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The drug education charity



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# Alcohol, drugs and neurodiversity – what's the difference?

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Supporting young people to make safer choices about drugs

# Alcohol, drugs and neurodiversity – what's the difference?

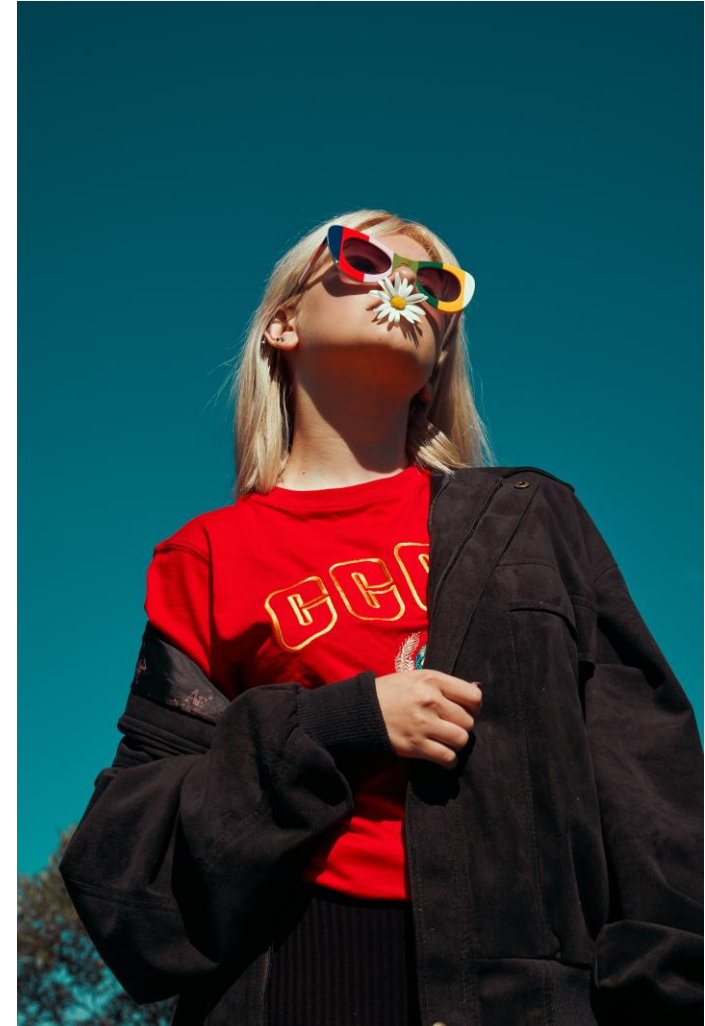
Exploring differences in...

...effects and risks

...motivation and decision-making

...vulnerabilities

...support



# Differences in effects and risks?

Sensory sensitivities, for example...

**Ketamine, LSD, MDMA**



Mixing substances, for example...

**Alcohol and methylphenidate hydrochloride (Ritalin)**

- Stimulant + depressant
- Alcohol changes the way methylphenidate is processed by the body, raising its levels, and leading to increases in negative side effects, and risk of an overdose.
- Methylphenidate can mask the effects of alcohol, leading to increased alcohol-related harms.

**Re-sale value?**

# Differences in motivation and decision-making?

## Managing symptoms...

Smoking, alcohol and illicit drug use were significantly related to ADHD symptoms. In addition, the number of different illicit drugs consumed was significantly higher among the ADHD symptomatic than the non-symptomatic participants.

*Gudjonsson, G.H., Sigurdsson, J.F., Sigfusdottir, I.D., and Young, S. (2012)*



## Symptoms of ADHD in children and adolescents include:

- acting without thinking
- little or no sense of danger

*nhs.uk (accessed March 2025)*

# Differences in motivation and decision-making?

## Managing symptoms...

Autistic adults were nearly nine times more likely than non-autistic peers to report using recreational drugs to manage unwanted symptoms.



*'The Sativa seems to alter my behaviour in a way I become more sociable, stim less and am less prone to meltdowns.'*

## Drugs can be used to:

- reduce sensory overload
- help with mental focus
- provide routine
- mask autism.

