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Independent Living for Adults with Autism

Prevalence of Autism

The prevalence of autism in Ireland varies significantly according to region. According to the National Council for Special Education, roughly one in every 65 people in Ireland has an autism diagnosis (Togher, 2023). Additionally, the Health Service Executive (HSE) in Ireland estimated the incidence of autism within the population to be one in 65 (Doyle & Kenny, 2022). However, another study indicated an estimated prevalence of autism of 2.9% in school-aged children in Northern Ireland, which was significantly higher than the 1.5% estimated in Ireland in the same age group but several years earlier (A & Strunecký, 2019). This may suggest a greater prevalence of adults with ASD in Northern Ireland.

Employment and income

There is a surprising dearth of research on the employment and earning of individuals with ASD in Ireland, and searches across multiple academic journals and national reports were only able to reveal the following. Around 80% of people with autism in Ireland are unemployed (Tracey, 2020), and AsIAM estimates that 85% of autistic people are underemployed, though no academic study could be found. While there is currently no concrete data on the earnings of autistic individuals in Ireland, the fact that a large portion may be underemployed suggests that autistic people are paid considerably less than non-autistic people and are more likely to be employed in roles that do not sufficiently make use of their potential or skills.

Educational Outcomes

Studies have indicated that rates of postsecondary educational participation for youth with ASD are notably lower than the general population, with previous research suggesting that 40% or fewer individuals with ASD ever attend college, and very few obtain a degree Shattuck et al. (2012). Additionally, the transition of youth with ASD into postsecondary education has received limited attention, highlighting the need to understand and address the considerable needs of this population as they pursue higher education (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Furthermore, postsecondary education outcomes for youth with ASD have been reported to be weaker compared to those of youth with other disabilities (Ditchman et al., 2017). This suggests that individuals with ASD may face additional challenges in accessing and completing postsecondary education in Ireland which are not experienced by those with other disabilities. The literature emphasises the importance of equipping youth with ASD with the necessary skills and support to navigate the transition to adulthood successfully, including accessing appropriate educational opportunities (Test et al., 2014).

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	Promoting the Social Inclusion of Children with ASD: A Family-Centred Intervention
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	McConkey, R., Cassin, M.-T., & McNaughton, R. (2020).
Short description of the current practice	The study focuses on a home-based family intervention aiming to integrate children with ASD into community activities by addressing their social isolation.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	Children with ASD experiencing isolation due to limited social and community engagement.
Results/outcomes	Significant improvements in children's ability to engage with the community and participate in activities outside the home, enhancing their social skills and reducing isolation. Parents also reported a decrease in stress and an increase in family cohesion.

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	Irish clinicians' views of interventions for children with autistic spectrum disorders
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1362361310364141
Short description of the current practice	This research captures clinicians' perspectives on various interventions, including supportive housing, and their effectiveness for children with ASD.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	Clinicians' evaluations of the adequacy of current intervention strategies, including housing and community services.
Results/outcomes	Clinicians favoured a mix of interventions tailored to individual needs, which often included supportive housing solutions to enhance developmental outcomes.

Country	Ireland
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Title of identified current practices	Assistive technology: Understanding the needs and experiences of individuals with autism spectrum disorder and/or intellectual disability in Ireland and the UK
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	O'Neill, S. J., Smyth, S., Smeaton, A., & O'Connor, N. (2020).
Short description of the current practice	The study evaluates how assistive technologies can support the daily living and independence of individuals with ASD within supportive housing settings.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	Enhancing independence in supportive housing through the use of assistive technologies.
Results/outcomes	Positive impact of assistive technologies on the independence of individuals with ASD in supportive housing, improving their ability to manage daily tasks and communications.

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	The professional development needs of primary teachers in special classes for children with autism in the republic of Ireland
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	Finlay, C., Kinsella, W., & Prendeville, P. (2019).
Short description of the current practice	This study assesses the training needs of teachers who are critical in both educational settings and supportive housing for children with ASD.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	Need for enhanced teacher training to support children with ASD effectively in both educational and residential settings.
Results/outcomes	Recognition of the need for ongoing professional development to enable teachers to better support the educational and residential needs of children with ASD, highlighting the interconnectedness of educational outcomes and residential stability.

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	The Economic Costs and Its Predictors for Childhood Autism Spectrum Disorders in Ireland: How Is the Burden Distributed?

Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	Roddy, Á., & O’Neill, C. (2018).
Short description of the current practice	This study estimates the societal costs associated with childhood ASD in Ireland, detailing the economic burden on families and state services.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	Economic burden of ASD on families and the distribution of state versus family expenditure on ASD services, including supportive housing.
Results/outcomes	Significant financial burden on families, indicating a need for more services and interventions, including residential care or supportive living accommodations.

