

I have concerns about my mental health. What are my options? I'm concerned about my autistic loved one's mental health. Are there resources to support us?

Autistic people have an increased vulnerability for mental health concerns as well as common co-occurring neurodivergences. These include, but are not limited to, anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), eating disorders, and substance use disorders. Often, these concerns develop as a result of the chronic stress of being neurodivergent in a neurotypical world.

Autistic individuals may struggle with difficulty identifying emotions, regulating their sensory systems, may experience black and white thought patterns that make dealing with unexpected changes difficult, and/or may have experienced adverse life events. Further, autistic people often manage their stressors through stimming. Because stimming is not understood by the neurotypical majority, it can be perceived as odd or inappropriate, leaving autistics with fewer tools to help cope. Barriers to stimming plus social isolation and a lack of peer support networks, can leave people feeling helpless and hopeless, which are the building blocks for mental health concerns.

The Sinneave Family Foundation is working with our partners and community advocates to address inequities in mental health care for autistic people throughout the lifespan through a variety of initiatives, including the Autism Mental Health Working Group and through Primary Care Networks. Please note that it is important to note that most of the mental health resources that currently exist in the community are not autism focused.

In order to access mental health supports, it's important to speak to your general practitioner (GP, also known as a Family Doctor) as soon as possible. General practitioners are just that – general. They may not have expertise in mental health and you may need to advocate for yourself to get connected to helpful supports. Your GP can refer you to mental health resources such as a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and other related community supports.

- It is important to disclose that you are autistic to the professional you are seeking help from because it can be tricky to recognize mental health disorders in autistic people because the diagnostic rules were made based on research on non-autistic people so our symptoms might look a little different.

You can prepare to see your doctor by recording your moods, symptoms, and routines. How much sleep are you getting? Are you getting enough water and nutrients every day? Have there been any recent changes or other stressors in your life? Do you notice any patterns in your mental health like feeling more anxious or tense in some settings or feeling tired? This can be hard if you struggle to identify your emotions and internal physical feelings like lots of other autistic people. Do your best to communicate your needs and experiences.

- You can work together with your medical team to come up with the best plan for your needs. Your doctor may suggest medication or counselling or both. A combination of medication and counselling is often the most effective treatment route.
- If you and your medical team do decide to try medications, make sure you take them as directed. It often takes a few weeks to notice effects. Keep recording any changes in your moods, symptoms, and routines and ask your pharmacist about any special considerations and what side effects to watch out for.
- Counselling can be very beneficial for individuals with mental health issues (as well as their family) as it can provide coping strategies and other ways to manage stress and anxiety.
 - Interview potential counsellors to ensure that they have experience working with autistic clients and that they utilize interventions that have demonstrated success in addressing mental health issues. Many psychologists

will offer short introductory sessions for free so you can see if they are a good fit for your needs.

- There are community based short-term counselling options your GP can refer you to. They may offer you 1:1 appointments or group therapy. You can advocate for yourself to be referred to the best supports for you.
- Supports can be offered in person, over the phone or video call, or over email or text apps.
- Some private practice psychologists offer sliding scale fees for people when cost is a barrier. If you would like help finding a psychologist who may be able to help, please contact one of our Resource Centre Ambassadors at The Ability Hub: 403.210.5000, ambassador@sinneavefoundation.org

Many Autistic people experience loneliness and isolation. It may help to reach out to autistic community supports. There are lots of online support groups and a few autistic-led organizations such as Autistics United Canada, the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), and the Autistic Women and Nonbinary Network (AWN). Some people might find it helpful to connect with or just listen to other autistic people facing similar struggles. These autistic-led organizations often post information to their websites and social medias about mental health struggles and strategies. They also address internalized ableism and encourage stimming as self-regulation and self-expression.

Consider the following key terms when searching for resources:

- [Ableism](#)
- [Advocate](#)
- [Alexithymia](#)
- [Neurodivergent or neurodiverse](#)
- [Neurotypical](#)

RESOURCES

The Resource Centre (a Sinneave Family Foundation initiative) does not endorse or guarantee the exhaustive, complete, accurate or up-to-date nature of information provided and does not assume any risk for the outcome of information or referrals provided.

SERVICES

Alberta Health Services - Access Mental Health

Assists members of the community to navigate the addiction and mental health system and ensure the clients get to the right service at the right time.

Phone: 403.943.1500, Ext 1 (Child & Adolescent Services), 403.943.1500 Ext 2 (Adult & Senior Services)

Email: mental.health@albertahealthservices.ca

Website: albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=2381&serviceAtFacilityID=1019446

Arnika Centre

A community based mental health service for persons 16 years and older with an intellectual disability and a mental health concern. A referral from a family doctor is required.

Phone: 403.943.8301

Address: Ground Floor, 3465 - 26 Avenue, Calgary AB T1Y 6L4

Website: albertahealthservices.ca/findhealth/Service.aspx?id=1060552&serviceAtFacilityID=1095165

Calgary Distress Centre

Provides crisis support, professional counselling, and referrals to social services at no cost. Offers online crisis chat feature and phone-based crisis supports.