Past research has shown that this behavioural management (also known as 'camouflaging' or 'compensating') has been linked to emotional exhaustion, worse mental health, and even increased risk of suicide among autistic adults.

*Weir, E, Allison, C, & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021)*

# Differences in motivation and decision-making?

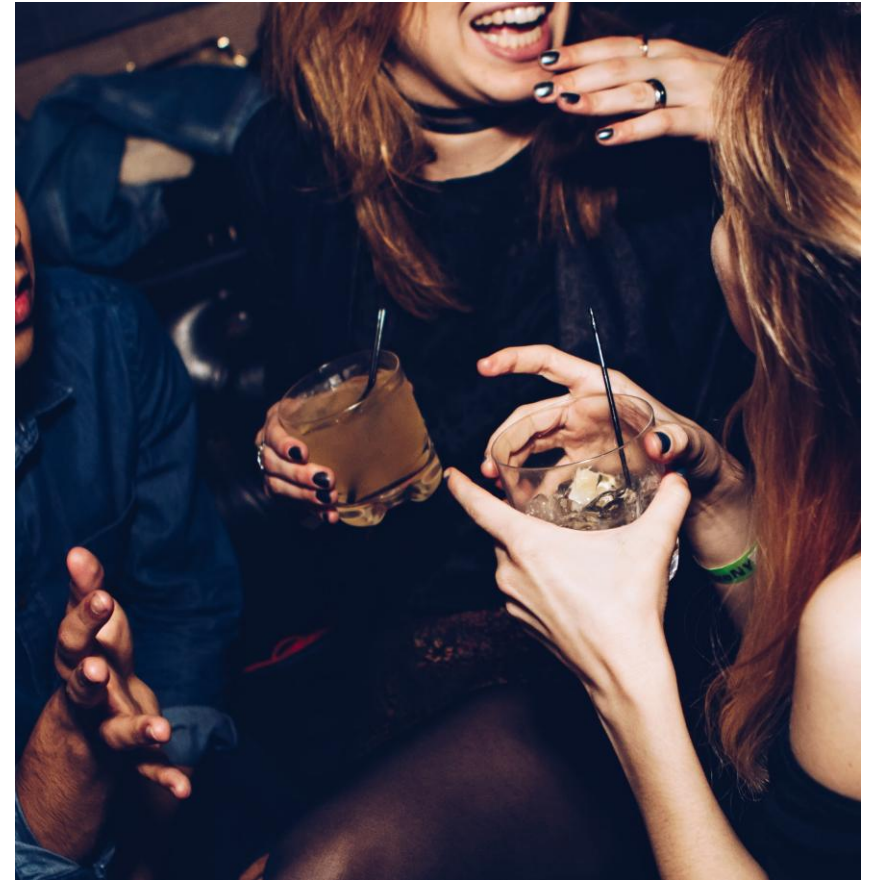
## Socialisation...



'I consider myself to have been a functioning recreational drug addict between the ages of 14 and 28... The only reason I have friends is because I used to take drugs. I have no interest in other people and don't trust anyone, but ecstasy changes that.'



'I found that [amphetamines] alleviated my autistic symptoms, enabled me to socialize/ go out and reduced agoraphobia.'



*Weir, E, Allison, C, & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021)*

# Differences in motivation and decision-making?

## Managing mental health...

### Autistic children (3-17yrs) –

- 78% have at least one mental health condition
- Nearly half have two or more.
- 39% suffer from anxiety and 16% from depression.

Study found that mental health conditions became more prevalent as autistic children grew older.

*Kerns, C.M., Rast, J.E., and Shattuck, P.T. (2020)*



More than half (51.8%) of individuals with ADHD had one or more mental health conditions.