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022-2027
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/2023-06/NHSDP%20Implementation%20Plan%20.pdf
Short description of the current practice	This strategy provides a national framework to ensure that the housing needs of people with disabilities (PD), including those with ASD, are addressed in a structured and sustainable way. It emphasizes the integration of disability needs into mainstream housing policies.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	The strategy addresses the need for more inclusive housing that supports the independence and community integration of people with disabilities,, including those with ASD.
Results/outcomes	The strategy has led to the creation of a more coordinated approach between various government departments and agencies, aimed at integrating housing needs of PD into all aspects of housing policy. Outcomes include the development and dissemination of guidelines to local authorities on adapting housing units to be disability-friendly and increased funding allocations for specialised housing adaptations and a review process for existing housing policies to ensure they meet the needs of PD.

Country	Ireland
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Title of identified current practices	Housing for All - A New Housing Plan for Ireland
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ef5ec-housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/
Short description of the current practice	This national report outlines a roadmap to provide increased housing accessibility and options for all citizens, including those with disabilities. It focuses on increasing the supply of social and affordable housing and enhancing the quality and suitability of housing. Specific actions include the revision of housing grants, the introduction of Disability Friendly Housing Technical Advisors in local authorities, and the establishment of regular reporting on the progress of housing initiatives.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	The lack of suitable, affordable and high quality housing for all people, which includes those with ASD.
Results/outcomes	<p>This plan has initiated several key developments in housing for people with disabilities:</p> <p>A commitment to increase the annual construction of accessible housing units.</p> <p>Introduction of the Housing Adaptation Grant, which has been utilized to modify existing homes to make them more accessible for individuals with disabilities.</p> <p>The plan has been instrumental in encouraging local governments to prioritize housing needs of disabled people in their urban planning and development agendas.</p>

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	Inclusion Ireland - Housing Resources
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	https://inclusionireland.ie/resources/housing/
Short description of the current practice	Inclusion Ireland offers a centralised platform providing resources, advocacy, and guidance for individuals with disabilities looking for housing. It emphasises rights-based approaches to housing and independent living. The organization works through public awareness campaigns, policy advocacy, and

	direct support services to assist individuals in navigating housing options.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	The lack of resources and appropriate and accessible guidance for people with disabilities managing independent living, including those with ASD.
Results/outcomes	<p>Inclusion Ireland's advocacy and resource provision have achieved:</p> <p>Enhanced public and policy-maker awareness of the housing challenges faced by individuals with disabilities.</p> <p>Influenced legislation and policy changes to improve housing accessibility and affordability.</p> <p>Provided direct assistance to hundreds of families in navigating the housing system, significantly improving their living conditions.</p>

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	A Vision for Change: Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/mentalhealth/mental-health---a-vision-for-change.pdf
Short description of the current practice	While broader in scope, this report acknowledges the specific mental health services and housing needs of those with ASD.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	Integrating mental health services with other supports, including housing, for individuals with ASD.
Results/outcomes	Though the report did not directly implement housing policies, it indirectly influenced housing for individuals with mental health challenges including those with ASD. By advocating for community-based services, which include supportive housing. The emphasis on reducing hospitalisations and promoting community living supports the need for appropriate housing that facilitates recovery and integration into society. The outcomes in terms of housing would therefore include increased awareness and a push towards developing housing solutions that are integrated with mental health supports for those with ASD.

Country	Ireland
Title of identified current practices	Implementation of Policy under National Housing Strategy for Disabled People
Reference (e.g. link, citation, national report, or article)	https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/2023-06/NHSDP%20Implementation%20Plan%20.pdf
Short description of the current practice	This component of the National Housing Strategy discusses the systematic approach to implementing the policy across different levels of government and agencies. It involves coordination between the Housing Agency, local authorities, and the Department of Health to ensure that the policy is implemented effectively. National and Local Authority Housing and Disability Steering Groups have been established to oversee and drive the implementation at both national and local levels.
The need/problem/issue addressed by the current practice	The lack of accessible and supportive housing for people with disabilities, including those with ASD
Results/outcomes	The implementation efforts have resulted in: Established regular monitoring and reporting systems that ensure accountability and transparency in the delivery of housing services for people with disabilities. Formation of local and national steering groups that have effectively coordinated the implementation of housing policies, ensuring that the strategies are carried out as planned. Significant improvements in collaboration between health and housing sectors, leading to more integrated service delivery for individuals with disabilities.

Field Research

Participants' Disclaimer

The question "Do you consider yourself to have high-functioning autism?" was included in the survey to gather self-reported data on the experiences and challenges faced by individuals who identify as having high-functioning autism. This question aims to better understand the specific needs and perspectives of this group, which can vary significantly from those with different forms of autism. It is important to note that the term "high-functioning autism" is a

self-identification and may not fully capture the complexity of individual experiences. The data collected through this question will be used to inform and improve support services, ensuring they are more tailored and effective for those who identify as having high-functioning autism.

