

## The Link Between Negative Thoughts and Depression in Autistic Adults

Summary Reports describe results from newly published research using data from SPARK participants.

### ■ Study Title

Investigating the Structure of Trait Rumination in Autistic Adults: A Network Analysis

### ■ What was the study about?

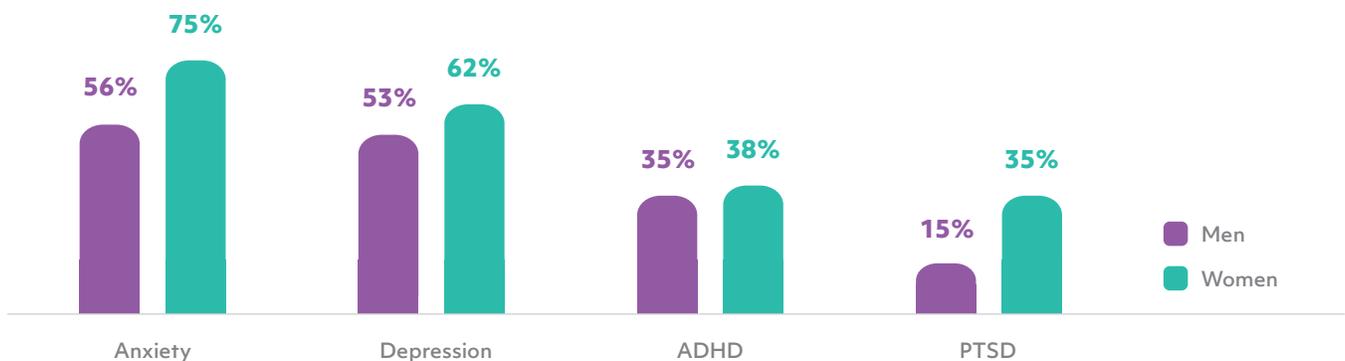
Autistic people are more likely to have depression and to have repetitive thoughts. This study looked at rumination, a type of repetitive thinking in which someone has negative thoughts without reaching a solution. Rumination is linked to depression in people who do not have autism. Researchers wanted to find out how rumination contributes to depression in autistic adults.

### ■ How was the research done?

More than 600 autistic adults who are enrolled in SPARK completed online questionnaires about rumination and depression. Most participants had attended at least some college. Their ages were 18 to 45, and 65 percent were women.

### ■ What did the researchers learn?

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTING OTHER CONDITIONS



- Rumination was linked to depression in autistic men and women.
- Rumination often involved wondering why one cannot begin a task, questioning why one has so many problems, and thinking about one's mistakes and faults.
- These self-critical thoughts were associated with feelings of sadness and guilt, which are symptoms of depression.
- Autistic women reported more symptoms of depression and rumination than autistic men.
- The links between rumination and depression were similar in both men and women in the study.

## ■ What was new and innovative about the study?

This study was the first to use network analysis – studying individual symptoms and their interactions – to look at the link between rumination and depression in autistic adults. The study team also included autistic and non-autistic researchers.

## ■ What do the findings mean?

These early findings point to areas of future study. A better understanding of the risk factors for depression in autistic adults may lead to better therapies, such as ones that target negative thinking.

## ■ What are participants and scientists saying?

### Study participants:

- “Thank you for this opportunity. I have learned a lot about myself, and I will seek mental health support for some of my issues.”
- “Great survey, helped me understand a little more about myself.”
- “Very interesting. I’m glad these topics were chosen, I felt understood for a rare problem in my life (repetitive thoughts/words/phrases).”
- “It actually helped me identify myself. It helped me analyze my life, from early childhood... to the [person] I am today! Also, it gave me answers to my self-consciousness and random thoughts. Overall, a really good survey that is actually meaningful!”

### Researcher Zachary J. Williams, M.D. and Ph.D. candidate, Vanderbilt University:

“One of the priorities of the autistic community is improving mental health and well-being. One of the ways to improve the well-being of autistic people is to focus on depression, which affects so many people and is life-changing. Depression, in many cases, is reversible and curable. By figuring out better ways to do that for people, you can really change a lot of lives.”

## ■ What’s next?

The researchers will study factors that may contribute to depression in autistic adults, including repetitive thoughts, stress, the amount of services and social supports available to them, and whether they try to hide their autistic traits. “The goal is to look at all the different ways that these factors interact to predict future depression,” Williams says. This could lead to interventions.

## ■ References

1. Williams Z.J. *et al.* Autism **25**, 2048-2063 (2021) [PubMed](#)

### About SPARK Research Match

This SPARK program matches participants with research studies that they may want to join. These studies have been evaluated for scientific merit and approved by a scientific committee at SPARK. The program is free to researchers and participants. SPARK does not endorse or conduct these studies. Participants choose if they want to take part in a particular study.

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