

# UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION IN AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS: SYMPTOMS, ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT

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# AGENDA

Depression in Neurotypical Youth

Depression in Autistic Youth

Treatment of Depression in Autistic Youth

Assessment of Depression in Autistic Youth

# Introduction

- Co-occurring conditions common in autism
- Depression prevalence varies widely (12-65%)
- Overlap with ASD traits
- Diagnostic overshadowing
- Need for treatment
- Need for proper assessment



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◦ **DEPRESSION IN**  
◦ **NEUROTYPICAL YOUTH** +  
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# SYMPTOMS IN NEUROTYPICAL CHILDREN



# SYMPTOMS IN NEUROTYPICAL ADOLESCENTS



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# DEPRESSION IN AUTISTIC YOUTH



# Depression in Autistic Youth

- Historically couldn't make double diagnosis-ASD still primary
- Comorbidities very common in ASD-up to 79% when intellectual disability included
- No established screening measures due to significant overlap
- Depression in neurotypical kids 2-8%, kids with ASD 12%
- No sex differences
- Risk factors: greater IQ, older age, stressful life events, and lower symptoms
- Very difficult to assess in higher needs: self-injurious and aggressive behaviour, loss of self-care skills, increased obsessions and stereotypies
- Lower needs: loss of appetite, loss of interest, increased irritability
- Problems with looking at only changes in behaviour

# TREATMENT OF DEPRESSION IN AUTISTIC YOUTH

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# TREATMENT FOR LOWER SUPPORT NEEDS



# TREATMENT FOR HIGHER SUPPORT NEEDS



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# ASSESSMENT OF DEPRESSION IN AUTISTIC YOUTH

# Assessment of Depression in Autistic Youth

- Wide range of prevalence across studies (12-65%)
- Diagnostic overshadowing
- Use measures designed for neurotypical youth
- May be overestimating or underestimating
- Not appropriate for minimally speaking
- Depression may look very different, but we don't really know



# Our Depression Measure

- 54 questions taken from DSM-5 and previous descriptions of symptoms in the literature
- Asking both parents and adolescents (if verbal)
- Has symptom been a problem in last two weeks (never, sometimes, often, almost always)?
- Don't ask inappropriate questions for verbal level
- What do you think the symptom is due to (autism, ADHD, depression, anxiety, puberty, COVID, other)?
- Has this symptom ever been a problem in the past?
- Ask parents if there is anything that we have missed
- Included regression of skills
- Will do 'fancy statistics'

# SUMMARY

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- Depression is a serious problem in autistic youth.
- May be difficult to detect- change in behaviour may indicate, but doesn't pick up chronic depression.
- Need much more research on treatment.
- Need measure of depression in autistic youth.



# THANK YOU

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<https://www.queensu.ca/psychology/autism-spectrum-disorder-studies>



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