*Merrill, Merrill and Masden, 2014*

# Differences in motivation and decision-making?

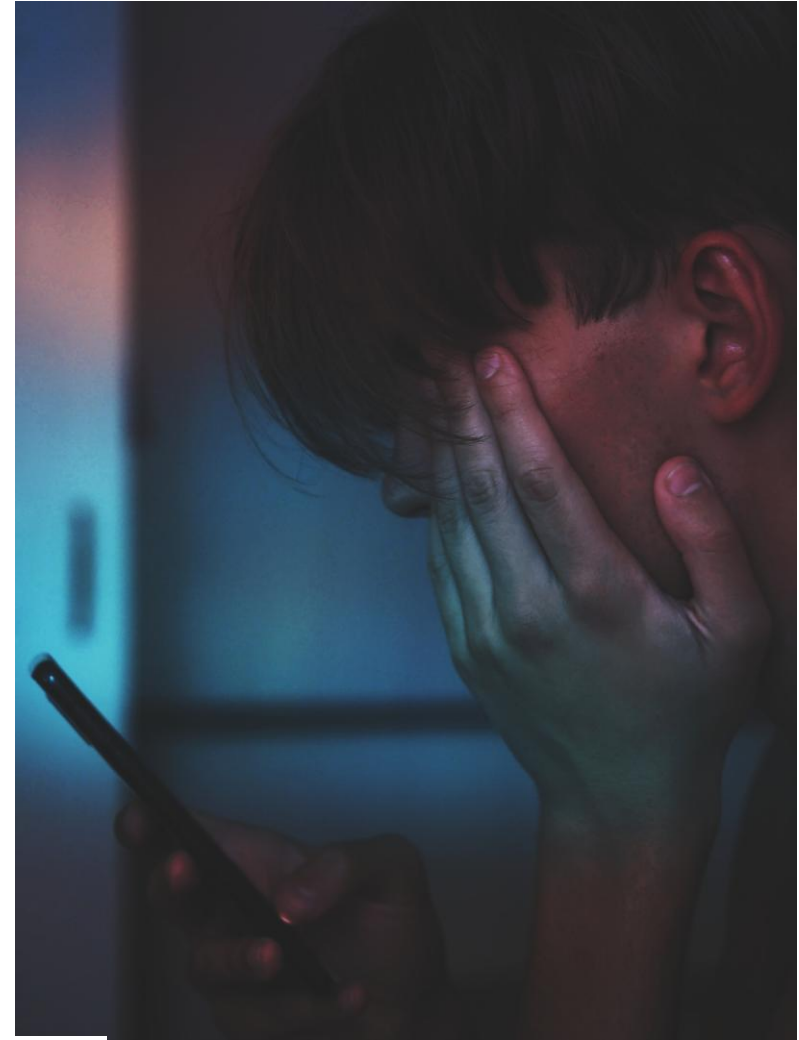
## Managing mental health...

Autistic adolescents and adults were over three times more likely than others to report using substances to manage mental health symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

*Weir, E, Allison, C, & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021)*



*'When I'm getting anxious weed helps, but then in the long run it makes the anxiety worse.'*



# Differences in vulnerabilities?

**Autistic individuals are over four times more likely to report vulnerability associated with substance use compared to their non-autistic peers, including:**

- using drugs to deal with past trauma
- substance use associated with suicide
- being forced, tricked, or accidentally taking drugs
- childhood use of substances (12 years or younger)
- dependence/addiction.

*Weir, E, Allison, C, & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021)*



# Differences in support?

Adolescents with ADHD are 2-3 times at greater risk of developing an addiction to alcohol and drugs than someone without.

*Özgen, H., et al. 2020*

Studies showed one in four (23.4%) adolescents with a substance use disorder had ADHD.

*Rohner et al, 2023*



Information  
for patients

**NHS**  
Berkshire Healthcare  
NHS Foundation Trust

## Cannabis use in ADHD

Barriers to diagnosis and treatment

*“Unfortunately, we can’t add you to our assessment waitlist if you are misusing substances.*

*We will temporarily discharge you from our service until you have reduced your drug use.”*

