

MENTAL HEALTH, AUTISM, AND YOUR CHILD

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

CHALLENGES WITH MULTIPLE SYMPTOMS

Parents and caregivers of children with autism may have a hard time identifying the different behaviors and symptoms.



When a child has multiple diagnoses, it can be difficult to know which symptom goes with which diagnosis! The overlap between diagnoses can be confusing for families. While symptoms may not always fall into neat boxes, it is helpful to learn how to recognize and manage these symptoms.

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

Every 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 symptoms can be helpful for parents.

Anxiety Symptoms

- With anxiety, many common fears or worries are about social situations and separating from caregivers.
- Anxiety can look like high levels of avoidance and anxious anticipation of upcoming activities.
- Unique ways that anxiety interacts with autism is the presence of very specific fears that other children do not have, such as a fear of fans, corners, crayons, pictures of the sun, and more.
- Children with autism may also be fearful of some sensory input such as loud noises.

ADHD Symptoms

- ADHD in kids with autism can look like having a hard time concentrating or finishing a task
- Children with autism and ADHD may also experience being overly focused on a task, item, or activity
- Having struggles with impulse control is also a common symptom in kids with both autism and ADHD
- Children may have difficulty ending one activity and starting another

Depression Symptoms

- Symptoms of depression include losing interest in previously enjoyed activities, tiredness, feeling sad, withdrawing from others, changes in sleep or appetite, and more.
- Children with autism may have a problem managing strong emotions, may be quick to react negatively, seem irritable, and cry often.
- Children with autism may make comments about self-harm or have suicidal thoughts.

TANTRUMS AND OUTBURSTS

- Tantrums and outbursts are very common in kids with autism.
- When deciding how to react to a tantrum and intervene, it is important to understand WHY the tantrum 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 tantrums 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 like doing a preferred activity or interacting with a favorite peer or adult.

ANXIETY

- Working on calm-down strategies could be helpful for a child with autism and anxiety. This could look like taking deep breaths, getting a drink of water, or going on a walk.
- Help your child identify their thoughts and feelings. Kids with autism often have trouble managing strong emotions.
- Encourage your child to face fears a little at a time. Try helpful phrases like, "Be brave and face your fears!"

DEPRESSION

- Find activities that your child likes and is good at to build self-confidence. In some cases, this may be a non-academic activity.
- Encourage your child to say positive things about themselves. Examples are: "I am a kind person," or "I can do hard things."

TANTRUMS

- Managing tantrums may be combination of keeping kids safe and helping them calm down, and teaching them skills to address the "why" of the tantrum.
- Helping your child learn skills like asking for help or asking for a break may be a way to step in before the tantrum gets too big.

WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

Bottom line: When nothing else works, seek support!

When you as a parent feel that you have tried everything but the problems are still there and it interferes with your daily life, or if your child's struggles are getting worse, it may be time to seek support. 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**