

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Comorbid Mood and Anxiety Disorders

1+1=3: Autism significantly increases risks for both mood and anxiety disorders.

When Kanner described autistic disturbances of affective contact in 1943, he observed that one of the hallmark clinical features was an “anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness.” Many studies since have documented the prevalence of co-occurring psychiatric disorders in patients with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In this population-based study, investigators leveraged a cohort of 31,220 individuals born from 1976 to 2000 in Olmsted County, Minnesota, to ascertain the prevalence of bipolar disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders in 1014 individuals with ASD, compared with 2028 age- and sex-matched controls.

Incident rates of these disorders by age 30 were as follows:

- Bipolar disorder: 7.3% in individuals with ASD and just 0.9% in controls
- Depression: 54.1% and 28.9%, respectively
- Anxiety disorder: 50.0% and 22.2%, respectively

Thus, patients with ASD were fully nine times more likely than controls to have clinically diagnosed bipolar disorder (hazard ratio, 9.34) and roughly three times more likely to be diagnosed with depression (HR, 2.81) or anxiety (HR, 3.45). Of people with one psychiatric diagnosis, those with ASD were significantly more likely than controls to meet criteria for a diagnosis in two or three categories (318 of 574 [55.3%] vs. 202 of 457 [44.2%]).

COMMENT

An ASD diagnosis can cast a large shadow that obscures the comorbid presence of treatable psychiatric illnesses. Indeed, the diagnostic tally might well exceed two additional conditions. While this study focused on mood and anxiety disorders, risk in people with ASD is also elevated for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, suicide, and psychotic disorders. The growing appreciation for this psychiatric complexity underscores the importance of ongoing surveillance and appropriate mental-health supports for individuals with ASD. — **Bryan H. King, MD, MBA**

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