Introduction:

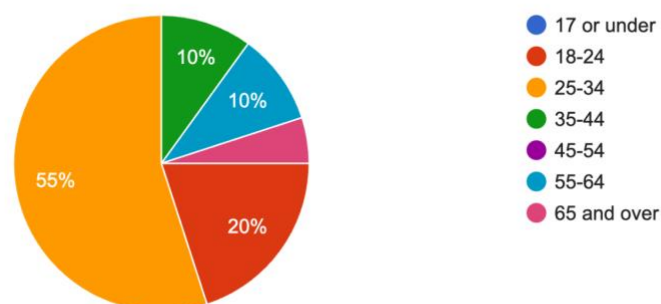
Questions were created in consultation with autistic adults (small focus group of 8), as well as adult educators and professionals working in the field of autism. Questions and answer options were designed to be as clear as possible to address communication barriers, with clear quantification for each answer to make the articulation of feelings easier. Questions were divided into 5 main categories based on desk research of the known challenges faced by autistic adults when living independently. Autistic people also consulted and confirmed the relevance of these barriers. Categories included social isolation, sensory overload, managing daily living tasks, financial literacy, health and well-being issues, and managing essential public services. Descriptions of feelings such as anxiety, stress and sensory overload were generated based on different studies on stress, anxiety and overload combined with a synthesis of academic articles focusing on presenting descriptions and feelings in a relatable manner to autistic people (see examples below).

Overall Description of Participants

1. Age Distribution

Age

20 responses

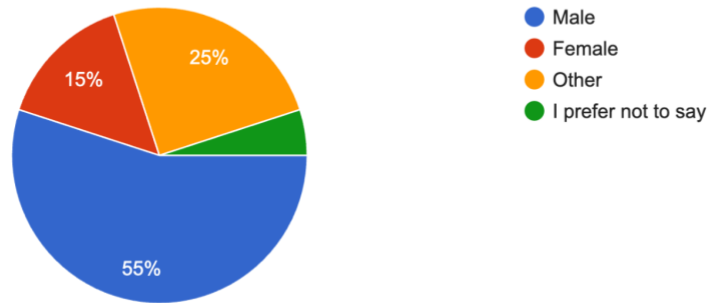


Analysis: The majority of participants (75%) are young adults between 18 and 34 years old, indicating that independent living is a pressing concern primarily

among individuals transitioning into adulthood and early stages of independent life.

2. Gender Identity

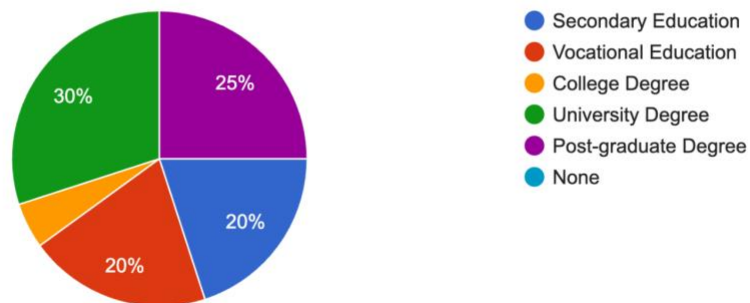
Gender
20 responses



Analysis: A higher proportion of male participants reflects the general diagnosis rates of autism, which tend to be higher in males. However, the representation of females and non-binary individuals underscores the importance of inclusive approaches that address diverse gender-specific needs.

3. Educational Attainment

Education
20 responses

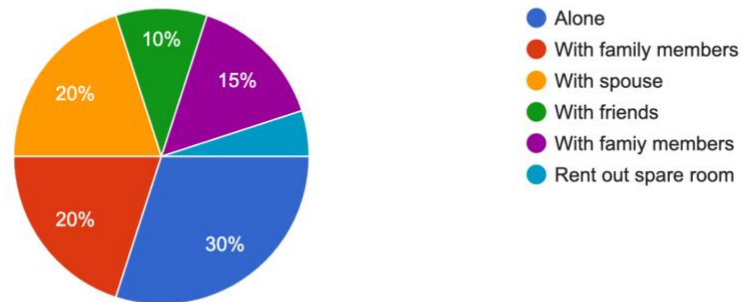


Analysis: A significant portion of respondents have attained higher education degrees, suggesting that despite educational achievements, autistic individuals may still face substantial challenges in achieving independent living, highlighting gaps between educational support and life skills development.

4. Living Arrangements

Living Status

20 responses

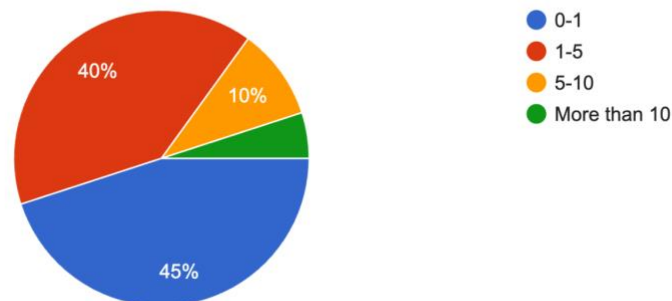


Analysis: Less than a third of respondents were currently living alone, indicating potential challenges or barriers in transitioning to independent living. The largest group of respondents were those that lived with family, which may reflect the struggles of autistic people to live as independent adults.

