



# MENTAL HEALTH

## in Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

Lauren Elder, Ph.D. ABPP

Current research estimates that about 30 percent of autistic individuals have an intellectual disability (ID). This means they have challenges in both cognitive skills and adaptive behavior.<sup>1,2,3</sup> In addition, an estimated 70 percent of autistic individuals with intellectual disabilities have co-occurring mental health disorders. These estimates highlight the dire need for improved mental health treatment for individuals with intellectual disabilities.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> Unfortunately, mental health issues are often overlooked in this population due to general challenges in identifying mental health issues in those with intellectual disabilities and a lack of knowledge of how to address such issues.

### Signs of Mental Health Concerns in Intellectual Disabilities

Changes in mood or behavior may indicate the presence of mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Other signs to watch for include:

- changes in sleep or appetite
- tearfulness
- avoiding experiences that were previously enjoyable
- low energy
- increases in repetitive or self-injurious behavior
- agitation, aggression or irritability

If you see any of these signs in your children, including adult children, it is important to first rule out any potential medical or sleep issues. Once such physical factors have been eliminated as possible causes, it is then time to consider the presence of potential mental health concerns.

## Why Mental Health is Often Overlooked

Mental health concerns are often overlooked in individuals with intellectual disabilities. Unfortunately, this can occur for a range of reasons, including the following.

- **Communication Challenges** – Some individuals with intellectual disabilities are unable to effectively communicate how they feel.
- **Interoception and Alexithymia** – Interoception is the ability to identify and interpret body cues. Alexithymia is when someone has difficulty identifying and expressing emotions. Many autistic individuals have challenges identifying their internal feelings.
- **Confusion with Sensory Processing Challenges** – It can be difficult to determine if challenges are the result of being sensorily overwhelmed, which is best addressed by an occupational therapist, or are due to emotional regulation. Often, it can be both.
- **Assuming Mental Health Treatment is Not Necessary** – Many providers assume that applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy is sufficient. However, ABA providers are not trained to address significant mental health challenges.
- **Lack of Access to Services and Trained Providers** – It is often challenging for families to access appropriate care.

As a psychologist who specializes in mental health treatment for individuals with developmental disabilities, I find that a lack of trained providers is one of the most significant issues. It is often challenging to find appropriate referrals when I'm unable to take on a client. Since I am willing to see adults with intellectual disabilities, I end up treating almost everything from eating challenges, psychosis, anxiety and mood concerns, to behavior issues and more. Mental health providers seeing clients with intellectual disabilities need to be generalists in everything related to mental health. Additionally, there is often a lack of appropriate training in mental health and intellectual disabilities, and what is available tends to be superficial or does not provide the depth necessary for providers to take on clients with intellectual disabilities. While a wide range of treatments are outlined in various manuals, many providers find that these protocols are not sufficiently adapted for clients with intellectual disabilities. Parents can help advocate for additional training for providers, such as school counselors.

## Role of the Mental Health Provider

Despite these challenges, mental health therapy can be helpful for individuals with intellectual disabilities. This therapy will initially focus on emotional regulation. Clients can be taught to better identify and communicate their feelings, and practice coping skills. Behavioral activation, which uses schedules to increase activity and pleasure, and other similar interventions can help with depression. Exposure therapy can be used to help clients with anxiety slowly face their fears.

Therapy may need to be adapted for individuals with intellectual disabilities. For example, the course of treatment could be longer, or the intensity of treatment higher. The therapist may need to use nonverbal therapeutic techniques such as play, expressive arts or movement. The therapist should communicate in the way preferred by the client, whether verbally or using an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device. Extra visual supports related to feelings can also be helpful to explain situations.

When seeking mental health providers, it is best to look for those who specialize in autism or developmental disabilities. Ask questions about how they might be able to modify their treatment approach to fit the needs of your child. Inquire about the ages they treat, their approach to treatment, and their experience treating individuals with intellectual disabilities. The local university psychology department or children's hospital will often have lists of providers, and many autism support agencies keep local resource guides.

## Questions to ask a Mental Health Provider

- Do you specialize in autism, developmental disabilities, and ID?
- What ages do you treat?
- What is your approach to treatment?
- How can you modify your treatment approach to suit my child?
- What is your experience treating individuals with ID?

## Role of the Parent

Parents can play a key role in therapy. When I treat individuals with intellectual disabilities, I often have family sessions or parent coaching sessions even when the client is an adult. This is especially important when clients still live at home. There are many things that parents can do to modify the environment in support of their child's mental health.

