

“Autistic adults are in silent crises during the Covid-19 lockdown”

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Previous research in the general population on pandemic outbreaks such as SARS, demonstrates that the short- and long-term effect of the pandemic will have negative implications on individuals and society, often leading to chronic changes. The COVID-19 outbreak has exposed most individuals to an extraordinary stressful situation due to the unknown duration of restrictions, temporary closure of services, and unclear governmental guidelines/advice. For those with additional needs or pre-existing mental health diagnosis, this situation has the potential to cause considerable harm to both physical and mental health through lack of support. Within the UK population, it is currently estimated that one in 100 adults are on the autism spectrum. However, many of these adults do not have record of an autism diagnosis in their medical history, hence are not identifiable by public health database surveys. Autistic adults commonly suffer from co-occurring illnesses/disorders including; depression, mood disorder, anxiety disorders, obsessive–compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, and suicide attempts. Furthermore, over 68% have at least one medical condition including immune system conditions, gastrointestinal problems, sleep disorders, seizures, obesity, hypertension, diabetes and emergent mortality data is of huge concern. The COVID-19 lockdown has shown many problems with the provision of mental and physical health intervention and little consideration has been given to the difficulties faced by autistic adults in adapting quickly to changes, such as the use of online services for medication, therapies, and shopping. During this crisis, the services and elective treatments have been suspended, suggesting that autistic population is in silent crisis with no alternatives or plans put forward.

Understandably, the rapid changes to the lockdown phase did not provide sufficient time to plan. It is now essential that healthcare providers and autism-related-services use autism specific signposting and are providing support as to

how to manage mental health issues as an autistic adult during the pandemic. From personal (second author) and peer experiences autistic people's mental health seems to be neglected and misunderstood, leaving autistic people feeling let down. We have listened to many autistic people and their personal accounts such as this:

“Living under lockdown I am feeling the financial stresses and anxiety at keeping my family safe but the way my PTSD encapsulates the world feels little different other than an increased hyper vigilance. It feels as if the world has caught up with my trauma rather than me emerging from sensing danger and unspecified fear, flashbacks and poor sleep. It has increased my feelings of disassociation and isolation from a lack of face to support.”

Concerns about the current situation has prompted us to conduct a poll on the effect of COVID-19 on autistic individuals during the fourth week of UK lockdown. A total of 583 autistic adults provided their responses within 72 hours of the survey. Over 73 % indicated that the COVID-19 lockdown is having an impact on their mental health. Most of the responders had pre-existing mental health (85%) but it has become worse during the lockdown and moreover 23% autistic people reported that the lockdown has caused new mental health problems. Sleep appears to have become worse with 79% reporting sleep disturbances and feeling anxious more than before (44%). However, lack of healthcare/social support (73%) with some autistic people feeling abandoned (22%) needs to be of priority and carefully managed. We are often reminded that this is not the last pandemic outbreak. Urgent work is required to improve the co-operation between community health services and mental-health-care providers as well as accessibility of different types of provision such as telehealth. We recommend including autistic adults to form collaborative team to strengthen support and treatment pathways becoming interwoven and integral in existing services.

