



The demand for and adequacy of Commonwealth, state and local government mental health services

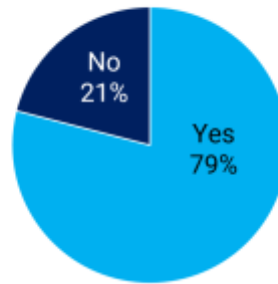
This short presentation is based on the La Trobe University Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) response to the Senate Select Committee on Autism, Term of Reference E (pg. 14). You can find a full copy of the submission [here](#).

This presentation includes information about mental health difficulties including depression and suicidal ideation. Click this [link](#) for a list of services available in Australia.

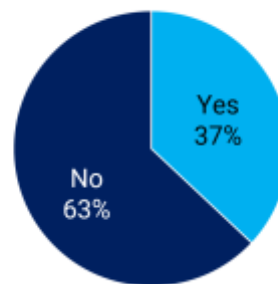
Mental health services for autistic people in Australia

Demand for mental and physical health services is high in autistic populations, as autistic people often also have mental health conditions*.

Currently experiencing anxiety

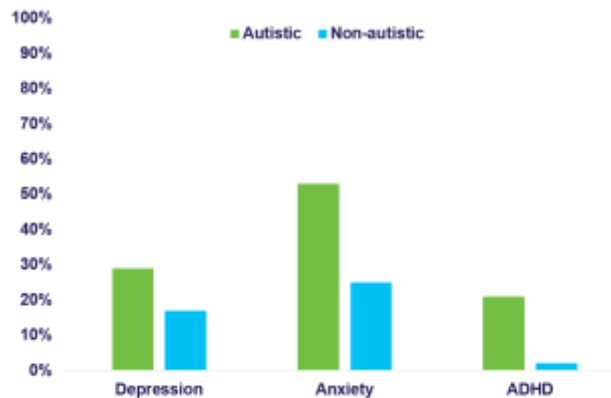


Lifetime experience of depression



**Kent et al (2017), Do et al (2017), Hollocks et al (2019), Thomas et al (2017), Uljarević et al (2019).*

Australian autistic youth are significantly more likely to report having a current diagnosis of depression, anxiety and/or ADHD than non-autistic youth ([SASLA](#) study).



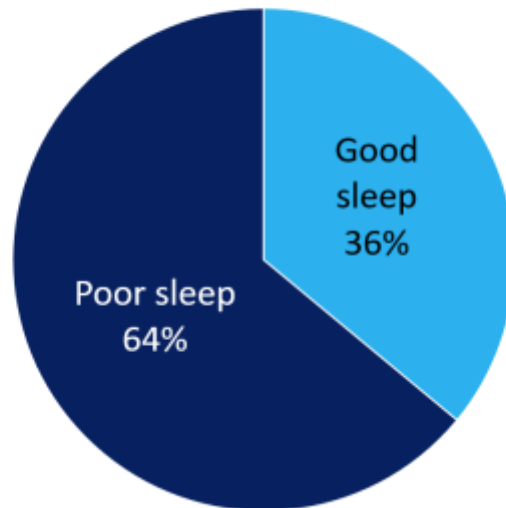
When researchers combined [SASLA](#), [ALSAA](#) and [Dandelion](#) data they found that 38% of autistic adults (aged 15 to 80 years) had clinical levels of both anxiety and depression.

Sleep

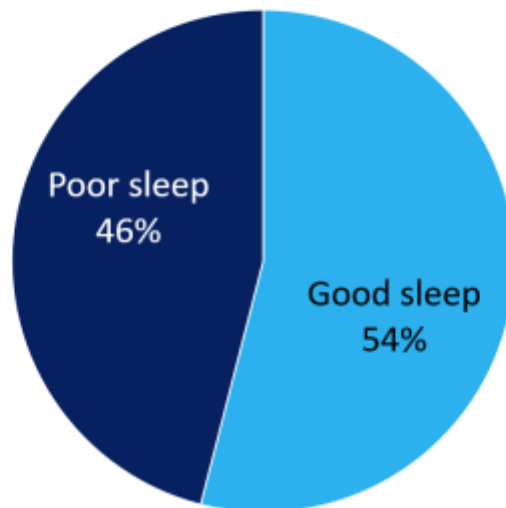
Sleep disturbances are also common in Australian autistic adults (aged 15 to 80 years of age; Joveveska et al, 2020). Poor sleep is associated with mental health problems and rates of unemployment.

