



care bridge
— specialists —

Mental Health and Autism



Mental health difficulties are highly prevalent for individuals on the autism spectrum.

While it is estimated that 25% of people will develop a mental health problem in their lifetime, for autistic people that figure is as high as 70%. Not only are they more likely to experience comorbid mental health conditions, such as sleep disorders, depression and anxiety but these problems also tend to be more severe and there is a higher risk of hospitalisation.

It can often be challenging for autistic people to live independently. They are more likely to be diagnosed with physical disorders, such as epilepsy and autoimmune diseases and their sensory differences and intolerance of uncertainty means that they find unexpected changes in everyday living stressful and struggle considerably when routines are disrupted or unpredictable.

These aren't the only challenges, experiences and perceptions that autistic people face throughout their lives which negatively influence their mental health. They are often on the receiving end of unfavourable judgements, stigma and negative unconscious bias and as a result of this may feel ostracised and resort to masking, camouflaging or internalising. Not only is this mentally exhausting for them but it has a significant detrimental effect on their psychological safety and sense of emotional wellbeing.

Research suggests that people with autism also experience less social support and have fewer opportunities to engage with likeminded people. Societies misunderstandings and

misconceptions often mean that they can lack a sense of 'belonging', have a restricted sense of identity and suffer from intense feelings of loneliness.

They can struggle with personal acceptance. Differences in social communication, social interaction, and sensory sensitivities along with repetitive interests and behaviours can often lead them to feeling that they live in a controlled and unsafe world where decisions are made for and imposed on them.

So, the question must be asked...

How Can We Improve Mental Health Outcomes?

1. Boost SELF ESTEEM

We want the individuals that we support to view autism positively and know that they don't have to try and fit into a non-autistic world. Our Practitioners celebrate every individual as they are. They encourage them to talk to someone, they practise active listening or sometimes they simply sit in comfortable quietude in the moments when there are no words.

Our Practitioners also very intentionally take time to do things that an individual enjoys and are good at; the things that boost their endorphins, oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin levels and help them to relax and unwind. They set small achievable goals that allow an individual to see how capable they are. This might be trying a new hobby, wearing a new outfit, or just getting dressed for the day. Whatever it is, it is always important to mark an individual's achievement and give them the credit that they deserve.

2. Boost ACCEPTANCE

Our Practitioners seek to improve personal and external acceptance from an individual's family, friends and from the individual themselves. We want every autistic person that we support to identify positively with autism in order to increase their sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

As one example of how we might support this we use 'Inner Child Visualisation'. This is a technique that harnesses an individual's inner child that wants them to feel loved and to know all their good qualities. It involves finding a quiet space and asking them to tell their younger selves that they deserve love and kindness, that they are not to blame, that they will learn from their experiences and that they are brilliant. After all how we talk about ourselves affects who we believe we are.

3. Boost COMMUNICATION

We know that autistic people often find it harder to communicate how they feel. Our Practitioners are experienced and practised in positive conversation. Their first step is always to find out how an individual prefers to communicate. If they are able to and it is their choice to do so they will talk in a calm quiet environment, they will be asked closed direct

questions that are easier for them to answer, and they will be allowed plenty of time so that they can process and respond to them.

In instances when an individual can't or doesn't want to open up we know that it remains important that they have a means and way to express themselves in line with their personal interests; be that drawing, painting, music, fashion or sport.

4. Boost FAMILY AND PEER SUPPORT

People with autism experiencing mental health challenges need opportunities to participate and build meaningful relationships with trusted people that make it easier for them to deal with life's challenges. They need to know that they are not alone and that people around them want to help.

Our Practitioners offer interventions that improve family and peer support and that empower individuals to feel good about themselves. They do this by validating and supporting their experiences and finding the right people for them to be around. That might be old or new friends, aunties, uncles, cousins, neighbours, or people at the local day centre and other community groups. Or our Practitioners might signpost them to one of the many amazing helplines and online services (*'YoungMinds'* or *'The Mix'* are two great ones) that can provide a warm, kind and patient voice that like our Practitioners, is there for them in every moment of crisis.