

Sexual Identity, Mental Health, and Quality of Life in Autistic Adults

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

■ Study title

Sexual Minority Identities in Autistic Adults: Diversity and Associations with Mental Health Symptoms and Subjective Quality of Life

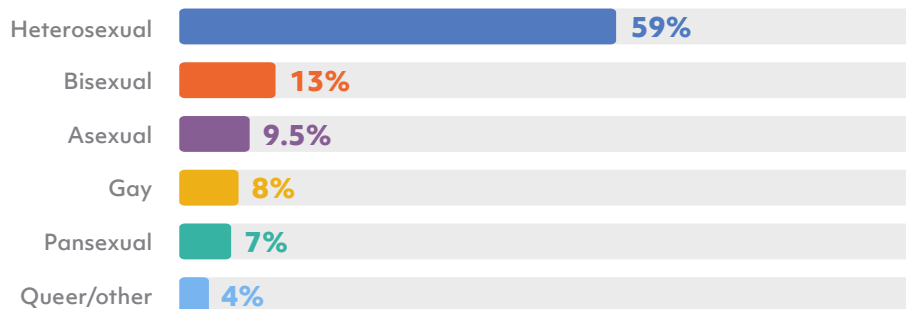
■ What was the study about?

Autistic adults are more likely to have mental health conditions and rate their quality of life as lower than the general population. They also more often identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or another sexual minority identity, which means a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. People in minority groups based on race, disability, and sexual identity may face stress from stigma, discrimination, and rejection that affects their health. Researchers wanted to learn if being a member of two minority groups – being LGBTQ+ and autistic – was linked to mental health and quality of life.

■ How was the research done?

Researchers enrolled 651 independent autistic adults ages 18 to 83 who were in the SPARK study. Almost 44 percent had at least a college degree, and 60 percent were assigned female sex at birth. Participants completed online surveys about their stress levels, symptoms of depression and anxiety, and quality of life.

SEXUAL IDENTITY OF AUTISTIC ADULTS IN SPARK ¹



■ What did the researchers learn?

- About 41 percent of autistic adults did not identify as heterosexual, which means they were a sexual minority. That is a much higher percentage than the general U.S. population.
- Fifty-one percent of those who were assigned female sex at birth identify as a sexual minority, compared with 25 percent of those who were assigned male sex at birth.
- Heterosexual autistic adults were older than those who identified as a sexual minority.
- Ten percent of the total group did not identify with the sex that they were assigned at birth. The vast majority of these adults said that they were a sexual minority.
- Among autistic adults who identified as a sexual minority, the largest number said that they were bisexual, followed by asexual, gay, and pansexual, in that order. Asexual means that the person is

not sexually attracted to, or interested in sexual activity, with others. Pansexual people are attracted to people of different gender identities.

- Autistic adults who identified as sexual minorities reported more symptoms of anxiety and depression, and greater stress, than heterosexual adults on the spectrum. They also reported having a lower quality of life. They were less satisfied with their physical and psychological health, their living conditions and safety, and their ability to manage autism-related concerns.

■ What was new and innovative about the study?

This may be the largest study comparing self-reported quality of life ratings between autistic adults who were heterosexual and those who were not. The study did not mention sexual identity when asking people to join, so as not to skew the participation rates based on those identities, says researcher Goldie A. McQuaid, Ph.D.

■ What do the findings mean?

Sexual minority autistic adults reported more stress, depression, and anxiety symptoms, and a lower quality of life, than heterosexual autistic adults. Therapists and doctors may want to be aware of these trends because of the link between sexual minority identities, stress, and mental health, says researcher Gregory L. Wallace, Ph.D.

■ What are people saying?

STUDY PARTICIPANTS:

- “Thank you for the opportunity to participate and share some of my experiences. I hope this proves useful to helping the ASD community.”
- “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.”
- “This was a refreshingly good survey in that the questions usually had applicable answers. So many surveys don’t give options of answers that work/fit.”

STUDY RESEARCHER:

- **Gregory L. Wallace, Ph.D., associate professor, The George Washington University**
“Autistic people are at risk for mental health challenges, and what we and other researchers are trying to understand is, ‘what are the factors that are driving that risk?’”

■ What’s next?

The researchers are examining how other minority identities, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, affect the quality of life and health of autistic adults.

■ References

1. McQuaid G.A. *et al.* *Autism Adulthood* **5**, 139-153 (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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