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Eating disorders and neurodivergence



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[Editorial policy](#)

Once thought of primarily as social diseases, [eating disorders](#) are now much better understood, with researchers increasingly discovering biological drivers of these conditions.

And studies have shown that, in many cases, eating disorders commonly occur in people considered neurodivergent.

While more research is needed on the link between these two conditions, further findings can help shape future treatments for eating disorders, offering additional options for care that are tailored to the unique needs of the neurodivergent community.

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Co-occurring disorders

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What is neurodivergence?

Neurodivergence is a relatively new term, used to describe the ways someone's brain functions, learns, behaves, and processes. It implies that these processes are different from those of someone considered "neurotypical."⁵

It's important to note that these terms don't signify brains that function better or worse, but simply differently. People considered neurodivergent have unique strengths and challenges, based on the different ways their brains operate, compared to the strengths and challenges of someone considered neurotypical.⁵

It's also important to note that "neurodivergent" is not an official medical term. It was first coined in 1998 to describe the different ways people's brains develop, and has since been adopted by the medical community—which frequently thinks in more black and white terms—to help describe cases where people aren't necessarily

sick, but rather “differently abled.”⁵

In fact, there’s no one definition of “normal” when it comes to brain function. Even when people are considered “neurotypical,” it simply means that their mental strengths and challenges aren’t affected by any differences that impact the way their brains work.⁵

Examples of neurodivergence

Neurodivergence may be more visible than many people think. The most common manifestations of this quality include:⁵

- Autism spectrum disorder (commonly called autism or ASD)
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Dyslexia, or difficulty reading

Other forms of neurodivergence include:⁵

- Dyspraxia, which impacts movement and coordination
- Dyscalculia, or difficulty learning and understanding numbers and math
- Tourette syndrome, a condition that produces certain "tics"

- Down syndrome, a physical and mental developmental disorder
- Bipolar disorder, a mental health condition involving extreme mood swings
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder, a mental health condition involving recurring thoughts and behaviors

The connection between neurodivergence and eating disorders

As research techniques have become more sophisticated, more links between eating disorders and many forms of neurodivergence have been discovered, particularly when it comes to [autism](#) and [ADHD](#). At the core of this connection is likely the influence ASD and ADHD have on sensory processing.¹

Sensory processing impacts the way, and degree to which, stimuli impact the brain. These stimuli are usually grouped into two distinct categories, including:

- **Exteroception:** External stimuli, including touch, sound, and sight
- **Interoception:** Internal stimuli, or cues, regarding things like pain, thirst, and hunger

Interoception

Exteroception

Eating disorders and interoception

In many people with ADHD or autistic traits, interoception may be disrupted.

This could lead to a lack of bodily trust—or a feeling of safety within or ownership of one's body—which could contribute to an over-reliance on external sources of appraisal or approval, possibly making someone more susceptible to damaging images and ideas pushed by [diet culture](#) and society at large.¹

More directly, disrupted interoception can also play a role in disordered eating patterns, thanks to its influence on hunger or thirst cues. This could result in someone missing hunger cues and eating less, contributing to traits of [anorexia nervosa](#) (AN), or feeling

overwhelmed by hunger cues and eating more, which would lead to issues involved with binge eating disorder (BED) and bulimia nervosa (BN).¹

Autism and eating disorders

Autism may play a role in many types of eating disorders, with current research estimating autism prevalence to be as high as 37% among people with these conditions.¹

Anorexia
nervosa

Avoidant/restrictive food
intake disorder

Autism and anorexia nervosa

Autism has long been linked to anorexia nervosa, with recent research estimating as many as one in three people with AN having "elevated traits" of ASD.⁷ Sensory aversions and social anxieties, including trouble eating

around others, may all contribute to this overlap.^{1,8}

Some personality traits connected to the two conditions may also explain their link. One qualitative study of women with AN and autism revealed that some participants felt the inflexibility and rigidity associated with their ASD had contributed to food rituals and routines that progressed to disordered behaviors around eating.²

The same study found that body image concerns and a desire to lose weight were not as relevant to the development of AN in participants as issues possibly related to ASD, like social confusion, a need for control, organizational problems related to food shopping and cooking, and the eating disorder becoming an intense subject of interest.²

ADHD and eating disorders

Less research exists on the link between eating disorders and ADHD, but recent studies have suggested a significant connection, with one in

particular finding that people with ADHD are three to six times more likely to develop an eating disorder than the general population.¹

Experts theorize that impulsivity and inattention—two hallmark traits of ADHD—may have something to do with the link between certain eating disorders and the attention disorder, since these traits can frequently lead to bingeing behavior. And research seems to support this assertion, with studies showing that childhood impulsivity may predict bulimia nervosa symptom onset in adolescence.³

Other common symptoms of ADHD, including deficits of awareness and unreliable internal hunger and satiety cues, have also been connected to disordered eating behaviors, including both bingeing and a disinterest in food.⁶

Complications with treating eating disorders in neurodivergent people

Overall, more research into the relationship between neurodivergence and eating disorders is

needed. Unfortunately, this has already played a role in eating disorder treatment.

Research indicates that women with autism tend to benefit less and experience poorer treatment outcomes than non-autistic women with anorexia nervosa. Further supporting this are reports from autistic women in treatment for AN who have stated they felt their needs were not met during eating disorder treatment.²

Certain types of in-person treatment may also prove difficult for some neurodivergent patients, especially those with sensory sensitivities. Group meals and group therapy could trigger anxiety, especially if they involve bright lights or loud sounds. These scenarios could also possibly present distractions for those with heightened exteroception.

