

Autistic people & Addictions

- A neglected mental health issue



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Emergent Divergence

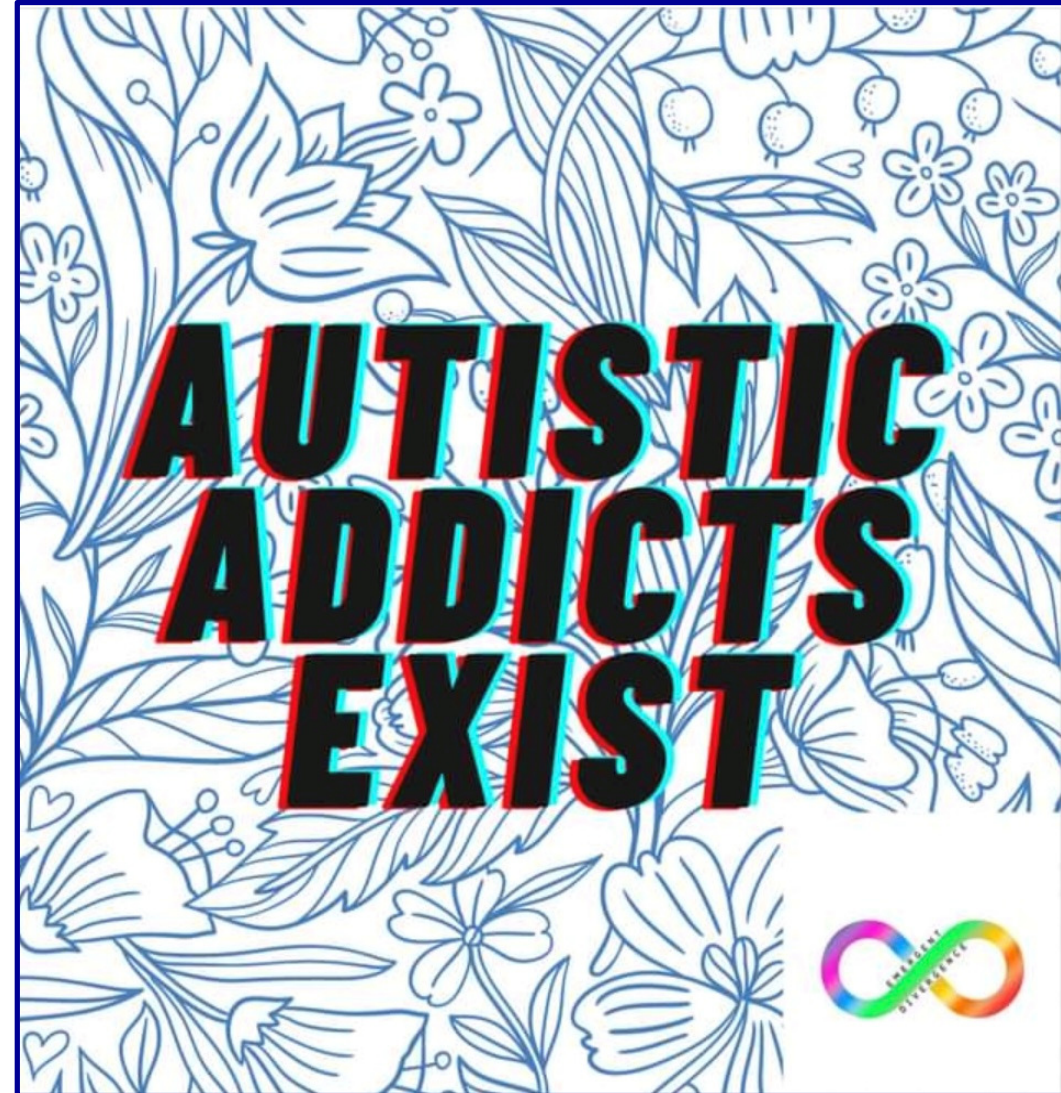
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Autistic addicts exist.

Erasing their existence does great harm to a significantly marginalised group.

We need to keep bringing attention to this important topic.

Remember, addiction is a consequence of trauma and systemic failures.



Possible Addictive Activities

Substance use:

- *Alcohol*
- *Cannabis*
- *Cocaine/Heroin etc*
- *Xanax/Codeine etc*
- *Nicotine*
- *Junk Food?*

Other behaviours:

- *Gambling*
- *Pornography etc*
- *Gaming*
- *Shopping*
- *Work?*
- *Social Media?*

from DSM 5 Criteria for Substance Use Disorder

- 1) **Tolerance**, as defined by either of the following:
 - a) ...need for markedly increased amounts...
 - b) ...markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount...
- 2) **Withdrawal**, as manifested by either of the following:
 - a) ...withdrawal syndrome for the substance.
 - b) ...substance is taken to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- 3) Substance is often taken in larger amounts or over a longer period **than was intended**.
- 4) ... **persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down** or control substance use.
- 5) ... **a lot of time** spent in activities necessary to obtain/use/recover from the substance
- 6) Important social/occupational/recreational **activities given up** / reduced because of substance use.
- 7) ...**use is continued despite persistent physical/psychological problem** ... caused or exacerbated by the substance.

from ICD-11 Gaming Disorder Criteria

A pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behaviour ... online or offline, manifested by:

- 1) **Impaired control** over gaming (onset, frequency, intensity, duration, termination, context)
- 2) **Increasing priority** given to gaming ... takes precedence over other life interests and daily activities;
- 3) Continuation or **escalation** of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences.
- 4) The pattern is of sufficient severity to result in **significant impairment** in ... important areas of functioning.

