

Disability Awareness:

Autism, Anxiety, and ADHD

Amber Kuszak, Psy.D.
Licensed Clinical Psychologist

Introduction to Autism, Anxiety, and ADHD

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
 - Both a neurological and developmental disorder
 - Lifelong condition
 - Affects how a person learns, interacts with others, and behaves
- Anxiety
 - Can present in many forms
 - Temporary anxiety versus persistent anxiety
 - Impairs functioning and reduces quality of life
- Attention-deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
 - Lifespan disorder
 - Involves a pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity
 - Often impacts social and academic/occupational functioning.

Features of Autism

Social interaction and communication challenges

- Difficulty understanding another person's thoughts and feelings
 - Such as another person's point of view
- Problems reading the emotions of others
 - Trouble understanding facial expressions and body language
- Difficulty in social situations
 - Making/maintaining friendships
 - Avoiding eye contact
 - Not understanding social "rules"
 - Standing/sitting too close to other people
- Difficulty communicating
 - Seeming blunt, rude, and/or not interested in what another person has to say
 - Finding it hard to express feelings
 - Difficulty making conversation
 - Lack of inflection when speaking
- Taking things literally
 - Difficulty understanding sarcasm or idioms

Features of Autism (cont'd)

Behavioral challenges

- Inflexible/repetitive thought and behavioral patterns
 - Having the same routine every day
 - High anxiety if it changes
 - The need to arrange items in a specific order
 - Liking to plan things carefully before doing them
 - Engaging in frequent monologues on the same subject(s)
 - Making involuntary noises
 - Such as repetitive throat clearing or clicking sounds
- Having a very keen interest in certain subjects or activities
- Experiencing sensory overload
 - Noticing (and being bothered by) small details, patterns, smells or sounds that others do not notice or are not bothered by

Features of Anxiety: Physical

- Faster, irregular, or more noticeable heartbeat
- Feeling lightheaded and/or dizzy
- Headaches
- Chest pain/discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Feeling hot or sweating/chills
- Breathlessness
- Shaking/trembling
- Muscle tension
 - Tightening in shoulders, neck, and/or back is common

Features of Anxiety: Mental

- Feeling tense or nervous
- Worrying about the past or future
- Worry about trying new things
- Difficulty controlling the worry/having obsessive thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
- Fear of the worst happening (catastrophizing)
 - What if...?

Features of Anxiety: Behavioral

- Being unable to enjoy leisure time
- Difficulty looking after oneself
- Struggling to form/maintain relationships
- Tearfulness
- Sleep disturbance
 - Difficulty falling or staying asleep, restlessness, unsatisfying sleep
- Avoiding places and situations that create anxiety
- Compulsive behavior
 - Such as constantly checking things

Features of ADHD: Inattention

- Makes careless mistakes and fails to give close attention to details
- Poor follow-through on instructions and failure to finish tasks/duties
 - Begins a task, but quickly loses focus
 - Beginning new tasks before completing old ones
- Avoiding, disliking, or being reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort
- Poor organizational skills
 - Difficulty managing sequential tasks
 - Messy, disorganized work
- Difficulty with focus and prioritizing
- Frequently loses or misplaces items
 - Keys, phone, paperwork, tools, badge
- Forgetfulness

Features of ADHD: Hyperactivity and Impulsivity

- Feeling restless or on edge
 - Fidgeting with or tapping of hands or feet
 - Frequent movement in seat
- Difficulty keeping quiet and speaking out of turn
- Interrupting or intruding on others
 - Finishing others' sentences
 - Use of others' possessions without asking or receiving permission
- Impatience

How do these features present in the workplace?

Attention to detail:

- Autism: Attention to detail determined by level of interest or knowledge about the topic
- Anxiety: Excessive attention to detail
- ADHD: Lack of attention

Task completion:

- Autism: Will plan for task and then will complete task according to same sequence of steps each time
- Anxiety: Difficulty completing tasks on time due to perfectionism or overwhelm
- ADHD: Move from task to task due to boredom or mental demand

How do these features present in the workplace?

Communication:

- Autism: Likely to be blunt, have difficulty with small talk, or ask repetitive questions
- Anxiety: Likely to engage in nervous chatter or laugh nervously due to being uncomfortable
- ADHD: Likely to be talkative, interrupt others, and derail from main topic

Interaction:

- Autism: Likely to work better alone and prefer independent tasks
- Anxiety: May have difficulty relying on or collaborating with others
- ADHD: May enjoy working with others and participating in multiple projects with multiple staff members

How do these features present in the workplace?