For those with ADHD, further challenges exist around medication, as many drugs used to treat the disorder can simultaneously impact appetite.

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Potential treatment solutions for neurodivergent individuals

Some of the issues around treatment may be due to the fact that there is no system-wide approach to treating eating disorder patients with neurodivergence. Indeed, many medical professionals have said their inability to tailor treatment to autistic patients stems not from a lack of desire to do so, but from a lack of knowledge in how to provide that type of comprehensive care.²

One current recommendation for better catering to neurodivergent patients with eating disorders is issuing a sensory profile assessment, which can help treatment providers understand a patient's individual interoception and exteroception functioning. This can help build more needs-specific treatment programs.¹

It's also possible to create more sensory-friendly treatment environments, including those with dimmed lights, no background noise, and no expectation of social interaction. And greater psychoeducation for the patients themselves has also been recommended, as a way to help them self-advocate for better care.¹

Still, more research will ultimately be needed, both to test these concepts and fine-tune any other solutions.

Finding help for an eating disorder

Ultimately, treatment providers should understand that every patient has individual needs, including those with neurodivergence. But even in cases when these differences play a role in treatment, help is always available.

If you or a loved one are struggling with an eating disorder, it's important to seek out help. Your primary care physician, therapist, or another trusted medical professional may be able to write you an official diagnosis or recommend nearby treatment programs.

You can also find help through Within Health. Our [unique program](#) allows you to benefit from the care of a personalized treatment team, without having to leave home.

Regardless of where you look for help, the decision to seek it out is the first step on the road to a happier and healthier future.

Resources

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6. Kaisari, P., Dourish, C., Rotshtien, P., Higgs, S. (2018). Associations Between Core Symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Both Binge and Restrictive Eating. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 9.
7. Kerr-Gaffney, J., Halls, D., Harrison, A., Tchanturia, K. (2020). Exploring Relationships Between Autism Spectrum Disorder Symptoms and Eating Disorder Symptoms in Adults With Anorexia Nervosa: A Network Approach. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11.

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Further reading

**October is
National
Depression
Awareness**

**Month: How to
find support**

October is National Depression Awareness Month in the United States, with National Depression Screening Day...

**Dual diagnosis
eating disorder
treatment**

While most forms of therapy were originally designed to treat a specific type of mental health disorder, some

**OCD and binge
eating disorder**

Binge eating disorder (BED) is characterized by eating a large amount of food in a short period of time...

The link between medical trauma and eating disorders

When people think of traumatic events, they likely think of a one-time terrifying or disturbing event, such...

PTSD and eating disorders

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and eating disorders commonly co-occur, which can complicate recovery...

Complex trauma and eating disorders

You may be familiar with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is an anxiety disorder that results...

Eating disorders and neurodivergence

Once thought of primarily as social diseases, eating

The relationship between bulimia and anxiety

Co-occurring mental health conditions are common among

Borderline personality disorder and anorexia nervosa

Borderline personality disorder

disorders are now
much better
understood, with...

individuals who live
with...

(BPD) and eating
disorders, such as
anorexia...

Bulimia and alcohol addiction

Bulimia nervosa (BN)
is an eating disorder
associated with
multiple negative...

What is stress- induced anorexia?

People with anorexia
nervosa (AN) often
experience high
anxiety and stress
levels...

How to stop anxiety eating

If you turn to food
when you're feeling
stressed or anxious,
you're not...

Unpacking anorexia and insomnia

The connection
between anorexia
nervosa (AN) and

Understanding depression and eating disorders

When someone
enters treatment for
an eating disorder it

Treating ARFID and autism

Avoidant/restrictive
food intake disorder
(ARFID) is an eating
disorder that

nervosa (AN), and
insomnia is complex.
Researchers haven't
identified...

an eating disorder, it
is important they
receive...

involves extreme
picky eating...

The relationship between anxiety, depression, and overeating

Food is one of the
most essential
aspects of life, not
only needed for
survival, but involved
deeply in...

The relationship between anorexia nervosa and anxiety disorders

Anorexia nervosa
(AN) is an eating
disorder in which
individuals are
concerned about...

The relationship between ADHD and binge eating disorder

Attention deficit
hyperactivity
disorder (ADHD) and
binge eating disorder
(BED)...

Sleep and eating disorders

Sleeping and eating

How does OCD and eating disorders interact

Food maintenance syndrome (foster

share a very intimate relationship, as they are both essential...

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and eating disorders are two distinctive conditions...

care)

Food maintenance syndrome is an eating disorder common in children in foster care...

Food aversion and OCD

When we think of eating disorders, we often imagine someone who has anorexia nervosa...

Eating disorders and co-occurring disorders

On their own, eating disorders are serious mental illnesses. But they are often accompanied by co-occurring...

Eating disorders and addiction

Eating disorders like binge eating disorder, atypical anorexia nervosa, and bulimia...

What is body

Anxiety and

Postpartum

dysmorphic

disorder?

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a serious condition that involves a preoccupation with physical appearance.

binge eating

Most people will "overeate" at some point in their lives, indulging in a large meal or an extra round of...

depression and

binge eating disorder

Postpartum depression is a common mental health condition that affects...

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