



Adapting Alcohol Support Services for Autistic Adults

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Overview

- Alcohol and Autism
- Accessing Alcohol Services
- Our research “Expectations and Motivations for Drinking”
- What’s Next - Austistica/Alcohol Change UK Project

Alcohol and Autism

- Autistic adults are at a lower risk for developing alcohol use disorders compared to other psychological conditions
- Autistic adults who drink are at an increased risk for developing an alcohol use disorder (AUD)
- Most research assumes that alcohol use within the autistic community is primarily motivated by the features of autism itself

Alcohol and Autism

Autistic adults are:

- Less likely to engage in heavy episodic drinking with peers
- More likely to repeat drinking behaviours
- More autistic traits, is associated with increased risk of AUD
- Alcohol use to “self-medicate” anxiety and to facilitate social interactions

Alcohol-Related Expectations

- Alcohol research has investigated cognitions and individual differences underlying drinking
- Expectations about alcohol:
 - Increased social and physical pleasure
 - Global positive changes
 - Increased aggression
 - Reduced tension
 - Increased cognitive and motor performance

Accessing Alcohol Services

- Autistic young people and people with intellectual disability are less likely to be enrolled in alcohol and drug services, compared with mental health and child welfare services
- Autistic adults with alcohol problems may face multiple barriers to accessing and receiving treatment for alcohol misuse
- Services may not be commissioned or provided in a way that meets the needs of many autistic adults

Our Research

- Aimed at identifying experiences of alcohol use and autism-aware alcohol-related service provision
- 507 autistic adults responded to questions about:
 - Their expectancies and motivations for heavy episodic drinking
 - Ways of seeking support, if needed
 - Barriers to seeking support
- 144 service providers responded to questions about:
 - Autism specific knowledge and training
 - Adaptation of services for autistic clients
 - Treatment outcomes for autistic clients

What We Found: Autistic Community

- 78% of participants reported having a formal diagnosis and 23% an informal diagnosis of autism
- 93% had drunk alcohol in the past year
- 54% were heavy episodic drinkers
- Traditional and autism specific expectancies were endorsed by heavy episodic drinkers
- *“Alcohol generally has powerful positive effects on people”*
- *“Alcohol makes verbal communication easier”*

What We Found: Autistic Community

TABLE 3. CORRELATIONS OF DRINKING FREQUENCY WITH EXPECTANCIES AND MOTIVATIONS FOR NONHEAVY EPISODIC DRINKERS AND HEAVY EPISODIC DRINKERS

	<i>Non-HED</i>	<i>HED</i>
Traditional expectancies	0.12	0.05
Autism-related expectancies	0.21**	0.15*
Enhancement motivations	0.41**	0.23*
Social motivations	0.30**	0.15*
Conformity motivations	0.05	0.01
Coping motivations	0.31**	0.32*

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

The strongest motivations for heavy episodic drinking were:

- For social reasons
- To enhance positive feelings

What We Found: Support and Barriers

- 45% of the participants indicated that they would not seek support
- Perceived barriers to support:
- That it would take place in an unfamiliar chaotic environment
- Being misunderstood and judged by a therapist

TABLE 4. SOURCES OF SUPPORT AND BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SUPPORT

<i>Support</i>	<i>n (%)</i>
Search online for information	250 (49.3)
I would not seek help or I'd try on my own	229 (45.2)
A family member or a friend	176 (34.7)
My doctor	176 (37.4)
A local alcohol service	65 (12.8)
A self-help group like Alcoholics Anonymous	59 (11.6)
Other	30 (5.9)
Other included my therapist, my psychologist, religious leader	
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<i>Barriers</i>	
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Going somewhere unfamiliar	301 (59.4)
Worrying they won't understand me	289 (57.0)
Being in a crowded or chaotic place	286 (56.4)
Fear of being judged for drinking	233 (46.0)
Other	88 (17.4)
Other included having to interact with other people, work in groups, anxiety/mental health	

What We Found: Service Providers

Online survey of 144 therapists

- 43 primarily worked in Wales and 74 primarily worked in England – in the following locations:
- Community-based centres 85 (65%)
- Local Authority Social Services 10 (8%)
- Outreach service, e.g. home visiting or street-based services 8 (6%)
- Hospital inpatients ward 6 (5%)
- Residential rehab centre 5 (4%)
- Hospital Outpatients clinic 1 (1%)
- Other 16 (12%)

What We Found: Service Providers

Therapists were asked if they had received any specific knowledge and/or skills sessions on autism in during training:

• No, none	62 (53%)
• Yes, theoretical information about autism	31 (26%)
• Yes, both theoretical and practical sessions	15 (13%)
• Yes, practical training on working with autistic people	8 (7%)

What adaptations have you made in treatment/support techniques when working with autistic people in the past?

• Using plain language more than with other clients	65
• A more structured and concrete approach	55
• Shorter sessions	54
• Avoiding metaphors in therapy	51
• Discussing individual hobbies and interests as part of therapy	50
• More written and visual information than I usually use	48
• Involving a family member or partner in sessions	37
• Behavioural strategies to introduce change	31
• Cognitive strategies to introduce change	31
• Psycho-education about emotions	23
• Longer sessions	7
• Other	17

What We Found: Service Providers

Therapists were then asked - If you have worked/are working with autistic people, how would you generally rate the treatment outcomes in comparison with other clients you have worked with?

• Very much worse outcomes	8 (9%)
• Less favourable outcomes	44 (49%)
• The same outcomes	19 (21%)
• Better outcomes	3 (3%)
• Very much better outcomes	3 (3%)
• Don't know	13 (14%)

Summary of Findings

- Autistic adults show similarities in the expectancies and motivations for drinking alcohol with the general population
- There may be some autism-specific expectancies about drinking alcohol, which impact upon seeking support
- Most service providers report having received no specific knowledge or skills sessions on autism during their training
- They perceive that treatment outcomes for autistic clients are relatively unfavorable compared with other client groups

Whats Next?

- Funded by Autistica and Alcohol Change UK, we will work with relevant stakeholders, to examine positive and negative experiences of seeking, accessing, and receiving support and treatment from drug and alcohol services
- We will run stakeholder workshops with autistic adults and their families/carers to identify research priorities aimed at improving access to and provision of support
- We will identify and meet with key professionals in drug and alcohol services to understand the current picture and identify research priorities

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- Autistic service users
- [Not your neurotypical client: Autism, alcohol, and other substances Tickets, Mon 6 Sep 2021 at 09:30 | Eventbrite](#)