Amount of Time Living Alone

Years of Living Alone

20 responses

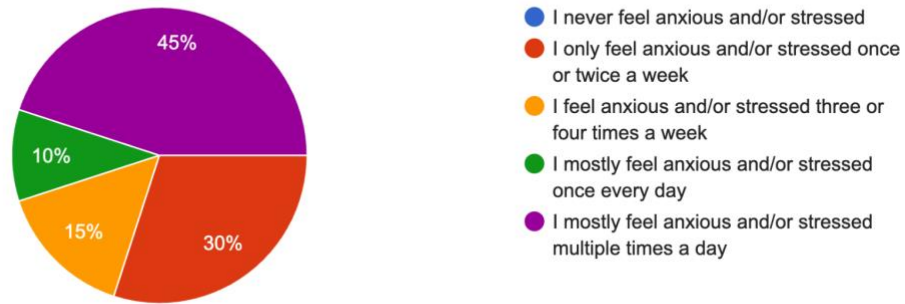


Analysis: The data shows that a significant portion of respondents have experience living alone, with 40% having lived independently for 1-5 years, and 5% for over 5 years. This indicates that independent living is a reality for many autistic adults, though it comes with varying levels of experience and associated challenges. The most significant portion had never or had just started living independently (0-1 years), which may be consistent with the standard rates of independent living for mainstream young adults.

Stress and Anxiety

Indicate the level of stress/anxiety you experience in your daily life.

20 responses



This data shows that nearly half of the respondents (45%) experience stress and anxiety multiple times a day, indicating a high level of daily distress. Another significant portion (30%) experiences stress or anxiety less frequently, about once or twice a week. The remaining respondents fall somewhere in between, with 15% feeling stressed three or four times a week and 10% feeling anxious or stressed once a day.

How stressed/anxious do you feel about the thought of living on your own without support?

20 responses

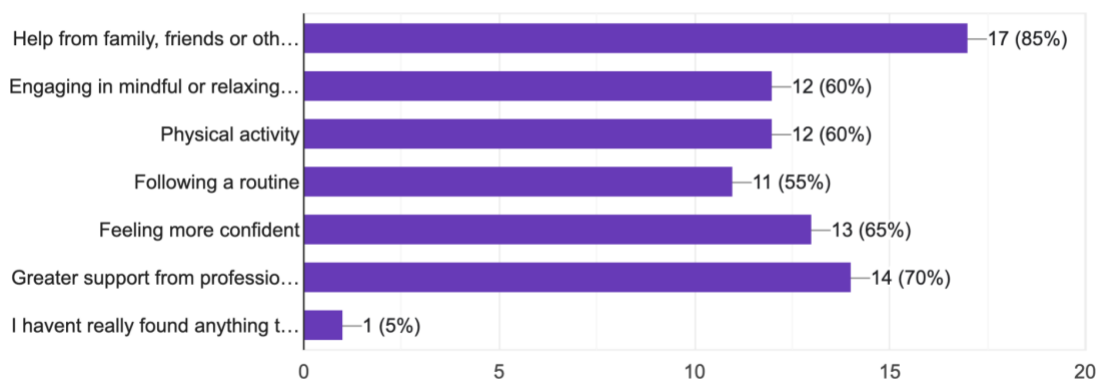


This data shows that while a significant portion of respondents (45%) feel only a little stressed about the prospect of living independently, there is still a substantial group (25%) who feel very stressed about it. Additionally, 30% of respondents do not feel stressed about living alone, which may indicate confidence in their ability to manage or existing support structures that they rely on.

5. Effective strategies for managing stress and anxiety

Which of the following do you feel would help you to deal with stress/anxiety?

20 responses



Help from family, friends, or other support groups was the most commonly cited strategy, with 85% of respondents identifying it as a potential means to deal with stress and anxiety. This highlights the significant role that close personal relationships and support networks play in helping individuals manage their mental health. Social support can improve the ability of adults with autism to live independently by providing a coping mechanism for stress and anxiety.

Greater support from professionals (educators, therapists, trainers, etc.) was mentioned by 75% of respondents. This reflects a strong demand for professional intervention in managing stress and anxiety, and may also suggest that autistic adults in Ireland are not currently receiving sufficient support from professionals. The importance of tailored support from professionals who understand the specific challenges faced by autistic individuals is evident. This could include therapy, counselling, and specialised training that addresses the unique needs of this group.

Feeling more confident was identified by 65% of respondents as a key factor in managing stress and anxiety. This suggests that building self-esteem and self-efficacy should be an important part of any support program. Confidence helps individuals feel more in control of their lives, which can mitigate the impact of stressors.

Engaging in mindful or relaxing activities and **physical activity** were each cited by 60% of respondents. These strategies are well-known for their effectiveness in reducing stress and anxiety. Mindfulness practices, such as meditation and deep breathing, help in grounding and calming the mind, while physical exercise is beneficial in reducing stress hormones and boosting mood through the release of endorphins.

Following a routine was highlighted by 55% of respondents. The structure and predictability that routines provide can be particularly comforting for autistic individuals, helping to reduce anxiety by minimizing uncertainty. Routines also help in organizing daily tasks, making them more manageable and less overwhelming.

