

Autistic people urgently need access to tailored mental health support

January 11 2019, by Jane Icke

New research has revealed that people diagnosed with autism don't have access to effective mental health support, putting them at risk of self-harm and suicide.

Researchers from the University of Nottingham, Coventry University and the University of Cambridge worked with a steering group of Autistic adults to design and carry out the research which has recently been published in the journal *Autism*.

The research demonstrates that there is an urgent need for tailored treatment pathways in [mental health services](#) for autistic people.

According to the research autistic people don't think mental [health support](#) was for 'people like them'. Some of the reasons they gave for feeling like this include: not knowing where to go for help, being perceived as 'too complicated' to help, professionals misperceptions of 'high functioning' autistic people as 'coping' even when struggling, support geared towards children and long waiting lists and lack of funding.

Life-saving support

Dr. Sarah Cassidy at the University of Nottingham's School of Psychology led the research and said: "When you are an autistic person with a [mental health problem](#), getting appropriate support and treatment

is difficult, but can be life-saving.

Autism is not a rare condition, and many autistic people report mental health problems and feeling suicidal. However, our research has shown that autistic people experience real difficulties in getting appropriate treatment and support, which can significantly impact their wellbeing and makes them more likely to see suicide as their only option. Our research, designed in partnership with autistic people, has strong implications for services, and need for an autism specific mental health pathway to better meet the unique needs of this vulnerable group."

A complex problem

Reasons for this lack of treatment and support are complex. Mental health professionals and psychiatrists are generally not trained in recognising and understanding [autism](#), meaning services are unprepared to adapt support and [treatment](#) to this group. There are also a lack of appropriate assessments to effectively identify mental health problems such as depression and suicidal feelings in autistic adults and a lack of appropriate adapted psychological therapies for autistic people.

Researchers developed a survey exploring mental health, self-injury and suicidality in autistic adults in partnership with an autistic steering group across six discussion groups, this was then completed by 200 autistic adults.

Sarah continues: "We know from our research that autistic people feel that their voices don't get heard which is why we wanted to ensure they were the heart of this research. They were able to use their own, often difficult, experience of mental health to shape the survey, ensuring we were asking the right questions in the right way. We found overwhelmingly that autistic people want and need mental health support but that is just isn't available in a way that is accessible to them,

something that we feel needs to be urgently addressed."

More information: Louise Camm-Crosbie et al. 'People like me don't get support': Autistic adults' experiences of support and treatment for mental health difficulties, self-injury and suicidality, *Autism* (2018).

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