

Presentation on autism and mental health will focus on improving care

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By Matt McDonald

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Alisha Fletcher, director of the Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism, which is led by the University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies.

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By Matt McDonald

Mental health issues can affect anyone. But people with autism not only experience higher rates of mental health conditions, but those conditions are not always diagnosed, said Alisha Fletcher, director of the Delaware Network for Excellence in Autism.

That's one reason the network, which is led by the University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies, will be hosting a presentation on autism spectrum disorder and mental health on May 16, from 9 to 11 a.m. Ms. Fletcher and Nicole Garrity, a training coach with the network, will hold the presentation over Zoom.

The presentation is geared toward professionals in fields like medicine, social services, mental health and education, but is appropriate for family members and autistic self-advocates.

One in 36 8-year-old children have been identified with autism spectrum disorder, according to a Centers for Disease Control analysis published in March. Autistic individuals experience higher rates of anxiety, depression and ADHD relative to the general population, Ms. Fletcher said.

One source of stress autistic self-advocates speak out about is what is sometimes called "masking" or "camouflaging" — where a person suppresses their autistic traits around others.

"It really requires a significant amount of effort and energy. And so a lot of autistic people contend that they spend an entire day masking at school or work. It can be really exhausting," Ms. Fletcher said. "You can see how that can also lead to anxiety (and) depression" when having to do that routinely, she added.

The network is hosting the presentation as part of the state's recognition of Trauma Awareness Month, an initiative launched in 2018 by Gov. John Carney.

Certain mental health conditions can present differently in people with autism compared to those without it, Ms. Fletcher said, "so calling attention to mental health and autism is a really important component for clinicians, folks in the community, professionals. ... This should be integrated into everybody's clinical practice."

Some professionals do not feel confident or properly equipped to work with autistic individuals. The presentation will seek to help in this area, too, providing participants with an introductory understanding of autism spectrum disorder alongside common co-occurring mental health diagnoses. Information about prevalence and presentation will be available, as will evidence-based resources to support people with autism with mental health needs.

For example, in cognitive behavioral therapy — which can help people manage anxiety — with "some modifications, there's great evidence to say that it's really highly effective and should be used with autistic individuals," Ms. Fletcher said.

The presenters will provide a resource guide to mental health therapists about how they can adapt the therapy technique.

“We’re really trying to be action oriented,” she said, “(Therapists) can think about how they might be able to take the skills that they already have, and to provide those modifications or adaptations to be able to accept clients with autism.”

Ms. Fletcher hopes providers, professionals and the otherwise curious will register. More information can be found at group’s website, delawareautismnetwork.org and selecting “upcoming events.”

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