Title: Comorbid psychiatric disorders in adolescents and young adults with Asperger’s Syndrome

Topic: Co-morbidity and medical conditions

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Institution: Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh

Grant Year: 2006
Funding: $30,000
Duration: 1 year

Purpose: To obtain a better understanding of the psychiatric conditions that are often co-morbid with Asperger’s syndrome.

Objectives: The researcher sought to obtain a greater understanding of psychiatric co-morbidity in adolescents and young adults with Asperger’s Syndrome, and determine which conditions most commonly co-occur.

Study: The research team measured the presence and prevalence of co-morbid conditions in 38 patients with Asperger’s Syndrome. They interviewed parents of the participating patients, who reported diagnoses and symptoms of other conditions. The participants received four self-report measures covering depression, anxiety, OCD, and ADD/ADHD. They were also interviewed regarding other general conditions or symptoms.

Results: Based on parent reports, a high percentage of the participants met criteria for co-morbid psychiatric diagnoses, including depression, anxiety, phobias, and ADHD/ADD. While these disorders are common in individuals with autism, it may be difficult to identify or label them because individuals with autism often experience difficulty identifying and labeling their feelings. Because this study relied on subjective self-report measures, the findings may have limited relevance with respect to Asperger’s (or autism, more generally) and mental health.

Significance: This study indicates that individuals with Asperger’s need intensive direct instruction and assistance in identifying common psychological symptoms. Parents should monitor symptoms and professionals should take actions that can help improve accuracy of diagnoses. The results also affirm that many adolescents and young adults with autism have undiagnosed co-morbid conditions, which indicates a deficit in current assessment procedures.

Practical Relevance: These results are important for parents of children with autism and psychological professionals who may have clients with Asperger’s or another Autism Spectrum Disorder. Parents should be aware of the psychological conditions often co-morbid with autism, so they may monitor properly and seek the most accurate diagnoses. For psychological professionals, these results can help inform the assessment process. Parents, psychologists, and other professionals should work together to ensure that a child with autism has been properly diagnosed for other conditions.
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