

What Mental Health Therapies Work for Autistic Adults?

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

■ Study title

A Mixed Methods Study of Autistic Adults' Mental Health Therapy Experiences

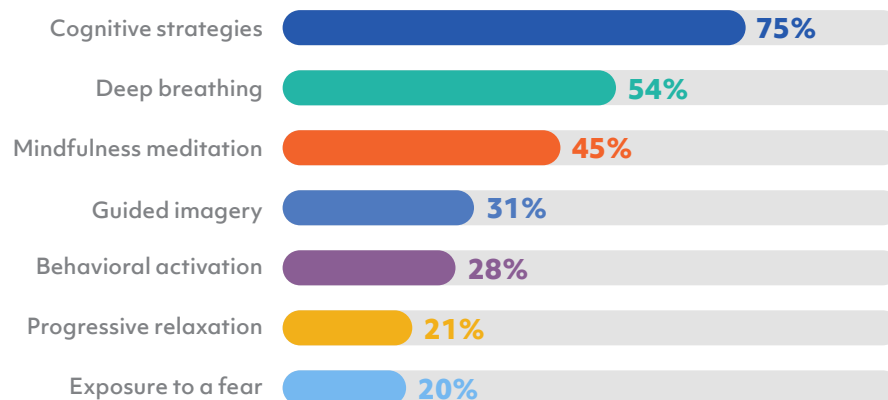
■ What was the study about?

Autistic adults have high rates of anxiety, depression, and other psychiatric conditions. But little is known about their experiences with different mental health therapies. Researchers asked independent autistic adults about their mental health diagnoses and experiences with therapy.

■ How was the research done?

Researchers enrolled 303 independent adults ages 21 to 77 who participate in the SPARK study. More than half had college or graduate degrees. Participants completed online surveys about their autism traits and any mental health diagnoses and therapy experiences that they had. Those who had received therapy also answered questions about those experiences.

PERCENTAGE OF AUTISTIC ADULTS WITH THERAPY EXPERIENCE, BY TYPE OF THERAPY¹



■ What did the researchers learn?

- Almost 90 percent of the adults had been diagnosed previously with a mental health condition and had received therapy. The most common diagnoses were anxiety disorder, depression, and ADHD, and the most common therapies were cognitive strategies, deep breathing, mindfulness meditation, and guided imagery.¹
- Most said that it was very important for therapists to know a lot about autism.
- Twenty-seven percent said that a therapist's ability to accept and understand them was vital to their therapy's success.
- Thirty-two percent said that therapy helped them with personal growth.
- Talking during therapy sessions was difficult for 14 percent. Some reported trouble knowing what to say, talking about their feelings, or identifying their emotions, issues that may be related to autism.
- Eleven percent said that the session format, such as using agendas or alternative activities, or working individually or in a group, affected progress.

- When answering open-ended questions about specific strategies, many said that therapy helped to reduce anxiety and improve mood.
- Many reported difficulties in implementing or remembering to use mental health strategies in their daily lives.

■ What was new and innovative about the study?

This is the first study to examine the opinions of autistic adults about whether specific mental health therapies were effective and acceptable for them.

■ What do the findings mean?

It is important to autistic adults that their therapists understand and accept them and their experiences. Therapists may need to give them more help in using mental health strategies in their daily lives. Also, therapists can modify sessions to better meet the clients' needs. "Some simple therapy strategies are sharing an agenda before each session, so the client knows what to expect, and asking the client about their communication preferences. Some people may prefer to write things down or use other ways of communicating with their therapist," says study researcher Micah Mazurek, Ph.D.

■ What are people saying?

STUDY PARTICIPANTS:

- "I loved that the questions were ones I hadn't ever thought about before. They really made me stop and think about what is going on in my head. And they gave me some really good insights into myself."
- "Since I enjoy writing, I liked responding to this study. Also, I am trying to be more aware of my feelings so again this made participation more enjoyable."
- "I was quite impressed about how this particular study didn't frame autism as all doom and gloom. It actually wanted to know my personal experience in this neurotypical world. I found that I could speak my voice with ease."

STUDY RESEARCHER:

- **Micah Mazurek, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and professor, University of Virginia:**
"A lot of autistic adults find therapy really helpful. They appreciate what participating in therapy does for improving their mental health, well-being, and personal growth. That's important for mental health professionals to recognize because we don't want those professionals turning away clients if they find out that they have autism, which is the experience of a lot of people."

■ What's next?

Mazurek and other researchers are working on a clinical trial that will compare the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy to mindfulness-based therapy in autistic adults.

■ References

1. Mazurek M.O. *et al. Clin. Psychol. Psychother.* Epub ahead of print (2023) [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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