You can compare the sleep quality of autistic and non-autistic adults by using the sliding scale on the image below.

Autistic adult sleep quality



Non-autistic adult sleep quality

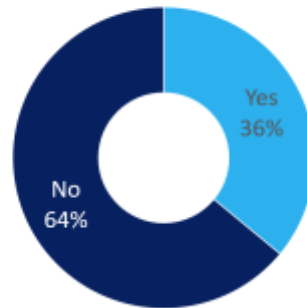


Suicide

Suicide is the leading cause of premature death in autistic people with an average IQ or above. There is a stigma and lack of knowledge about suicide in autistic people.

Australian autistic adults have a high rate of suicidal ideation (thinking about, considering, or planning suicide). Autistic people have great difficulty accessing appropriate mental health supports for suicide prevention.

Currently experiencing suicidal ideation



Mental health - clinical care

A submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System by [AMAZE](#), with content provided by OTARC researchers, identified that:

1. Mental health professionals felt unqualified to work with autistic people,
2. Autism specialists lacked training in mental health treatment.

Most currently available tools for clinicians to diagnose mental health conditions have been designed for non-autistic people and have not been validated* for autistic people.

**checked to ensure that the tool actually measures what it claims to measure*

1. Autistic people may experience symptoms of mental health conditions differently.
2. Autistic people may understand or answer questions in a way that's unfamiliar to clinicians.
3. Clinicians who are unfamiliar with autism may misinterpret symptoms of autism as features of a different clinical condition.
4. Clinicians may ignore or overlook co-occurring conditions, assuming they are part of autism, an issue known as diagnostic overshadowing.

Changes are needed to better support autistic people experiencing mental health difficulties. An international scoping review (including Australian studies) of patient-service provider interactions with

individuals with autism in healthcare settings found six themes to inform improvement of services (Morris et al, 2019).

1. The complexity of working with autistic patients was beyond service providers' usual role.
2. Limited knowledge and resources negatively affected service provision to autistic patients and their families.
3. A lack of training or prior experience with autistic patients was a barrier to care.
4. Communication and collaboration were flagged as relevant to service provision as autistic patients and their families require unique communication and environmental accommodations.
5. A need for information and training to enhance the quality of service provision.
6. The need for care coordination and systemic changes to increase accessibility and efficiency of care.



Recommendations to the Senate Select Committee

1. *Develop and adopt best practice guidelines for clinicians in the identification and treatment of co-occurring conditions in autistic people.*

2. *Educate mental and physical healthcare and service providers about the unique clinical presentation of co-occurring conditions in autism and train them on the appropriate use of validated tools to identify and treat these conditions.*
 3. *Develop and implement evidence-based therapies designed for autistic individuals living with co-occurring conditions such anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and sleep difficulties.*
 4. *Implement changes in service settings to accommodate autistic clients including longer consultation times and reduced wait times (expedited triage of care), reduced sensory stimulation in waiting and testing rooms.*
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Acknowledgements

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) is Australia's first centre dedicated to autism research. It has a strong focus on research translation through the development of evidence-based tools, and collaborates with other autism research centres and institutes both in Australia and internationally.

OTARC is situated in the School of Psychology and Public Health within the College of Science, Health and Engineering (SHE) at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia.

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The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Taking a whole-of-life approach to autism focusing on diagnosis, education and adult life, Autism CRC researchers are working with end-users to provide evidence-based outcomes which can be translated into practical solutions for governments, service providers, education and health professionals, families and people on the autism spectrum. The Autism CRC funds the **SASLA** study.

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This presentation was created by [Alex Haschek](#).

References

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