

The Role of Atypical Sensory Function in the Phenomenology of Anxiety in Autistic Adults: an IPA Study



Introduction:

This study aims to contribute to the knowledge of autistic adults' perceptions of anxiety and the impact of atypical sensory function.

Method:

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling through local support groups and social media. 10 participants (five female and five male) were recruited who fell, according to the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria of autism, within the Level 1 subtype of "requiring support" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyse the transcripts (Smith et al., 2022).

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Results:

3 themes identified:

1

Descriptions of anxiety

"It's difficult. I've kind of been experiencing it for so long, I don't know what it's like to not be anxious."

2

Managing anxiety around sensory experiences

"Recently I go to bed and I have a set of ear plugs that I put in to block the noises out."

3

Link to Sensory Experiences

"...noisy can be loud but not noisy...I can go stand next to a waterfall which is insanely loud...and that would be fine but talking, for example, when there's not a pattern...is an obvious one because my brain can't, like, let go."

Discussion:

Research into the qualitative experiences of anxiety in autistic adults has found it to be a very physical experience (Halim et al., 2018).

Participants clearly outlined the impact that negative sensory experiences had on their anxiety levels, but it was also evident that sensory stressors were perceived in a very subjective manner

The element of control was an extremely important facet in the management of anxiety, allowing participants, in many instances, to tolerate previously intolerable sensory input.

References:

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>

Halim, A. T., Richdale, A. L., & Uljarević, M. (2018). Exploring the nature of anxiety in young adults on the autism spectrum: A qualitative study. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 55, 25-37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2018.07.006>

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2022). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research (2nd ed.). Sage