a part of, has developed an approach that focuses on developing the strengths of autistic children and adolescents. This difference in perspective and new understanding of how the brain works is very positive because it allows us, parents of young people with autism, to see beyond the barriers inherent in autism. We contemplate possibilities rather than walls.

Of course, walls we have encountered and walls there will be more of. But to better understand the minds of our autistic children, focussing not only what is difficult, but what can be developed, makes all the difference.

This difference feels like a breath of fresh air during difficult moments.

Wishing you all the best with this new issue!



Fondation les petits trésors
Centre québécois de l'autisme