Phone: 403.266.HELP (4357) - (24 hour crisis line), Administration 403.266.1601 Youth Program 403.264.8337
Address: 300, 1010 - 8th Avenue SW, Calgary, AB T2P 1J2
Email: info@distresscentre.com
Website: distresscentre.com

Calgary Eating Disorders Program (CEDP)

The Calgary Eating Disorders Program (CEDP) is a physician referral based program that offers treatment for people diagnosed with an eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and other specified feeding or eating disorder. The program is offered across three sites with inpatient, day treatment and outpatient options.:

Brochure: albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/hp/arp/if-hp-arp-cz-eatingdisorders-qr.pdf

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

Offers mental health interventions, education, and support for caregivers. Fees based on a sliding scale, and no one is refused due to financial reasons. They also have an 8-week Capable Careers Group (psycho-educational) for family and friends of adults with a mental illness.

Phone: 403.297.1700
Email: info@cmha.calgary.ab.ca
Website: cmha.calgary.ab.ca/

Developing Better Tools for Life – DBT Skills Group

McMan Calgary offers a 12-week skills group for youth (ages 16 to 27). It is for youth generally though they have had autistic participants in the past. The group follows a Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT) model. DBT focuses on increasing skills in four main areas: (1) mindfulness; (2) emotional regulation; (3) distress tolerance; and (4) interpersonal relationships.

Phone: 403.280.6293
Email: dbt@mcmancalgary.ca
Website: mcmancalgary.ca/dbt/

RESOURCES

Anxiety Canada

An online educational resource with information regarding anxiety and mental health and various treatments including cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), tools and tips.

Phone: 604.620.0744
Address: 311 - 409 Granville Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 1T2
Website: anxietycanada.com

Autism Mental Health Blog

The aim of this blog is to share research regarding mental health and autism with a diverse audience. This blog is primarily from a medical perspective and is largely authored, edited, and reviewed by non-autistic medical professionals. It primarily features research summaries with limited strategy supports. It refers to autism as a disorder.

Phone: 416.736.2100 Extension 22987
Address: York University, 4700 Keele Street, BSB 250, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3
Email: tablonp@yorku.ca
Website: asdmentalhealth.blog.yorku.ca/

Mental Health Autism - My Safety Plan

This website is curated by a research project team in the UK. It refers to autism as a condition, not a disorder. They offer a few resources, including a downloadable PDF Safety Plan.

Website: mhautism.coventry.ac.uk/
Safety plan: mhautism.coventry.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/MHAutism-Safety-Plan-.pdf

MindBalance

MindBalance is an 8-session program for autistic teens, adults and their families to learn about and manage anxiety using effective mindfulness-based strategies. Sliding fee scale and online options available.

Phone: 403.210.5000 Extension 2014
Address: 300, 3820 - 24 Avenue NW, Calgary, AB T3B 2X9
Email: katelyn.lowe@mindbrio.ca
Website: mindbrio.ca

National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)

NEDIC is an organization that provides eating disorder education, resources, support, and referrals to people in Canada. They offer a toll-free phone help-line and an instant chat feature on their website.

Phone: 1.866.633.4220 (Toll-free helpline open from 7 am to 7 pm MST Monday thru Thursday and Friday from 7 am to 3 pm MST)
Website: nedic.ca (Instant-chat helpline available, same hours as phone line)

Psychologists Association of Alberta

Professional association for psychologists working in Alberta. Offers a referral service and assistance in selecting psychologists with specialization in a variety of issues.

Phone: 780.424.0294 or 1.888.424.0297
Address: Unit 103, 1207 - 91 Street SW, Edmonton, AB T6X 1E9
Website: psychologistsassociation.ab.ca/

READINGS & VIDEOS

Agony Autie

An autistic advocate who shares many videos about mental health and autism, particularly in her personal relation to trauma, anxiety, and depression. She has a “What’s That?” video series which explains common experiences and self-regulation strategies in 3-5 minute videos. “Embrace Autistic Stimming | North Walesn Autism Conference 2018” is linked below. Agony Autie/ Sara Harvey presents on the impact of shame on mental health and the power of stimming. She addresses stimming as regulation and as communication. She talks about creating a “stim toolkit” and giving herself options to use instead of engaging in self-harm. Sara has other videos on meltdowns, shutdowns, and autistic burnout to highlight just a few.

Video: youtu.be/meCjCa-WIac

“Analysis pins down prevalence of mental health conditions in autism” - Spectrum News

A scientific news article about the findings of a meta-analysis on mental health conditions and autism.

Article: spectrumnews.org/news/analysis-pins-down-prevalence-of-mental-health-conditions-in-autism/

Autistic Regression and Fluid Adaptation – Cynthia Kim

Autistic advocate Cynthia Kim writes about adapting to increasing demands.

Link: musingsofanaspie.com/2013/12/19/autistic-regression-and-fluid-adaptation/

Internalized Ableism and How Neurodiversity Helped Me - stimmycats

Autistic advocate using the handle “stimmycats” writes about internalized ableism and finding self-esteem through connection with the neurodiversity movement.

Link: autismthroughcats.wordpress.com/2014/08/10/internalised-ableism-neurodiversity/

Self-injurious Behaviours

Autistic advocate Bridget explains self-injurious behaviours (SIB) to a neurotypical audience.

Post: itsbridgetsword.com/2012/10/07/self-injurious-behaviors/

What is Alexithymia? - Ask an Autistic #27

Autistic Advocate Amythest Schaber concisely explains alexithymia and offers suggestions.

Video: youtube.com/watch?v=Fl-aKRdzLyQ

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5