Support & Service Needs of Adolescents and Adults with ASD with Psychosocial Problems

Adapted from Living with ASD: Adolescence and Beyond, Autism Ontario, 2006, pages 63-66.

Finding Supports and Services
Finding supports and services to help adolescents and adults with ASD who have psychosocial problems can be difficult. Supports may be found in agencies that serve people with ASD, people with developmental delays, or people with mental health problems.

- **Social Workers:** Social workers are professionals who have either a Bachelor of Social Work or a Master’s of Social Work. To use the title, “Social Worker,” they must be registered with the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers. Social workers may perform case management or provide ongoing counselling/psychotherapy.

- **Psychiatrists:** Psychiatrists are medical doctors and most often are used for the diagnosis of ASD and mental health disorders. They also prescribe medication and are members of the College of Physicians and Surgeons. They may provide psychotherapy and ongoing management of medications. Psychiatrists who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of developmental disabilities (including ASD) in Ontario are unfortunately difficult to find.

- **Psychologists:** Psychologists are specialized in assessment and diagnosis and may provide ongoing treatment. They are able to complete a Psychological Assessment, which may include the use of standard measures, tests, and intellectual measures. They belong to the provincial College of Psychologists.

Other groups of professionals known as mental health workers or case managers, who do not have consistent professional credentials, may be able to help adults with ASD access one of these professionals or, if qualified, provide therapeutic support.

Psychological Assessments
A psychological assessment, which utilizes standardized measures and a clinical interview, may help clarify an individual’s diagnosis, their cognitive strengths and weaknesses, daily living skills, personality profile, and whether any mental health issues are present. An assessment can give both professionals and family members another perspective with which to view the individual’s strengths and areas of need. Both need to be considered equally in the planning process.
The most helpful part of the assessment may be what professionals call a functional skills or adaptive behaviour assessment.

In addition to the standardized measures to assess functional skills, other measures may be used in the psychological assessment to assess:

- Intellectual and academic capability
- Autistic/Asperger’s traits
- Emotional traits or problems (anxiety, depression, etc.)
- Sensory issues
- Personality profile

**Counselling**

Although the professional literature contains little discussion of counselling for adults with ASD, they can benefit from this intervention. Even adults with associated cognitive delays can benefit from counselling by an experienced professional. Usually the greatest benefit is realized if a clear structure and goals are a part of the counselling process.

Counselling can address not only emotional difficulties, but also a wide range of other issues including social skills, appropriate behaviour, sexuality and intimate relationships, decisions about the future, and personal crises. Sometimes while seeking supports for their teen or adult with ASD, parents also want to find a counsellor to whom they can go for advice and guidance.

**Behavioural Interventions**

Often, behavioural interventions are useful when addressing mental health needs of adults with ASD. Commonly, behavioural interventions refer to the introduction or withdrawal of rewards to increase or decrease the frequency of behaviour. This approach may be useful, for example, if an individual is having a difficult time doing household tasks because of depression. A reward system that is suitable for the individual may be put in place to increase the frequency of completion of household tasks.

Another form of behavioural intervention that does not include the use of specific rewards can also be effective. It is important to help the young adult structure their days to ensure that they have a clear schedule for sleeping and eating and other activities. They may need the support of parents or community workers (such as Special Services at Home workers) to promote this structure.

It is important to note that behavioural interventions may not be fitting for all types of behaviour related to mental health seen in teens and adults with ASD. Behaviour indicative of mental health issues may also need to be addressed through other forms of intervention or with a combination of behavioural and other interventions. For example, behavioural interventions may be paired with cognitive interventions in individual counselling.

**Medication**

Individuals with ASD may benefit from medication for various mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. However, medical practitioners who have extensive experience prescribing medication to adults with ASD may be difficult to access in the community.
When medical practitioners are available, they may not be able to monitor the medication over the long term. More likely, a medical specialist in the field may be able to provide an initial recommendation for a trial of medication, and continue overseeing the treatment with the help of other professionals involved with the youth or adult.

Research on medications for youth and adults with ASD who have mental health difficulties is still in its infancy. It is important to know that adults with ASD can be unusually sensitive to medications and may therefore experience adverse side effects. Often, side effects can be avoided if doses start low and are increased very slowly.

Some Community Resources

- Autism Ontario – www.autismontario.com
- Aspergers Society Ontario – www.aspergers.ca
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health – www.camh.net
- Kerry’s Place Autism Services – www.kerrysplace.org
- Ongwanada – www.ongwanada.com
- Surrey Place Centre – www.surreyplace.on.ca
- Your local hospital

About the Author

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