Workspace:

- Autism: Items have designated location and do not get placed elsewhere
- Anxiety: Items are labeled, color-coded, and organized
- ADHD: Items are not organized or placed in designated place after use; workspace is untidy

Work Environment:

- Autism: Quiet workspace is desired
- Anxiety: Quiet, calming workspace is desired—soothing music or white noise machine
- ADHD: Quiet workspace needed for some tasks and more lively workspace with music or chatter is needed for other tasks

Stereotypes, Biases, Myths

- “People with mental illness are incompetent.”
- “People with autism are weird and awkward. They don’t want to be around people. They are less likeable than other people. They can’t handle change.”
- “People with anxiety are weak.”
- “People with ADHD are lazy and unproductive.”

Support from Employers

When a staff member presents with autism:

- Offer a quiet, private working place or a “do not disturb” sign that individuals can use when they require intense concentration.
- Minimize noise, lights, and visual disturbances.
 - Use desk partitions, low lights, provide noise-canceling headphones/earbuds.
- Permit individuals to work from home or change their working hours to quiet times.
 - To reduce distraction and stress
- Provide clear and specific information and instructions on completing work tasks.
 - To avoid any ambiguity or confusion
- Give written rather than verbal instructions.
- Offer help with planning tasks, as needed.
 - To improve time management and concentration

Support from Employers (cont'd)

When a staff member presents with anxiety:

- Set small targets that are easily achievable within the process of completing a larger task.
- Slowly build up the amount of time that an individual spends in worry-inducing situations.
 - In an effort to gradually reduce anxiety
- Minimize anxiety by increasing successful predictability.
- Provide clear and timely feedback on projects, tasks, etc.
- Encourage the individual to take short breaks.
 - To engage in meditation, deep breathing, stretching, mindfulness
- Encourage healthy boundaries between work and personal life.
 - Such as leaving work on time, not taking work home

Support from Employers (cont'd)

When a staff member presents with ADHD:

- Allow individual to take short breaks throughout the day when they lose focus or become distracted.
- Provide one task at a time rather than expecting the individual to multitask.
- Divide large assignments into several small tasks.
 - Set multiple deadlines
- Set a timer/alarm for a window of time for completing a task.
- Provide a checklist of assignments.
- Provide an electronic or hardcopy organizer and train the individual on how to use it effectively.
- Use a wall calendar to emphasize due dates.
- Develop a color-coded system.
 - Each color represents a task, event, or level of importance

I Have a Disability. What are My Next Steps?

- Speak with your employer about disability accommodations or needed supports.
- Seek Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services, if available.
- Seek mental health services such as individual therapy or medication.

What can I do as a supervisor/ manager?

- Foster a supportive and collaborative environment where each staff member's unique skills and abilities can be emphasized and celebrated.
- Encourage open communication by staff members about diagnosis and areas of difficulty.
- Provide periodic sensitivity and competency trainings for all staff.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Anxiety disorders. In *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.).
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Neurodevelopmental disorders. In *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed., text rev.).
- Fontenot, S. (2021, February 5). Study: Reducing Biases About Autism May Increase Social Inclusion. Retrieved from <https://news.utdallas.edu/health-medicine/autism-biases-study-2021/>
- Gonzales, M. (2022, April 15). What life is like for autistic workers. Retrieved from: <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/what-life-is-like-for-autistic-workers.aspx>
- Leonard, J. & Sharon, A. (2021, October 31). Everything you need to know about autism in adults. Retrieved from: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/326841>
- National Health Service. (2019, April 18). Signs of autism in adults. Retrieved from: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/signs/adults/>

References (cont'd)

- National Health Service. (2019, October 15). Anxiety, fear and panic. Retrieved from: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/anxiety-fear-panic/>
- National Health Service. (2021, December 24). Symptoms-Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Retrieved from: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/symptoms/>
- Robbins, R., & Ratajczak-Mrozek, M. (Reviewing Editor) (2017) The untapped potential of the ADHD employee in the workplace. *Cogent Business & Management*, 4(1), doi: 10.1080/23311975.2016.1271384
- Sherrell, Z. (2021, August 24). What to know about autism discrimination in the workplace. Retrieved from: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/autism-discrimination-in-the-workplace>



Questions?