

Understanding Trauma in Autism: The Importance of Trauma-Informed Care

Unfortunately, it's not uncommon for individuals to experience trauma in their lifetimes. Trauma can occur in many forms, including direct experience of traumatic events, witnessing the event, or hearing about it from others. For autistic individuals, trauma adds an additional layer of complexity that can exacerbate challenging symptoms and behaviors. Understanding the intersection between trauma and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is crucial in providing effective support. This is where Trauma-Informed Care comes into play, offering a lens through which caregivers and professionals can better assist individuals with autism.

First, what is trauma?

Trauma is an emotional, psychological, or physical response to an event perceived as harmful or life-threatening. These experiences can affect a person's ability to function in daily life and maintain healthy relationships. One of the most well-known and common mental health conditions associated with trauma is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Individuals with PTSD may experience intense, distressing thoughts and emotions related to their trauma long after the event has passed. They might relive the experience through flashbacks or nightmares, feel persistent fear, sadness, or anger, or struggle with feelings of detachment from others. Common symptoms also include avoiding reminders of the trauma and having strong emotional reactions to everyday stimuli, such as loud noises or unexpected touches.



It's important to remember that not all difficult experiences lead to trauma, and not everyone who experiences trauma develops PTSD. Additionally, a formal PTSD diagnosis is not required for someone to experience trauma-related symptoms or to benefit from trauma-informed care.

Intrusion Symptoms	Avoidance Symptoms	Negative Effects on Cognition and Mood	Altered Arousal and Reactivity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Recurrent intrusive memories•Nightmares•Flashbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Avoiding thoughts and feelings from the event•Avoiding reminders of the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Distorted thoughts•Negative beliefs about oneself or the world•Persistent feelings of fear, guilt, or shame	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Difficulty sleeping•Irritability•Feeling 'on edge' or extra watchful

Common symptoms of trauma

How Trauma Impacts Autistic Individuals

The impact of trauma on individuals with ASD can be both physical and psychological. Physically, trauma can result in symptoms such as chronic pain, sleep disturbances, or gastrointestinal issues. These health issues may be exacerbated by the emotional stress that comes from living in a state of hyperarousal due to trauma.

The psychological effects of trauma may show up as heightened anxiety, difficulty with emotional regulation, and an increased sense of isolation. Trauma may worsen any pre-existing challenges associated with an individual's ASD, such as difficulty with communication and sensory sensitivities.

Trauma can also have lasting effects on an individual's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. Autistic individuals may become more withdrawn, avoiding social interactions, or reacting with aggression or fear to people or situations that remind them of the trauma. These behavioral changes can further isolate the individual, leading to a cycle of distress and social disengagement.

Autistic Individuals Are More Vulnerable to Trauma

Autistic individuals across the spectrum are particularly vulnerable to trauma for a variety of reasons. First, they may experience heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli, meaning that events that may seem neutral or minor to neurotypical individuals may feel overwhelming and traumatic for someone with ASD. The sensory overload that many individuals with ASD experience in everyday environments can also make them more sensitive to stressors. For example, hearing a loud siren unexpectedly in the mall may lead the individual to avoid going to that mall in the future.

People with ASD also experience difficulties with social interactions and understanding social cues. This lack of understanding may make them more susceptible to abuse or exploitation. They may not recognize the signs of danger or may be more trusting of others, which can put them at risk for harmful situations. For example, an autistic individual may struggle to apply safety rules

in a new or unfamiliar situation and engage in social interaction with a stranger who may harm them.

Trauma is Often Overlooked in Autistic Individuals

Trauma in autistic individuals is often missed by healthcare providers. Traumatic experiences may be overlooked or minimized for a variety of reasons. Individuals with ASD who struggle with communication may struggle to express their feelings or report traumatic experiences. Some autistic individuals, particularly those who are non-speaking, may be unable to report a traumatic experience at all.

