



# COMBATting MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE AUTISM COMMUNITY

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Approximately 77.7% of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder have at least one mental illness, according to a study in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*<sup>i</sup>. In the autism community, symptoms of mental illness may be incorrectly attributed to developmental disability.<sup>ii</sup> We hope this article will shed light on some key symptoms to look out for that may suggest your child could benefit from mental health treatment in addition to autism services.

Let us first consider the difference between mental illness and developmental disorder. The American Psychiatric Association defines mental illnesses as “health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior.”<sup>iii</sup> On the other hand, developmental disabilities are defined by the CDC as “a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas.”<sup>iv</sup> If someone has both autism and mental illness, this is a type of dual diagnosis.<sup>v</sup> Mental illnesses can be treatable and can even resolve with proper care.<sup>vi</sup> While developmental disorders are lifelong and may require continuous treatment in order to improve outcomes.<sup>vii</sup>

In terms of dual diagnosis, young people with autism have a particularly higher risk of anxiety disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)<sup>viii</sup>. Regarding anxiety disorders, individuals on the autism spectrum are more likely to be bullied and struggle with regulating their emotions, both of which can increase depression and anxiety.<sup>ix</sup> In the case of ADHD, symptoms often overlap with autism, making a separate ADHD diagnosis harder to identify among individuals on the spectrum.<sup>x</sup> As children are trying to navigate the world with autism, the challenges they face in a world that struggles to embrace neurodiversity can impact their mental health. According to the *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, parents should look out for the following symptoms:<sup>xi</sup>

- Difficulty concentrating or completing daily tasks
- Defying figures of authority
- Withdrawing from family/friends
- Aggressive behavior such as being violent towards others
- Anxiety such as restlessness<sup>xii</sup>
- Depression such as loss of interest in activities<sup>xiii</sup>

If you notice any of the above signs or symptoms, consider having your child evaluated by a psychologist. As with autism, early identification of mental illness is key for the most successful treatment outcomes.

Although mental health treatments vary, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and wrap-around services are among the most promising. One study employed an adapted version of CBT for anxiety by accommodating for the social and adaptive skill deficits of children with ASD. The adapted CBT resulted in an improvement in anxiety.<sup>xiv</sup> A more recently developed treatment called “wrap-around services” refers to a team of physicians,

psychologists, and service coordinators working together to ensure care needs are met from home to school to work.<sup>xv</sup> This treatment is more personalized, focusing on the specific needs and strengths of each individual.

As parents and caregivers know all too well, advocating for individuals with autism requires taking extra measures. This includes consideration of their mental health and well-being. Unfortunately, seeking mental health services is often stigmatized, especially in the African American community. According to one study that looked at the experience of stigma among Black mental health consumers, 76% expressed that stigma played some role in preventing them from accessing mental health treatment.<sup>xvi</sup> Although some may be discouraged from speaking out, it is past time to destigmatize mental illness. We must take action for our loved ones on the autism spectrum, in particular, as they may need our support even more due to added social and communication challenges. If you have any concerns about your child's mental health, do not hesitate to communicate with your child's care team about the behaviors you observe. You can also feel free to contact us at the Autism Genetics & Human Diversity Project so that we might be a resource for connecting you with mental health support.

Although the dual diagnosis of a mental illness along with a developmental disorder like autism can be daunting, these conditions do not have to prevent individuals on the spectrum from leading positive lives. Understanding the differences between mental illness and developmental disorders, can help families obtain the most effective treatments to support thriving with autism. If we all do our part to combat the stigma against mental illness, then personalized care is available to support each child's unique needs. As parents and caregivers of loved ones with autism, we know advocacy is your top priority. We hope this article can further equip you with information to identify early signs of mental illness and obtain valuable treatment.

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**Note from the authors:**

The Autism Genetics & Human Diversity Project at UCLA is currently investigating genetic risk for autism in the African American community in order to increase participation of under-represented groups in autism research. By participating in this study, African American families who suspect their child has autism can receive a free assessment by trained autism specialists to determine if a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is appropriate. The study can also help families whose child has already been diagnosed with ASD by providing basic recommendations based on the autism specialist assessment. In addition, all participating families will gain access to educational resources and future research opportunities through the UCLA Center for Autism Research and Treatment (CART).

For more information about the Autism Genetics and Human Diversity Project, contact 310- 794-4090 or [AutismGenetics@ucla.edu](mailto:AutismGenetics@ucla.edu).

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