Study Title
Social Support and Links to Quality of Life among Middle-aged and Older Autistic Adults

What was the study about?
Researchers examined the effect of social support on quality of life in autistic adults ages 40 and above. Good social support is linked to better physical and mental health, and better quality of life, in older people who do not have autism. But little is known about social support and quality of life among older autistic people. Social support may include receiving help from others, talking or spending time with friends and family, and having satisfying relationships. Quality of life refers to how satisfied people are with their life overall, and in areas such as physical and psychological health, living arrangements, and relationships.

How was the research done?
Almost 390 autistic people ages 40 to 83 completed questionnaires about their background, quality of life, social support, and any symptoms of depression and anxiety. All of the adults were legally independent, which means they did not have guardians. Almost 60 percent of all participants had a college or graduate degree. More than half of the participants were assigned female at birth.

What did the researchers learn?
• Social support, as rated by study participants, was important to their overall quality of life. That was true even after researchers took into account factors such as physical health, depression, age, and sex assigned at birth.
• Those autistic adults with better social support also reported a better quality of life. That is similar to studies of older adults who do not have autism, and also young autistic adults.
• Interacting with people socially contributed to participants’ satisfaction with their physical and psychological health.

Answers to Select Study Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do family and friends understand or ‘get’ you?</th>
<th>How satisfied are you with relationships with family and friends?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Very Dissatisfied: 42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Somewhat Dissatisfied: 19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfied: 38.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

50% 50%
• Having practical support – someone to help with chores, transportation, and advice, for example – contributed to people’s satisfaction with their relationships, their living conditions and safety, and their ability to manage autism-related concerns. Those concerns included sensory overload, barriers to services, and their autistic identity.

• Autistic men reported a higher quality of life than autistic women in some aspects, which is similar to findings in the general population.

What was new and innovative about the study?

This appears to be the first study to examine the relationship between social support and self-rated quality of life among a large group of middle-aged and older autistic adults.

What do the findings mean?

Those autistic adults who said that they had more social support also reported more satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. These findings could help inform efforts to provide services or social supports to autistic people as they age.

What are people saying?

Study participants:

• “I enjoy these studies. The studies ask questions about things I don’t realize I do. I learn more about my autism every time I take one.”

• “It is FANTASTIC that you are studying Adult Autistics’ character traits, behavior, and thought processes!!! We have a LOT to offer to those just coming of age, in terms of experience.”

Study researcher Gregory L. Wallace, Ph.D., associate professor, The George Washington University: “As people in the non-autistic population age, they start to experience more isolation, for various reasons. That isolation in turn negatively impacts mental health, physical health, and quality of life. So it’s important to investigate this in the context of autism, and not make the presumption that everything is going to look the same.”

What's next?

Wallace’s team has already followed up once with the study participants. “One of our next steps is to examine changes in social support over time in middle and older adulthood, and see how those changes affect quality of life and physical and mental health,” he says. “As people age, are they experiencing increases, declines, or no changes in social support, and what are the impacts?”

References