# Trauma and Autism

## Introduction

In addition to universal traumas, such as emotional or sexual abuse or neglect, autistic people* uniquely experience collective trauma related to their identity and neurodiversity.

## Examples

- Trauma related to daily life in neurotypical world. EG: sensory (lighting, sounds, etc.), routine disruption
- Increased risk for Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) - caregiver stress may be a factor (Hoover & Kauffman, 2018)
- Increased risk of social victimization/traumatic bullying (Hoover & Kauffman, 2018)
- Increased risk of traumatic interactions with police (Salamon, 2018)

## Recognizing Trauma

Overlap in diagnostic criteria between PTSD and autism can lead to under diagnosis or overshadowing of PTSD (Kildahl et al., 2020).

Research suggests possible differences in presentation of PTSD among autistic people; more research is needed (Gravitz, 2018).

Autistic people who have experienced trauma may experience difficulty/inability to communicate that trauma verbally.

## Intersectionality Matters

Autistic people at increased risk for dangerous or deathly interactions with police. For autistic people of color, this threat is multiplied.

Black autistic students are suspended at higher rates compared to white autistic students (Krezmien et al., 2017; USGAO, 2018). Suspension is considered harmful and could be a traumatic change of routine.

## Research

There is a dearth of research at the intersection of trauma and autism. Further research that centers the voices and experiences of autistic people is needed.

---

*This document uses identity-first language but recognizes that some people prefer person-first language and both are equally valid.*
## Interventions

### Interactive Trauma Scale

The Interactive Trauma Scale (ITS) prototype is an interactive self-report trauma assessment app designed specifically for autistic children. Early research suggests that the ITS is an effective self-report trauma measure for autistic children. Further research is needed (Hoover & Romero, 2019).

### Trauma-Focused CBT (TF-CBT)

TF-CBT has shown to be effective with autistic individuals. Suggested modifications include: use of simple, concrete language, visual activity schedules and visual aids, routine for gradual exposure, taking sensory needs into account, and external rewards (Earl et al., 2017).

### Community Training

Trainings for caregivers, school personnel, police officers, and other community members help to increase knowledge and reduce the potential for traumatic events for autistic people (e.g., suspensions). More research is needed on how trainings translate to real-world reductions in trauma (Alexiou, 2020).

### Concurrent Trauma Assessments

Some diagnosticians screen for trauma during ASD screenings, but most refer out for more in-depth trauma assessments. Barriers include individual knowledge and clinic resources (Ahlers, 2020). Researchers recommend incorporating trauma screening into more community-based ASD services (Kildahl et al., 2020).

## Takeaways

- Reflect on neurotypical bias of “typical” trauma; trust the person’s lived experiences
- Consider intersectionality
- Assess for caregiver stress and ACES risk
- Advocate for universal, ongoing trauma screenings
- Recognize dearth of evidence-based interventions at the intersection of trauma and autism; be flexible in modifying interventions
Resources for Further Learning

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: The Road to Recovery training
- Trauma-Informed Lens Podcast: Trauma & Autism
- Recognizing and Treating Trauma-Related Symptoms in Children and Adolescents with Autism
- Trauma and Autism Spectrum Reference Guide, University of Washington
- Autistic Global Initiative’s Trauma Warriors documentary
- Trauma, Autism, and Neurodevelopmental Disorders
- TF-CBT Training

References