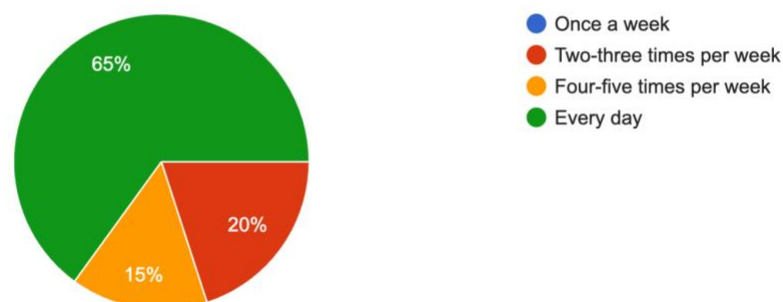
I haven't really found any solution that helps my anxiety/stress except when I'm with my partner was a specific response given by one respondents. This highlights that for some individuals, finding effective coping strategies remains a challenge. This response could also belong to the social support question, which further highlights how vital support networks are for autistic individuals.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

1. Frequency of Social Interactions Among the Participants

How often do you interact with others (in person)?

20 responses

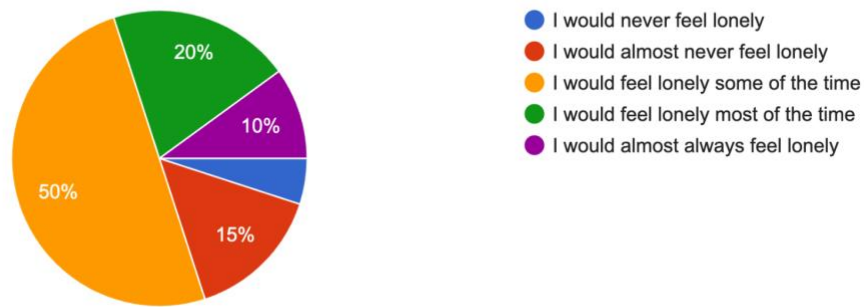


The data reveals a strong inclination toward daily social interactions, with 65% of respondents engaging with others every day. This frequent social engagement highlights the importance of regular social contact for maintaining mental well-being among autistic individuals. However, despite this frequent interaction, there is still a significant concern about loneliness when living independently.

2. Perceived Isolation and Loneliness in Independent Living

Do you or would you feel isolated/lonely when living alone without support?

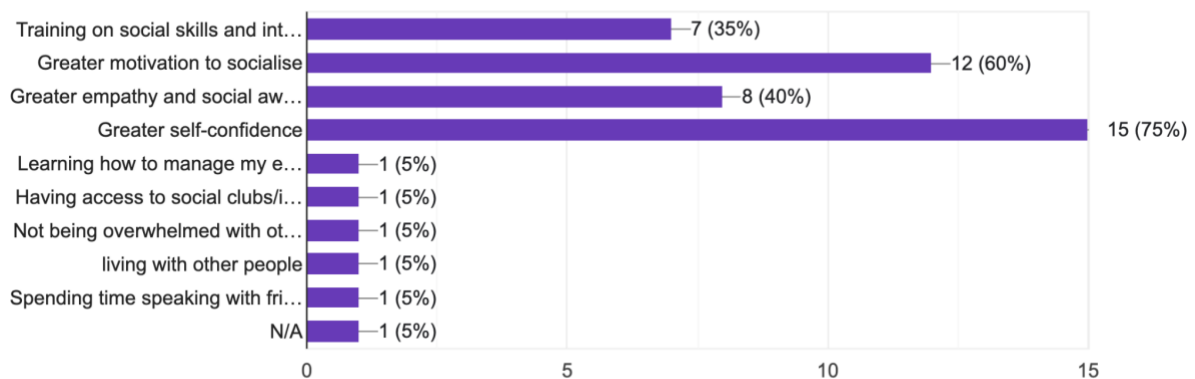
20 responses



Half of the respondents (50%) expect to feel lonely some of the time when living alone, indicating that even with regular social interactions, the risk of isolation remains high. A further 20% fear feeling lonely most of the time, which underscores the emotional challenges that come with independent living. Only 5% of participants would never feel lonely when living independently, highlighting that social support is critical for adults with autism.

Which of the following would help you to feel less isolated/alone?

20 responses



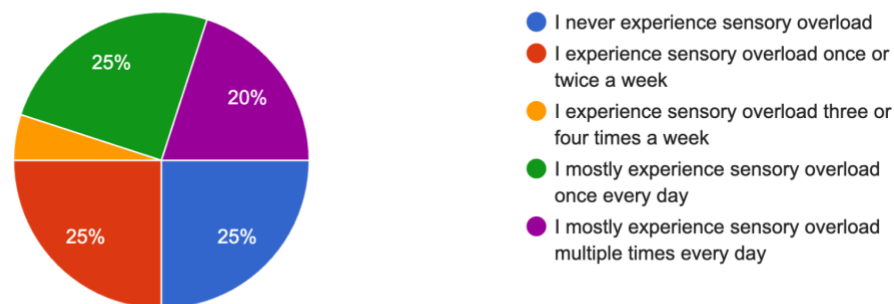
In terms of mitigating loneliness, the most effective strategies identified by respondents include increasing self-confidence (75%) and motivation to socialize (60%). These responses suggest that internal factors, such as self-esteem and the drive to engage with others, play crucial roles in reducing feelings of isolation. Additionally, the need for greater empathy and social awareness (40%) and social skills training (35%) indicates that external support and skill-building are also vital.