- **ADDRESS THE SENSORY ENVIRONMENT** – Sensory processing issues contribute to many challenges in emotional regulation. Parents can limit sensory overwhelm, whenever possible, through the use of headphones, sunglasses, fidgets, alternative seating, and breaks from busy environments. An occupational therapist can help to customize a sensory plan for your child.
- **MODIFY THE SCHEDULE** – Many autistic individuals need a lot of downtime, and some can get overwhelmed by busy school and therapy schedules. Make sure children have adequate time to rest, play and pursue their interests.
- **IDENTIFY TRIGGERS** – Keep a journal to document times when your child seems distressed. Make notes about what happened before and after. Try to determine what triggers your child and avoid those situations when you can.
- **SUPPORT COMMUNICATION AROUND FEELINGS** – Ensure that there are feelings buttons on your child's AAC or picture communication system, and model their use. Talk about the feelings of your child's favorite characters from books and movies. Label how you think they might be feeling. Label your own emotions whenever possible.
- **MODEL COPING SKILLS** – Make sure your child sees you practicing coping skills. You could tell your child that you're going to take a break when you feel upset. Let your child see you taking deep breaths or meditating. Ask your child to take a walk with you or give you a hug when you have been feeling overwhelmed. Make a visual display of things that help your child calm down, and teach your child to look at the pictures and pick a coping method to use.
- **EMOTION COACHING** – Help your child connect with his or her feelings by empathizing. Avoid saying such things as, "You're okay!" Instead, say something like, "I can see you're sad. That's hard! Do you need a hug, or should I give you some space?" If language overwhelms your child, try something simpler like saying, "Sad?" and opening your arms for a hug. Be sure you are communicating in the way your child communicates, whether verbally, through a picture system, AAC device, sign language or other method.
- **PRESUME COMPETENCE** – Almost everyone can learn to improve his or her emotional regulation skills and mental health with the correct supports.





Treating individuals with intellectual disabilities for mental health concerns can be a bit more complex and challenging than treating some other populations. However, I know that it can be done successfully. Parents and professionals need to work together to ensure that this underserved population has improved access to quality mental health care.

## Resources

<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/People-with-Disabilities>

<http://www.aamr.org>

<https://skillssystem.com>

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Lauren Elder, Ph.D., ABPP, has over 20 years of experience as a psychologist, consultant and public speaker. Dr. Elder provides consulting services in the U.S. as well as internationally. Clients include families, clinics, foundations, agencies and corporations with behavioral products in development. She has diverse experience including helping to develop a prototype for a digital autism intervention, guiding clinics in the development of their service offerings, transforming an early intervention program to be neurodiversity- and trauma-informed and helping families evaluate and choose from a variety of early intervention services.

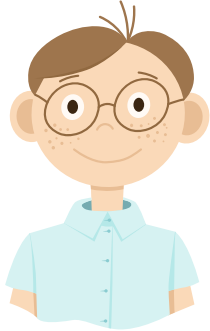
Dr. Elder is highly sought after to deliver training on a variety of early intervention, neurodiversity, and mental health topics. Recent training has included *Parenting Neurodivergent Children in a Neurotypical World* and *Best Practice in Early Intervention for Developmental Disabilities*.

Dr. Elder uses a client-centered and neurodiversity-affirming approach to help clients from infants to adults. She offers individual, parent coaching and dyadic therapy options. Her practice focuses on autistic individuals and those with ADHD or Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Intellectual Disabilities. She also offers psychological assessments across the lifespan.

For more information or to contact Dr. Elder directly, please see her website: [www.ascentpsychologicalservices.com](http://www.ascentpsychologicalservices.com)

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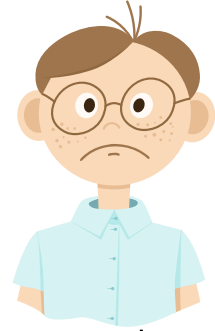
# How Am I Feeling?



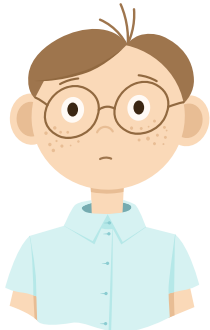
Happy



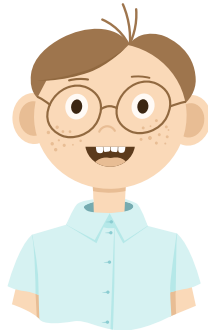
Angry



Sad



Worried



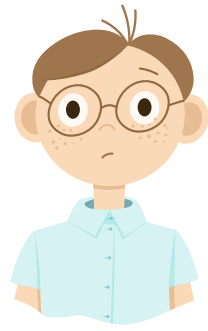
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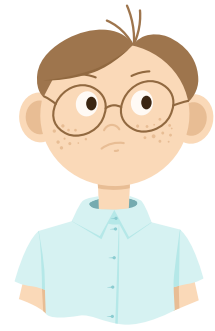
Calm



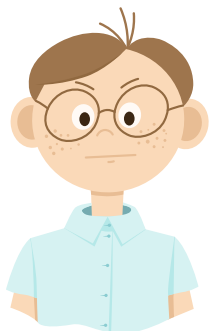
Silly



Scared



Disappointed



Frustrated



Relieved



Embarrassed

# I Need A Break

I would like:



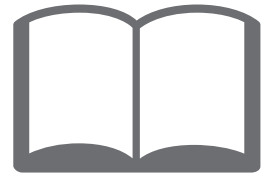
**music**



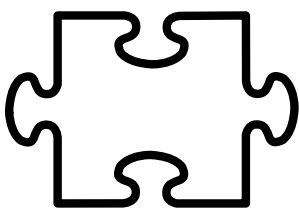
**playdoh**



**comfy chair**



**book**



**puzzle**



**draw**



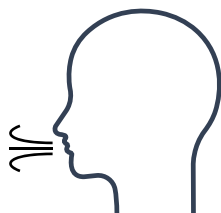
**fidget toy**



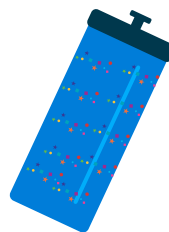
**weighted blanket**



**noise-canceling headphones**



**deep breathing**



**sparkle bottle**



**stretching**