

Research Brief

Risk Factors for Anxiety and Depression in Adults with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities

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Background



People with intellectual and developmental Disabilities (IDD) are just as likely as people without disabilities to have depression and anxiety—or possibly even more likely. The number of people with IDD who have depression and anxiety may be underestimated due to factors such as:

- **Limited access to mental health care**

People with IDD may face barriers in accessing mental health services, which could mean they don't get the help they need.

Existing health inequalities make it difficult for people with IDD to access mental healthcare.

- **Caregivers' inability to recognize mental health concerns**

Caregivers may not always recognize signs of depression and anxiety in individuals with IDD. This could be because caregivers do not have any specialized training in mental health, and may miss signs and symptoms of poor mental health

- **Diagnostic overshadowing**

Sometimes, concerns about mental health may be attributed solely to a person's disability rather than being seen as a separate issue. This could result in their mental health needs being overlooked or underestimated.

People with IDD may even experience higher levels of depression than people without disabilities, because of:

- **Biological predisposition** (such as a genetic tendency that runs in families)
- **More adverse experiences** (such as unemployment, abuse, or poor social support)
- **Poorer cognitive functioning** (which has been shown to be associated with depression)
- **More stressful life events** (for example, death of a loved one, change in employment, and change in residence)

Research Gap

While we know people with IDD may have some risk factors for anxiety and depression, we don't fully understand how certain factors impact this population over time. This study took a closer look by surveying about 750 caregivers of people with IDD at four different times. We looked at how three main things were related to anxiety and depression:

- **Demographic factors** (e.g. age gender, IDD related diagnosis, employment status)
- **Health and function** (e.g. health status, mobility limitation, obesity)
- **Social-environmental factors** (e.g. number of special Olympics events participation, stressful life events)

Key Findings



The frequency of depression and anxiety increased for this group over time. The percentage of participants with depression increased from 10.8% to 12.1%, and for anxiety, it increased from 12.3% to 15.0% across four time points.

Factors Associated with Depression and Anxiety

Depression

- Older age
- Hearing impairment
- Smoking
- Female gender
- Chronic health conditions

Anxiety

- Older age
- Hearing impairment
- Smoking
- Diagnosis of Autism
- Obesity
- Experiencing 2+ stressful life events

While stressful life events were not directly associated with depression, an increase in stressful life events over time (such as changes in caregiver, jobs, residence, and service provider) were associated with an increased risk of anxiety. This highlights the importance of considering stress as a risk factor for poor mental health outcomes.

Recommendations

As we begin to better understand the risk factors for anxiety and depression in people with IDD, it's important to consider what treatments or interventions can help people with IDD who struggle with depression or anxiety. Future research should explore the interplay of stress, health, and psychopathology of people of different ages, and the way people with IDD themselves report their symptoms of anxiety and depression.

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