

CLAHRC BITE

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A bite-sized summary of CLAHRC research: Vulnerability and mental health in autistic adults



**“I have been lost in a system that doesn’t
care as long as it ticks boxes”**

Why?

Autistic adults are more vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes (e.g. anxiety, depression, suicidality). In order to reduce mental health problems in this group, we need to understand the type of negative life experiences that lead to poor mental health outcomes in this group.

What?

A Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) panel was established to design a measure of vulnerability in autistic adults. The resulting measure, called “The Vulnerability Experiences Quotient”; measures rates of negative life experiences across a range of different areas of life.

Who?

426 autistic adult and 268 non-autistic adults completed the vulnerability experiences quotient.

Background

Around 70% of autistic adults also have a mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression. In this project we aimed to understand the types of negative life experience that may increase the risk of comorbid mental health conditions in this population.

We ran PPI groups with autistic adults to find out which life experiences they felt had been particularly difficult for them. We then created the 'vulnerability experiences quotient' to measure how many of these negative life events people had experienced. We asked a larger group of autistic adults and non-autistic adults to complete this questionnaire and some measures of mental health symptoms.

Findings

We found that autistic adults are more vulnerable to many negative experiences, including employment difficulties, financial hardship and domestic abuse. The total number of negative life experiences partially explained the higher rates of anxiety and depression symptoms and lower life satisfaction in autistic adults compared to non-autistic adults.

Our research suggests that policy changes are needed to reduce the vulnerability of autistic adults. At the moment, autistic adults without intellectual disabilities are not eligible for support services in many areas of the country. Resources should be focused on ensuring autistic adults have practical assistance with obtaining and maintaining employment, managing finances and accessing other services such as housing and healthcare. Peer mentoring or support groups may also be an effective way to reduce vulnerability as we found that around half of autistic adults reported not having others they could turn to for help and advice.

This is a summary of research funded by Autism Research Trust (ART) and Autistica, undertaken at the Autism Research Centre. This research is informed by a previous study funded by the NIHR CLAHRC EoE which discovered a strong link between autism and suicide risk. This enabled the team to apply to ART and Autistica for this second grant on autism and vulnerability.



www.autismresearchtrust.org/

AUTISTICA

www.autistica.org.uk/



www.autismresearchcentre.com/

What is NIHR CLAHRC East of England?

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) East of England is a five year programme of applied health and social care research which focuses on the needs of people with complex problems, often vulnerable, when multiple agencies are involved in their care: young people, frail older people, those with dementia, learning disabilities, acquired brain injuries or mental ill health.

The CLAHRC East of England collaboration encompasses some thirty-six organisations, with research hubs in the Universities of Cambridge, Hertfordshire and East Anglia working closely with individuals and organisations involved in the whole care pathway.

Service users and carers are at the heart of what we do, in parallel with an ambitious public health research programme. Co-production and collaboration at all stages of the research process are fundamental to making a positive impact through applied health research.

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For information about the CLAHRC EoE Suicide and Autism research:
www.clahrc-eeo.nihr.ac.uk/2016/07/suicide-autism-autistic-traits/

If you are autistic, or you know someone on the autism spectrum, you can find information and advice on the National Autistic Society website
www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/main/contact.aspx

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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