

# 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.

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Questions?