



Providing Trauma Informed Care to Autistic Adults



Background. Autism-related services have traditionally focused on the needs of young children. However, recent years have produced a growing awareness of the trauma experienced by Autistic adults and ways that providers can better offer trauma informed care to this marginalized population that experiences high levels of exclusion and disdain. There is also growing awareness of the fact that Autistic people can have vastly differing strengths and support needs. In providing trauma informed care to Autistic people, it is also important to be aware of the ways in which the medical-model of disability has been especially harmful to Autistic individuals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). An understanding of the complex ways in which racism, ableism, misogyny, and transphobia impact a person's experience of trauma must also inform their care. It is always important to remember that Autistic people are experts in their own experience and that the role of helping professionals is to support them in making their own decisions.

Establish a Safe Environment (Safety).

- Autistic people experience high rates of abuse, both as children and as adults ([Griffiths & Allison et al., 2019](#)), with the likely outcomes of developing difficulties in terms of trust and ease of forming relationships ([Trauma Informed Oregon, 2020](#)). BIPOC Autistic people are especially likely to have experienced violence and abuse, including police violence ([Hilton, 2017](#)), and may have additional barriers obtaining a diagnosis or other resources of support ([Jo & Schieve et al., 2015](#)). As a result, they may want additional support to gain access to services.
- BIPOC Autistic individuals may be misinterpreted as dangerous when they stim or express their emotions loudly. It is important to allow them space to express themselves and not call the police, which could put them in danger.
- Autistic women can have a harder time getting a diagnosis as stereotypes portray Autistic people as being men. ([Green & Travers et al., 2019](#)). Autistic women may also want to have help in getting access to a diagnosis and other services.
- Autistic people are several times more likely than the general population to be transgender or gender diverse ([Warrier & Greenberg et al., 2020](#)). Autistic transgender people may have experienced barriers to receiving gender-affirming services and may want to have support in getting the services they need ([Strang & Powers et al., 2018](#)).
- Some Autistic people have sensory triggers with things like perfumes, bright lights, and any of the other five senses. Checking in with a person about their own sensory needs and making changes when possible can help to establish trust.
- Autistic people may prefer not to make or hold eye-contact when communicating or may communicate with assistive devices, such as a typing-to-speech generator. Autistic people often benefit from language that is specific, descriptive, and literal rather than general, cursory, and figurative.
- Autistic people may be afraid of being judged and rejected for being themselves and may feel like they need to act a certain way to be accepted (masking). Allowing them to stim (self-soothe), and allowing full autonomy in their preferences for communication, including utilizing assistive devices such as a tablet or letter board is essential to developing trust ([Gratton, 2020](#); [corbin, 2020](#)).

Emphasize Understanding (Power).

- Promoting autonomy and agency (not forcing them to do things) is very important when providing service to Autistic people as many are survivors of violence and abuse, which often involves loss of agency ([SAMHSA, 2014](#)). This may be especially important for Autistic people who have experienced trauma from forced compliance training such as Applied Behavior Analysis ([Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019](#)).
- As part of helping Autistic people to heal from abuse, including the trauma of social exclusion, it is also important to respect an Autistic person's need for accommodations and that it is okay for them to be different from non-Autistic

people while also avoiding talking down to Autistic people. Allowing individuals the opportunity to share accommodation needs ahead of time may be helpful. They may also want to find a therapist who is knowledgeable about autism and trauma.

- Many Autistic people prefer identity-first language (“Autistic person” rather than “person with autism” (Identity-First Autistic, 2016)) but it is important to honor the language that each person prefers to use.
- Many Autistic people are transgender or gender diverse (Stagg & Vincent, 2019), and it is important to respect individuals’ pronouns and preferences for gender expression (GLSEN, n. d.). It is also important to respect an Autistic person’s preferences regarding choice of symbols to represent Autism. For instance, many Autistic people find the puzzle piece stigmatizing (or even a form of hate speech) and instead prefer symbols such as the neurodiversity infinity loop displayed on the front page on this TIP (Jessop, 2019).
- Some Autistic people may be accompanied by support persons (such as family or professional staff). It is important to respect an individual’s need to use supporters while also making sure that they retain agency in decision making processes.
- Some Autistic people may need more time to understand information or may need information presented in a different way to be more accessible. For instance, they may need images or plain language. They may also need to have information ahead of time in order to know what to expect. Some Autistic people also use routines to help them to know what to expect and it is important to avoid disrupting routines.

Reinforce Self-Worth (Value).

- Autistic people who have been shamed for being Autistic may have difficulty advocating for their needs and may experience internalized oppression. Encouraging them to set boundaries and express their needs while also mirroring and expressing empathy for them may be helpful for developing skills in self-care.
- Many Autistic people experience co-occurring mental and physical health conditions and unmet healthcare needs (Griffiths & Allison et al., 2019; Raymaker & McDonald et al., 2016), homelessness (Kargas & Harley et al., 2019), and suicide attempts (Pelton & Crawford et al., 2020). In helping Autistic people connect to services it is important to let them know what all their options are (including traditional and alternative medicine) and to respect their choices. Connecting Autistic people to other Autistic people and the neurodiversity movement may also help them develop advocacy skills, find community, and foster resilience (Kapp, 2019).
- BIPOC Autistic people may particularly be interested in forming connections with other BIPOC Autistic people who understand their experiences of racism and ableism (Brown, 2020).
- Many Autistic people have strong passions and interests. Encouraging them to pursue those interests may be helpful for developing a sense of meaning and purpose.
- Many Autistic people experience barriers to employment and have difficulty finding work environments that are accepting (Black & Mahdi et al., 2020). Helping Autistic people to build connections with accepting employers and pursue work that is meaningful to them may be helpful.

Summary

Establish Safety. Help Autistic people to feel comfortable being themselves.

Emphasize Power. Respect an Autistic person’s autonomy and individual accommodation needs.

Reinforce Value. Help Autistic people to pursue the things that are meaningful to them.

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