Goodman proposes this definition of addiction in general

(Goodman, A. (1998) *Sexual Addiction: An Integrated Approach*.)

A condition in which a behavior that can function both to produce pleasure and to relieve painful feelings is employed in a pattern characterised by two key features:

- 1. Recurrent failure to control the behavior, and**
- 2. Continuation of the behavior despite significant harmful consequences.**

= “Compulsive Self-Rewarding”

Common Areas of Harmful Consequences

- **Relationships**
- **Work/Career**
 - **Finances**
- **Physical Health**
- **Mental Health**
- **Moral Character**
- **Legal Difficulties**

Possible Developmental Factors

- Evolved Reward Neurology + “Supernormal Stimuli”
- Availability of Addictive Substances/Activities
- Genetic factors
- Family & Peer-Group Learning Experiences
- Trauma, Abuse, Neglect and other ACEs
- PTSD, Depression, (Social) Anxiety, etc
- Coping Strategies/Choices

Embrace Autism blog

Addiction in autistic people can be induced by **early stress**, thus affecting the proper functioning of the **cortico-striatal dopaminergic regulation systems** (and also the HPA axis).^[6] Less dopamine means more behaviors where dopamine is sought after, and since dopamine is produced among other things by sex, food, and drugs, this also makes autistic people prone to addiction.

Anxiety

About **85%** of autistic people suffer from **anxiety**. Drugs and alcohol allow the person to decrease their anxiety. In addition, the use of drugs or alcohol anesthetizes the person from previous traumas, sexual, physical, financial abuse etc.

Social challenges

Neurochemical alterations may also lie between the connection. Specifically, **oxytocin** is low in autistic people,^[7] and addicts often report being unable to socialize without drugs or alcohol.

During adolescence autistic people often find themselves having **difficulty socializing and fitting in** and as a result, alcohol and drugs can act like a social lubricant. In addition, the marginalized teen may find a way of fitting into the high school culture via engaging in drug use.

It is our belief that those with AS drink for the same reasons as many other problem drinkers and alcoholics, but with a different degree of necessity. Many people report using alcohol to deal with periods of anxiety, but this group drinks to combat high levels of anxiety which haunt them every moment of every day. Socializing is difficult for many people and many use alcohol to aid the process, but for those who have learned that the only way to avoid isolation and loneliness is to engage in a social marketplace which has rules, signs and language that you cannot read and do not understand, alcohol may be the only way to cope. Interestingly, those people with AS who did not drink, when asked how they cope with social situations, said that they simply avoided them. These

Tinsley, M. & Hendrickx, S. (2008)
***Asperger Syndrome & Alcohol:
Drinking to Cope***

Kunreuther, E. & Palmer, A. (2017) *Drinking, Drug Use, and Addiction in the Autism Community*

For instance, when we saw this quote, “It was all very confusing. I remember isolating on the playground, watching all the other children laughing and playing and smiling, and not feeling like I could relate at all. I felt different. I didn’t feel as if I were one of them. Somehow, I thought, I didn’t fit in” (AA 2002, p.281), we speculated that it could easily be attributed to someone with an autism diagnosis looking back at their childhood, even though it came straight from *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Big Book*. As we did our research, we not

Tinsley & Hendrickx, in *Asperger Syndrome & Alcohol: Drinking to Cope*,

**suggest that obstacles in the path of revealing
the nature & extent of the issue may include:**

- Widespread lack of adult autism diagnosis/discovery**
- Fear of disclosing being autistic**
- Fear of disclosing MH issues (which could lead to diagnosis)**
- Active addiction masking autistic difficulties**
- Lack of recognition of having an addiction problem**
- Lack of knowledge of autism by addiction treatment providers**

Kunreuther, E. & Palmer, A. (2017) *Drinking, Drug Use, and Addiction in the Autism Community*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Tinsley, M. & Hendrickx, S. (2008) *Asperger Syndrome & Alcohol: Drinking to Cope*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Kouimtsidis, C. et al (2007) *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in the Treatment of Addiction*. Chichester: Wiley.

Miller, W. & Rollnick, S. (2012) *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*. 3rd ed. New York: Guilford.

<https://emergentdivergence.com/2021/05/26/autism-addiction-and-my-need-for-control/>

<https://thisgreatape.com/2017/07/01/actress/>