

Autism and Mental Health:

What we know now

TRAINING SUMMARY:

In recent years the autism community has benefitted from a growing awareness of the importance of promoting sound mental health, and of the challenges posed by various forms of mental illness or mental “disorders” in the lives of people on the spectrum. Autism was originally believed to represent a form of schizophrenia or related psychosis; it took many years to fully differentiate autism from mental illness, after which many parents, self-advocates and professionals were understandably reluctant to revisit the question of mental illness in relation to autism. However, we now know that this question can be very productive. Although autism itself is not a mental illness, people with autism are susceptible to mental illnesses and disorders of both hereditary and environmental origins. The old myth that a lack of social and emotional capacity protected them from psychological harm has been thoroughly discredited, and is being replaced with an emphasis on supporting the mental health and emotional development of people on the spectrum. Understanding the relationship of autism to several frequently co-occurring conditions, in particular anxiety and depression, obsessions and compulsions, “mood disorders,” and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, can suggest more compassionate and nuanced approaches that take us beyond “trait lists” and “behaviors” to an engagement with the individual’s unique experiences and quality of life.

TRAINING GOAL:

The goal of this training is for parents, professionals, and community members to understand the nature, prevalence, and impact of anxiety in the lives of people with autism; to explore the types of environmental modifications, body awareness activities, accommodations, and supports that can alleviate anxiety; and to recognize potentially beneficial effects of vigilant behavior.

TRAINING OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of the training are for the participants to:

1. Identify the signs and symptoms of anxiety, and explore the experience of anxiety in their own lives and through the words of self-advocates with autism
2. Understand the “brain basis” of anxiety, and its connection with the sensory and motor challenges associated with the autism spectrum
3. Recognize the environmental factors that can trigger and exacerbate anxiety, and consider practical strategies to reduce their impact
4. Consider a wide range of supports and strategies that can help people on the spectrum become more self-aware and resilient in the face of anxiety
5. Explore socially valued activities that respect and use the positive aspects of vigilant behavior to achieve desired goals.

METHODS TO ACHIEVE OBJECTIVES:

Training content can be delivered via webinar incorporating lecture and discussion (app. 1½ hours). This training also can be delivered in person in a traditional training or classroom setting incorporating lecture, videos, discussion, and interactive group exercises (2-3 hours).

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS NEEDED:

PowerPoint

Copies of the non-annotated PowerPoint are participant handouts.
Annotated PowerPoint is Trainer's Guide.