

MENTAL HEALTH, AUTISM, AND YOUR CHILD

A GUIDE FOR IDENTIFYING MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS AND CARING FOR YOUR CHILD

CHALLENGES WITH MULTIPLE SYMPTOMS

Children with autism often experience mental health symptoms that affect their daily lives. Parents and caregivers may have a hard time recognizing the different behaviors and symptoms.



When a child has multiple symptoms, it can be difficult to know where the symptoms are coming from. Knowing the difference between symptoms is important because it can guide treatment options.

HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED?

- Around 7 in 10 children with autism also have at least one co-occurring mental health condition
- Many mental health symptoms are noticed in childhood and are seen as early as preschool
- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Anxiety, and Depression are the most common diagnoses that can co-occur with autism symptoms



SIFTING THROUGH SYMPTOMS

Each child is unique and so is the way they live in the world. Symptoms interact with one another and it can be difficult to understand what is going on. Some behaviors could be caused by an underlying mental health condition. Understanding how to recognize and manage symptoms can be helpful.

Anxiety Symptoms

- Common fears include worries about social situations, separating from caregivers or intense fear reactions to specific objects or animals (spiders, dogs, the dark).
- Unique ways that anxiety interacts with autism is experiencing specific fears that other children do not have (fans, corners, crayons) and/or anticipating and avoiding sensory experiences, such as loud noises or certain textures.
- High levels of avoidance of upcoming activities can be signs of anxiety.

ADHD Symptoms

- Kids with autism and ADHD may have a hard time concentrating or finishing a task.
- They may also be overly focused on a task, item, or activity.
- Struggles with impulse control may also be common.
- Children may have difficulty ending one activity and starting another.
- Restlessness, trouble sitting still, and high activity levels may also be signs of ADHD.

Depression Symptoms

- Symptoms of depression include losing interest in previously enjoyed activities, feeling sad or tired, withdrawing from others, changes in sleep or appetite, and more.
- Youth may have problems managing strong emotions, are quick to react negatively, and cry often.
- High levels of irritability may be present.
- Children may make comments about self-harm or have suicidal thoughts.

MELTDOWNS AND OUTBURSTS

- Challenging behaviors are very common in kids with autism and can include yelling, destroying property, and hitting others.
- When deciding how to react to an outburst, it is important to understand WHY the behavior is happening. Is your child trying to get something or someone's attention; or avoid doing something?
- Learning how to figure out the WHY of outbursts is important because it can help you make a plan for how to help your child.



STRATEGIES TO TRY AT HOME

ADHD

- Movement breaks are a great way to maintain focus. Movement breaks can include walking, dancing, or wiggling before getting back to work.
- First-Then strategies can be helpful for staying on task and motivated. For example, first do five homework questions then you can go outside. This can be a great place to use picture examples, too!
- Use positive rewards for completing tasks such as doing a preferred activity or interacting with a favorite peer or adult.

ANXIETY

- Work on developing calm-down strategies which could include taking deep breaths, taking a break, getting a drink of water, or going on a walk.
- Help your child identify their thoughts and feelings.
- Support positive self-talk ("I can give this a try"; "I've got this!")
- Develop relaxing and calming activities to use every day.
- Encourage your child to face fears a little at a time.

DEPRESSION

- Find activities that your child likes and is good at to build self-confidence; consider non-academic activities.
- Similar to anxiety suggestions above, encourage your child to say positive things about themselves: "I am a kind person," or "I can do hard things."
- Build in time to have fun on a daily basis!

MELTDOWN

- Managing meltdowns may involve three things: 1) keeping kids safe, 2) helping them calm down, and 3) teaching them new skills to address the "why" of the outburst.
- Teaching new skills like asking for help or asking for a break may be one way to prevent the outbursts from getting too big.
- Managing behavioral outbursts takes time; ask for help!

WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

Bottom line: When nothing else works, seek support!

Parenting is hard! If you feel stuck but the problems are still there and you are not sure what to do next, it may be time to get help. A helpful step can be talking with your child's pediatrician or teacher. Common approaches to managing mental health symptoms include cognitive behavior therapy or behavioral therapy. For some children, the combination of therapies and medication can be helpful.



EMERGENCY SUPPORT

If your child or someone in your household is in danger or feels unsafe, please seek immediate crisis support by calling 911 or the Colorado Crisis Line.



WHERE TO SEEK SUPPORT

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH CENTER

CONTACT YOUR PRIMARY CARE PROVIDER

IN AN EMERGENCY, PLEASE CONTACT COLORADO CRISIS LINE

**1-844-493-8255
OR CALL 911**

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