

Supporting Autistic People with Eating Disorders

What We Found

One pathway in NHS England has promising results for autistic patients. It was coproduced with patients, and involves a multi-disciplinary clinical team.

One clinical pathway has been specially developed to address eating disorders in autistic patients: the 'PEACE pathway'. Preliminary evidence suggests this is beneficial, in terms of cost-savings and better treatment outcomes too. The pathway:

- Was co-created with autistic patients and their carers as well as a multi-disciplinary clinical team
- Includes "weekly huddles" to bring together the diverse clinical team
- Reduced cost-per-year for the service by about £275,000
- Resulted in a reduction of hospital admission time for autistic patients from 19 to 13 weeks on average

Other treatments have been studied in people who have an eating disorders and elevated autism trait scores. Two cognitive therapies (*cognitive remediation therapy*, CRT and *cognitive remediation and emotion skills training*, CREST) were shown to benefit groups with anorexia and high autism traits. However these benefits only occurred in individual versions of these therapies, and not in group settings.

Sensory wellbeing workshops had a range of benefits for people with low autistic traits in terms of awareness of personal sensory wellbeing, strategies to enhance sensory wellbeing and confidence managing sensory wellbeing. For patients with higher autistic traits, only confidence improved, but that might have been because awareness and strategies were already high.

A single small study looked at the effect of oxytocin nasal spray, but it didn't record clinical effects. Instead the researchers measured attention to images related to eating, weight and body-shape.

What We Suggest

There's a real shortage of bespoke treatments for autistic patients with eating disorders, but evidence suggests one-to-one models will be more effective than group session.

Few treatments are available to target eating disorders in patients who are autistic. There is a paucity of good quality evidence to support interventions for this population. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of interventions, prioritising identification of individuals with a diagnosis of autism and an eating disorder, rather than relying on trait measures.

The pattern of findings across studies suggests that autistic patients may benefit from

- individual format therapies rather than group sessions
- being involved in designing new clinical pathways
- multi-disciplinary team input

Investigating eating disorders other than anorexia nervosa is important as the research focuses almost exclusively on this single eating disorder type.

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What We Did

We conducted a systematic review, finding just nine relevant papers which provided information on autism-specific treatments for eating disorders

This briefing is based on an undergraduate student project conducted in 2022. Studies published between 1994 and February 2022 were identified through a systematic search of four electronic databases of published research.

We searched for papers reporting on any classified eating disorder (anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating and others) with either an autistic sample or measurement of autism traits in a general sample.

We started with 2800 potential papers but narrowed this down to just 9 relevant papers for our review. One took place in South Korea and the others were all in the UK. Three of the papers were all about one specific clinical service in England.

Since the number of papers was small, we analysed their findings narratively. In addition, most of the papers weren't analysing effectiveness of a treatment – i.e. whether it works - but instead talking about development or feasibility of a new treatment option.

Why We Did It

Autistic people have relatively high rates of eating disorders, but standard treatments don't seem to work well for them.

Research considering a link between eating disorders and autism shows considerable overlap, with up to 23% of people with eating disorders potentially also being autistic [1].

Co-occurrence is associated with worse treatment outcomes, suggesting that standard eating disorder treatment does not meet the needs of autistic people with eating disorders. Currently, there are no clinical guidelines for management of this population. Also autistic people, their parents and clinicians alike have all reported dissatisfaction with current treatments, highlighting barriers to healthcare, and a lack of confidence in clinicians [2-4].

We aimed to identify:

- treatments available for autistic people with an eating disorder
- any treatments with potential for adaptation to address the needs of autistic people
- any evidence to suggest these treatments are effective

Since this review was conducted, a new research network has been created specifically to address research gaps, via co-production, in this area:

<https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/projects/enhancing-eating-disorder-research-networks-the-eating-disorders->

Thank you

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3. Kinnaird E, Norton C, Tchanturia K. Clinicians' views on working with anorexia nervosa and autism spectrum disorder comorbidity: a qualitative study. *BMC Psychiatry.* 2017;17(1):292.
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