Interestingly, 20% of respondents mentioned practical solutions like access to social clubs or living with others, which may indicate that these are seen as less effective compared to psychological and social skill improvements. However, most of these focused on having access to support groups.

Sensory Overload

Do you ever experience sensory overload at home or during other activities in your daily life?

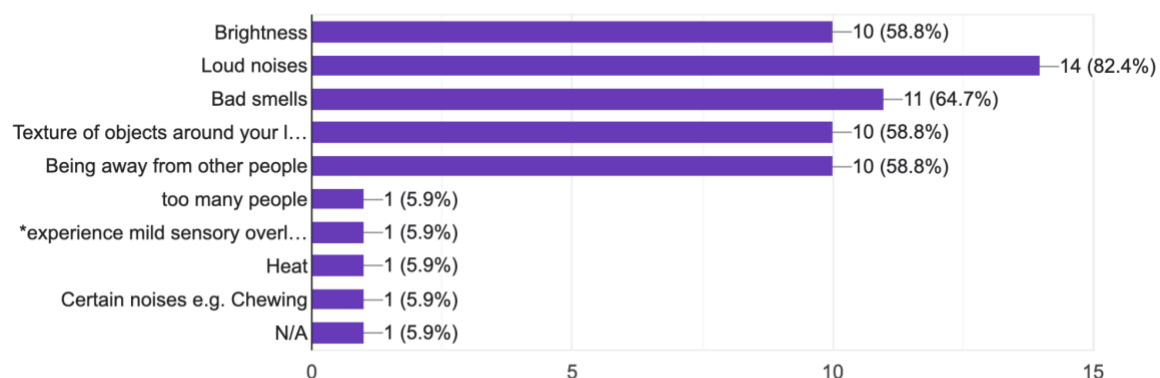
20 responses



The responses to the experience of incidences of sensory overload are mixed, with 50% of participants experiencing sensory overload once or more a day. This may indicate that autistic adults could be better equipped to make changes in their environment to reduce the likelihood of experiencing sensory overload. 25% expressed that they never experience sensory overload, and 45% experience it 1-4 times per week. It is important to note that sensory overload can be particularly difficult to recognise among people with autism (>>>).

If you answered that you experience sensory overload in the last question, would it be improved by being able to control the following? (Tick all that apply)

17 responses

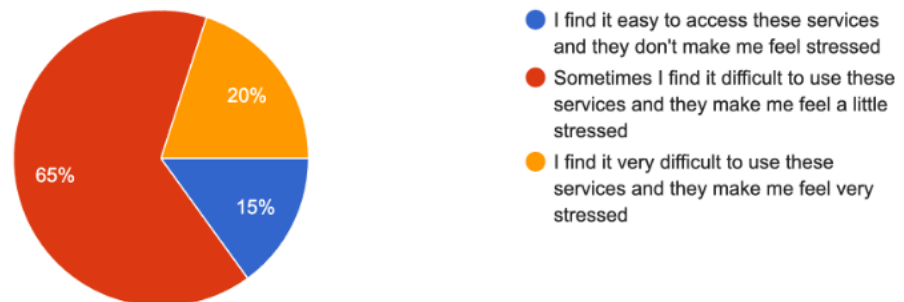


- ecific noises (e.g., chewing), and the presence of too many people.

The responses highlight that **loud noises** and **bad smells** are the two most significant triggers for sensory overload among the survey participants. This suggests that environmental control measures focusing on reducing or mitigating these sensory inputs could greatly improve their ability to manage daily tasks independently. Moreover, **brightness, texture, and being away from other people** are also prominent concerns, indicating that personal space and environmental customisation are critical for creating a comfortable living environment.

Do you find it challenging to navigate essential public services (healthcare, bank and financial services, insurance, etc.)?

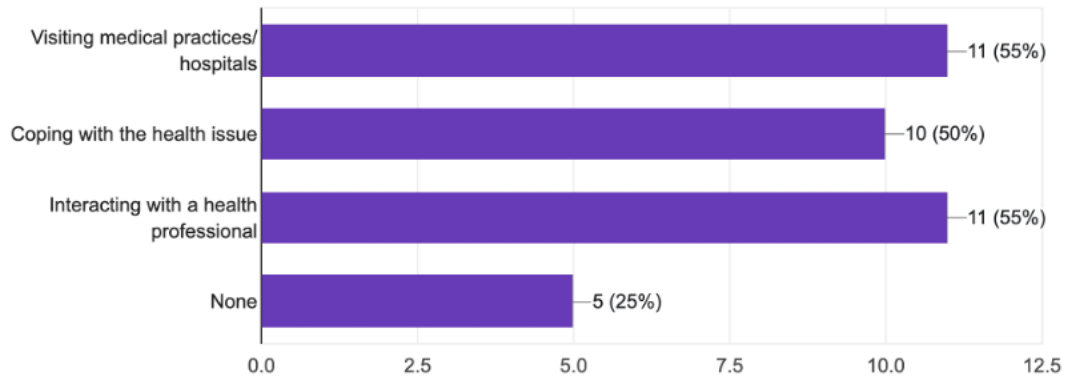
20 responses



The results suggest that accessing essential public services is a significant source of difficulty and stress for autistic adults. The majority of respondents (65%) face considerable challenges, which suggests a gap in the accessibility or user-friendliness of these services for individuals with autism. This might point to barriers such as complex communication methods, overwhelming sensory environments, or difficulties in understanding bureaucratic processes. Meanwhile, a smaller portion of the population finds the process somewhat easier, indicating a possible variation in personal coping mechanisms or external support available.