In addition, many symptoms resulting from trauma, such as avoidance, heightened or dulled emotions, and withdrawal from social situations, are common in autism to begin with, and caregivers, families and clinicians may not appreciate that something additional is going on. For example, if an autistic patient is seeing a doctor for the first time to understand increased agitation, intrusive thoughts, and difficulty sleeping, the doctor may attribute these symptoms to ASD rather than seek to understand other relevant information, such as whether the individual has experienced trauma. The fact that many individuals with autism also carry additional diagnoses, such as anxiety or depression, which makes trauma identification and intervention even more challenging.

Supporting Loved Ones with Autism and Trauma

Trauma-Informed Care is an approach that focuses on creating a safe environment for individuals by recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma, integrating trauma awareness into care practices, and avoiding re-traumatization. Trauma-informed care, first coined by Harris and Fallot in 2001, shifts the mindset of care from assuming there is something “wrong” with the individual to seeking to understand what may have occurred that led to the current symptoms.

Here are several ways to support a loved one with ASD and trauma:

- **Ask Direct Questions:** Since individuals with ASD may have difficulty expressing themselves verbally or emotionally, it is crucial to ask direct and clear questions. Avoid making assumptions and allow time and space for individuals to respond in their own way. Examples of questions include: “Did someone come into your personal space?” “Did something scary happen to you?” “You seem worried, what is on your mind?” Offering individualized supports for communication is always important. This might include using visuals and social stories, incorporating appropriate trauma-informed vocabulary on an individual’s AAC device, and/or utilizing one’s preferred topics, phrases, or videos to help with communication.
- **Create a Safe Space:** Provide a predictable, structured environment that minimizes sensory overload. Predictability can be soothing and maintaining routine is essential for individuals with ASD. Consider reducing bright lights, loud noises, or other sensory stimuli that may be triggering.

- **Find Support:** Professional support from therapists experienced in both trauma and autism is essential. Working with someone who understands both conditions can help families and caregivers navigate the complexities of treatment. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to trauma treatment in individuals with ASD, and a tailored, flexible plan is key. Because it may be difficult to find one expert in autism and trauma, a team approach may be helpful.
- **Offer Emotional Validation:** Even if the trauma doesn't seem to make sense to others, it's important to validate the person's feelings. Acknowledge that what they experienced was difficult and offer comfort in whatever form they can accept.
- **Encourage Coping Mechanisms:** Teach coping strategies, such as deep breathing, sensory tools, or calming activities, that can help manage anxiety and emotional dysregulation. Encourage the use of these techniques before overwhelming emotions take hold.

Recognizing the impact of trauma on autistic individuals is essential in providing the right support and care. Because trauma can manifest in ways that overlap with autism traits, it is often overlooked, leaving individuals without the help they need. By adopting a trauma-informed approach, caregivers, educators, and healthcare providers can create environments that foster safety, trust, and healing. Understanding each individual's unique experiences and challenges is key to offering effective interventions and support. With increased awareness, tailored strategies, and access to appropriate resources, we can empower autistic individuals to navigate trauma and thrive in their daily lives.

Resources for Individuals and Families

Trauma-informed care resources can be vital in supporting individuals with ASD who have experienced trauma. Here are some resources that may be helpful:

Relevant Books:

Walking the Tiger: Healing Trauma by Peter Levine – This book explains the long-term effects of trauma on the body and mind, offering insight into how trauma impacts physical and emotional health.

Unmasking Autism by Devon Price, PhD – A book discussing the subtleties of the autistic experience, written by an autistic psychologist.

Informational Website:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org) – Provides a wealth of information on trauma and its effects on different populations, including those with autism.

Groups and Organizations:

The Autism Society (www.autism-society.org) – A national organization that advocates for individuals with autism and provides resources for families.

About the Author

Lexie Seigies, PsyD received her Doctorate in School and Clinical Psychology from Pace University and completed her predoctoral internship at Cambridge Health Alliance/Harvard Medical School. She is a clinical postdoctoral fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School at the Lurie Center for Autism, where she provides assessment, therapy, and supportive services to individuals on the autism spectrum across the lifespan and their families.