

Dual diagnosis

ASD can co-occur with other developmental disorders (e.g. Down Syndrome, learning disability), neurological conditions (e.g. dyspraxia, epilepsy) and functional impairments (e.g. cerebral palsy, sensory impairment). Dual diagnosis helps ensure that both conditions (and their interaction) are considered when treatment is required.

Mental health problems

Individuals with ASD are also more likely than others to suffer from a range of mental health problems (e.g. anxiety, depression, bi-polar disorder) which may be acute or chronic.

A high level of anxiety is common in ASD and anxiety disorders including phobias, separation anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, or eating and sleep disorders can occur.

Mental health problems in ASD need treatment, as in other cases, but the interaction with the symptoms of ASD will affect identification and treatment.

Reactions to anxiety states may lead to challenging behaviour, violence and self injury. Phobias may be masked by panic reactions and the individual may be seen as aggressive or challenging or socially avoidant. Depression may be misinterpreted as social withdrawal or regression.

Mental health problems

Individuals with ASD are more likely than others to suffer from a range of mental health problems (e.g. anxiety, depression, bi-polar disorder). These may be acute or chronic.

A high level of anxiety is common in ASD and this can manifest as

- phobias
- separation anxiety
- obsessive compulsive disorder
- eating and sleep disorders.

Differentiating symptoms

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) may be confused with obsessions as part of ASD.

- Obsessions within ASD usually decrease anxiety and give pleasure to the individual.
- Obsessions within OCD usually result in an increase in anxiety and have a 'compulsive' quality.

Eating disorders may be confused with 'faddiness' and the rigidity over food intake that is typical in ASD (e.g. only eating foods of a certain colour, texture or brand):

- Anxiety and the need for control may take 'autistic' rigidity over food intake to a dangerous level, even anorexia nervosa.
- Obsessive interest in food and poor impulse control may lead to extreme over-eating.

Identifying mental health problems in individuals with ASD is particularly difficult.

The person with an ASD may have little self-awareness so the practitioner cannot rely on verbal reports and has instead to infer the mental health problem from behaviour.

Identifying mental health problems

Practical Strategies

- Get a good idea of concerns from the individual, family and carers.
- Establish what aspect the individual wants to address.
- Ask for concrete examples about behaviour and functioning.
- Be aware that non-verbal behaviour may be in stark contrast to the level of difficulties and distress experienced by the individual.
- Gather information from a range of sources about what has helped in the past.
- Establish what resources the individual has, including personality factors and family support.
- Agree with the individual and family to monitor the situation for a particular period.
- Consider and discuss onward referral where necessary.
- Be aware of the possible idiosyncratic responses to medication.

Treatment for mental health problems

Mental health problems may be helped by medication but behavioural and educational methods can also be effective, either on their own or in conjunction with a temporary period of medication.

Medication

There may be atypical reactions to medication and a narrow range for the therapeutic dose. The NHS Education for Scotland resource “The Pharmaceutical Care of People with Learning Disabilities” has a chapter on ASD.

Educational / Cognitive

Best approaches stress a positive attitude to coping (teach coping skills and awareness)

- positive solution-focused problem solving, increase understanding
- cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) (specially adapted for ASD – even for children)
- structured, predictable environments
- relaxation
- general – sensory; meditation; yoga; deep pressure; music
- specific - fold arms, close eyes, chant or hum
- aerobic exercise

Diet

There is limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of dietary interventions

Therapies

- talking with others (significant others / peers)
- art/ drama/ music / occupational therapy

References and resources

Autism Network Scotland connects and communicates with individuals on the autistic spectrum, their families, carers, and practitioners working in the field of autism. It is a hub of reliable and impartial information, signposting people to supports, resources and useful information. ANS offers a platform for knowledge exchange and sharing of good practice and promotes a solution focused approach. ANS supports regional networks across Scotland by providing a neutral space for discussion and communication.

www.autismnetworkscotland.org.uk

Healthtalk.org aims to provide free, reliable information about health issues, by sharing people's real-life experiences. You can watch people sharing their stories about autism

<http://www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/autism>

The National Autistic Society is a leading UK charity providing support, help and information for those with ASD, their families, carers and links to resources including information for GPs.

<http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/health/info-for-gps.aspx>

Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network (2007) SIGN 98: Assessment, Diagnosis and Clinical Interventions for children and young people with autism spectrum disorders.

The Scottish Strategy for Autism: Menu of Interventions (2013) was developed by a multi-agency group (including parents and carers). It provides a guide to intervention aimed at providing support to individuals on the autism spectrum across the age range and across the whole of the spectrum.

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0043/00438221.pdf>

The University of Birmingham and NHS Scotland have developed a specialist, online learning resource on ASD, designed for GPs and Primary Care Practitioners, where you will find more detailed information on:

- The Patient with an ASD
- Practical Strategies
- Health Issues
- Diagnostic Issues

<http://www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/home/learning-and-cpd/learning-spaces/autism-spectrum-disorder.aspx>

NHS Education for Scotland (2014) The Pharmaceutical Care of people with learning disabilities”

http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/media/2733301/2014-04-14_learning_disabilities_final_version.pdf