Which of the following scenarios do you find difficult to deal with when you experience a health issue? (tick all that apply)

20 responses



The results suggest that **visiting medical practices/hospitals** and **interacting with health professionals** are the two most challenging aspects for autistic adults when dealing with health issues. This could be due to sensory overload, communication difficulties, or anxiety in clinical environments. Additionally, **coping with the health issue itself** is also a significant challenge, indicating that managing the symptoms and stress of illness is a barrier. A smaller proportion (25%) of respondents reported no difficulties, which may reflect either individual resilience or the presence of adequate support systems.

Do you feel that managing every day home activities alone (such as cleaning, eating healthily, going to the supermarket, etc.) is/would be difficult or stressful?

20 responses

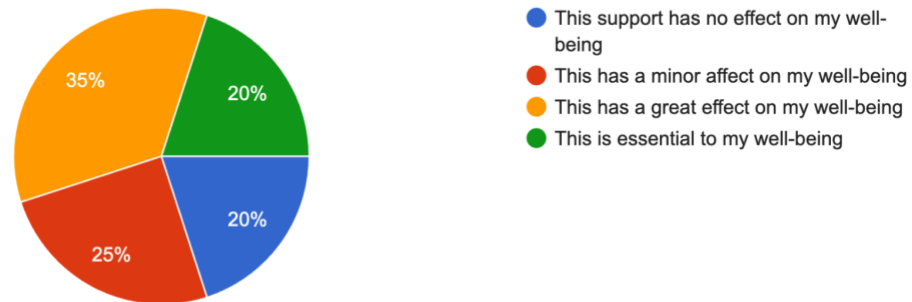


The responses suggest that while a significant portion of respondents (35%) do not struggle with managing daily activities, the majority (65%) experience varying degrees of difficulty. Half of the participants find it somewhat challenging, which may point to specific obstacles such as executive functioning issues, sensory sensitivities, or a lack of external support. The 15%

who find these activities very difficult likely face more profound barriers in maintaining independent living without additional assistance or accommodations.

Please indicate how useful the support from educators, therapists, and other support professionals is to your overall well-being?

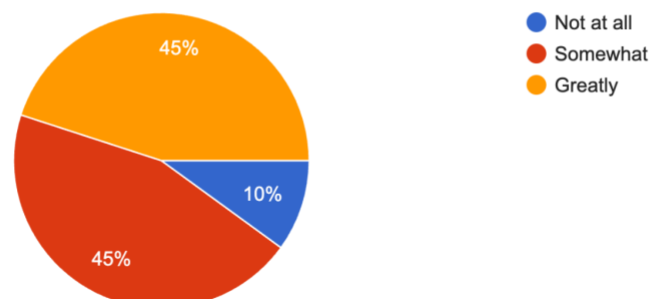
20 responses



The responses show that a majority (60%) of participants find support from educators, therapists, and other professionals to be either essential or to have a substantial positive effect on their well-being. This underscores the critical role that professional support plays in improving the lives of autistic adults, potentially helping them navigate everyday challenges, manage sensory overload, and achieve better mental health. However, 40% of respondents find that this support has only minor or no effect on their well-being, which could point to gaps in the effectiveness or relevance of the services they are receiving.

Do you feel you would benefit from greater support from educators, therapists or other specialists in order to live independently?

20 responses

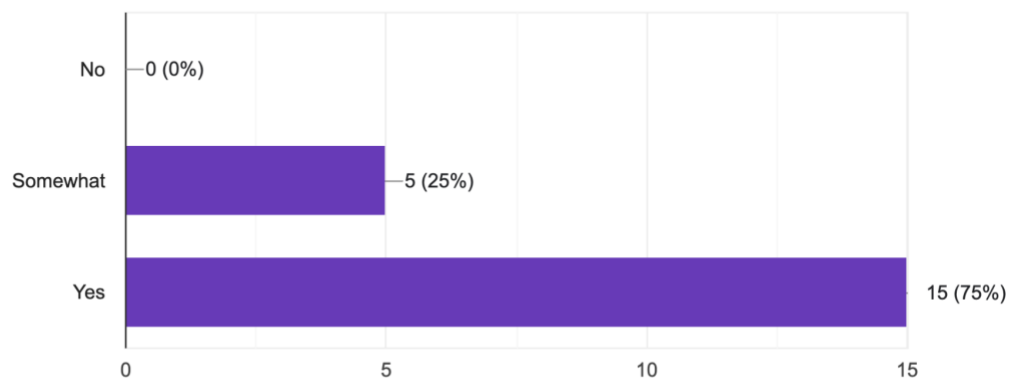


The results reveal that the majority of respondents (90%) believe they would benefit, either somewhat or greatly, from increased support to live

independently. This highlights a significant need for expanded or more personalized services to help autistic adults manage the challenges of independent living. The equal split between "greatly" and "somewhat" suggests that while some individuals need extensive assistance, others may require more moderate levels of support. Only a small percentage (10%) do not feel that additional support is necessary, possibly due to already effective coping mechanisms or adequate support systems in place.

