

# Professor Jacqui Rodgers

Newcastle University

Wednesday, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2022

University of Reading



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Evidence-Based Psychological Treatment

## Advancing understanding, identification and interventions for mental health conditions experienced by autistic children and adults

### Introduction:

Autism is characterised by lifelong, persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction and the presence of restrictive and repetitive behaviours or interests that may include hyper-reactivity or hypo-reactivity to sensory aspects of the environment. At least 1.1% of the UK population have an autism diagnosis.

Autistic children and adults are more likely to experience mental conditions than neurotypical people, particularly anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts and behaviours. For example, around 40% of autistic children and adults will experience significant anxiety during their lifetime and autistic adults are reported to be nine times more likely to die by suicide than the general population. Mental health conditions have a significant negative impact on the well-being, functioning and quality of life of many autistic individuals, sometimes over and above the impact of autism-related challenges themselves. Improving mental health for autistic individuals has been identified as the number one research and service development priority by the autistic community.

Recent research has identified several aspects of mental health presentations in autism that are similar to those found in standard diagnostic systems, however there is emerging evidence that autism related expressions of mental health difficulties are present for autistic people. Given this the identification, assessment and support provided to autistic children and adults experiencing mental health difficulties can pose significant challenges. It is unsurprising therefore that autistic people face a number of significant barriers to effective healthcare access and treatment.

### Content

The workshop will be in two parts. The initial part of the day will focus on increasing participant's knowledge and understanding of mental health in the context of autism. Using anxiety and suicide as exemplars, we will consider recent advances in research which aims to understand the mechanisms and phenomenology of mental health conditions experienced by autistic children and adults.

During the second part of the day, we will also spend some time thinking about how to work with autistic people to devise appropriate and valid tools to identify mental health conditions, to ensure that we avoid diagnostic overshadowing and ask the right questions in the right ways. We will end by exploring some recent therapeutic advances in the treatment of anxiety and suicidality in the context of



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autism. The day will close with some evidence based, practical recommendations for how clinical services can be adapted to meet the needs of autistic people.

## Learning objectives:

- To develop knowledge of anxiety and suicidality with the context of autism.
- To increase understanding of the presentation of mental health difficulties experienced by autistic people, to enable delegates to work towards bespoke formulations for autistic people they are working with
- To consider how therapeutic interventions can be adapted to make them more valid and accessible for autistic people.
- To consider what practical adjustments can be utilised to enable autistic children and adults to engage with services

## Training modalities

The workshop will be interactive and include both experiential and didactic teaching. Delegates will have a chance to explore some assessment and therapeutic materials developed for and with autistic people and to discuss their experiences of working with autistic children and adults.

## Key references:

1. Brice S, Rodgers J, Ingham B, *et al* The importance and availability of adjustments to improve access for autistic adults who need mental and physical healthcare: findings from UK surveys *BMJ Open* 2021;**11**:e043336. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-043336
2. Jacqui Rodgers, Kirstin Farquhar, David Mason, Samuel Brice, Sarah Wigham, Barry Ingham, Mark Freeston, and Jeremy R. Parr. Autism in Adulthood. Mar 2020.24-33. <http://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0044>
3. Cassidy, S. & Rodgers, J. Understanding and preventing suicide in autism: New directions for research, policy and practice. *Lancet Psychiatry* (2017), [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/52215-0366\(17\)31062-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/52215-0366(17)31062-1)
4. Parr, J.R., Brice, S., Welsh, P. *et al*. Treating anxiety in autistic adults: study protocol for the Personalised Anxiety Treatment–Autism (PAT-A©) pilot randomised controlled feasibility trial. *Trials* **21**, 265 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-020-4161-2>
5. Cassidy, S.A., Bradley, L., Cogger-Ward, H. *et al*. Development and validation of the suicidal behaviours questionnaire - autism spectrum conditions in a community sample of autistic, possibly autistic and non-autistic adults. *Molecular Autism* **12**, 46 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-021-00449-3>



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- Rodgers, J., Wigham, S., McConachie, H., Freston M., Honey, E., Parr, JR. Development of the Anxiety Scale for Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASC-ASD) *Autism Research*, 2016 2016, 9(11), 1205–1215

## About the presenter:

Jacqui Rodgers is Professor of Psychology Mental Health and an autism researcher based in the Faculty of Medical Sciences, Newcastle University, UK. Her work focuses on trying to understand the relationships between characteristics of autism (such as sensory issues and restricted and repetitive behaviours) and co-occurring mental health conditions. She has a particular interest in anxiety and suicide in autism. She is really keen to ensure that clinical services have good assessment methods available to them to identify when autistic people are experiencing mental health difficulties and to evaluate interventions and with colleagues has developed the first anxiety and suicidality questionnaires specifically designed and validated for autistic children and adults. She is also involved in the development and evaluation of a range of mental health focused interventions for autistic children and adults. Some of this work focused on how autistic people respond to uncertainty. All the work she is involved in is undertaken in collaboration with members of the autism community and she feels passionately that co-production is essential for us to be able to truly understand the experiences of autistic people.

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All workshops, unless otherwise indicated are intended for a cross/mixed ability audience