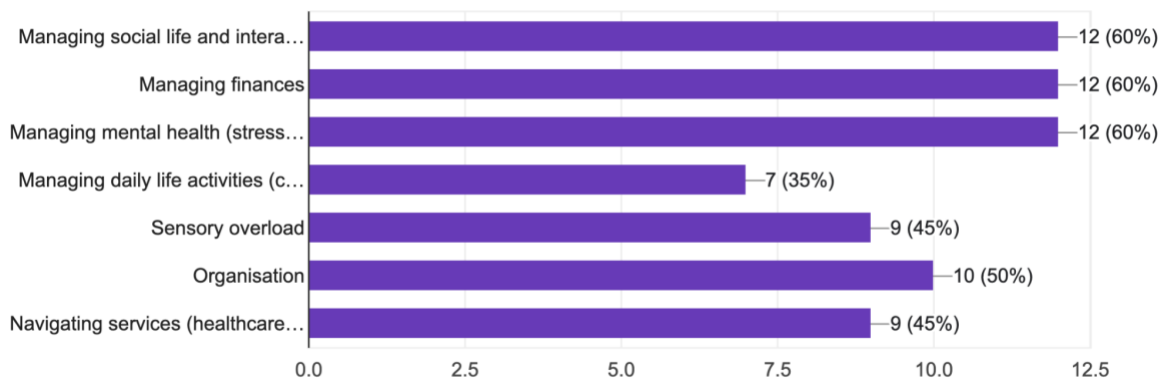
Do you feel that a greater awareness and understanding of autism would help these professionals to provide more effective support?

20 responses



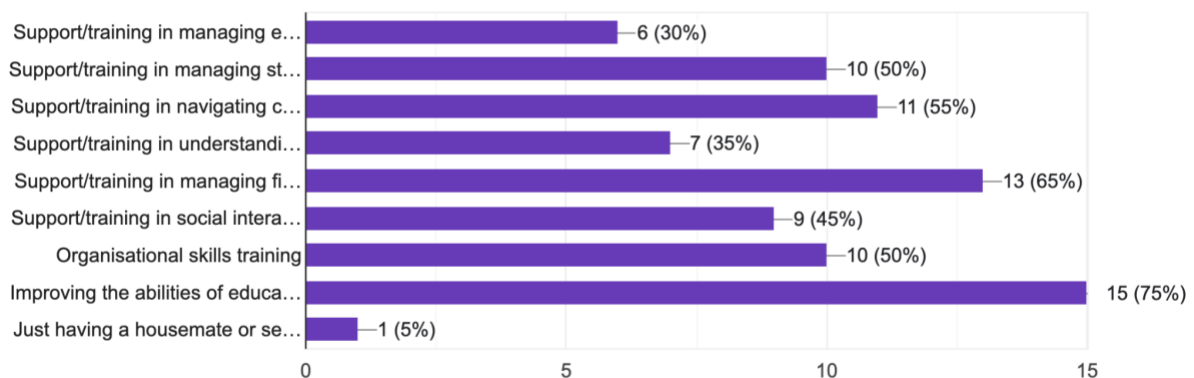
The overwhelming majority of respondents (75%) strongly feel that professionals could provide better support with a deeper understanding of autism, suggesting that many current services may lack the necessary insight into autistic needs and challenges. A further 25% believe that greater awareness would somewhat help, highlighting that even incremental improvements in understanding could enhance support. The absence of any "No" responses indicates a consensus among respondents that professionals need to improve their awareness of autism to deliver more effective care and assistance.

Which of the following areas of independent living do you feel you struggle/would struggle with
20 responses



The top areas of struggle—**managing social life, finances, and mental health**—are consistent among 60% of respondents, reflecting a widespread challenge in handling social interactions, financial responsibilities, and emotional well-being. Difficulties with **organization** and **sensory overload** are also significant, with 45-50% of respondents identifying these as areas of concern. Navigating services, often a complex task due to bureaucratic procedures and communication challenges, is similarly challenging for a large portion of respondents.

Which of the following would help you to feel more supported when living independently?
20 responses



The most significant factor, with 75% of respondents agreeing, is the need to improve the abilities of educators, therapists, and other support professionals. This suggests a perception that better-trained professionals could provide more effective support, highlighting the critical role that professionals play in fostering independent living. Financial management is also a prominent concern, with 65% of respondents needing support in this area. Similarly,

navigating services, managing stress, and improving organizational skills are key areas where respondents seek assistance, which aligns with the earlier responses about struggles in independent living.

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