# What do we need?

## Diagnosis

**ND training for all university staff**

**ND training for substance use practitioners and mental health practitioners.**

**ND screening for substance use and mental health services.**

**Services that will treat young people with ND, substance use disorders and MH conditions.**

**ND accessible drug education and harm reduction information.**



# Useful resources...



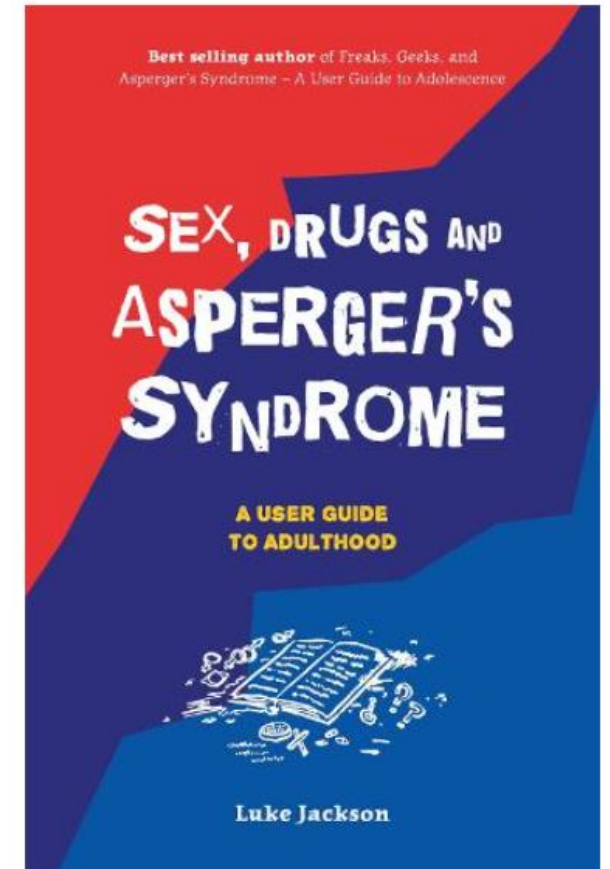
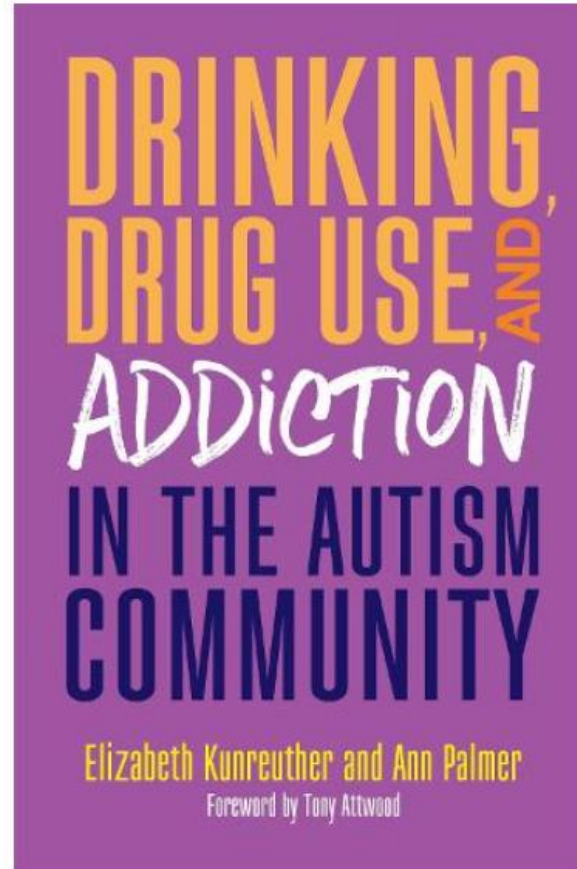
[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

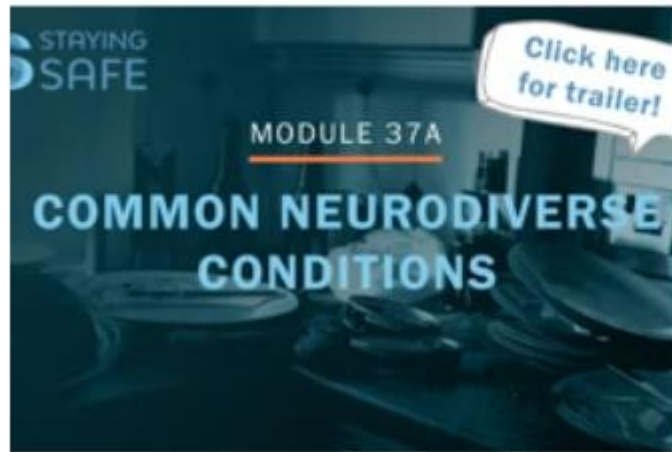


<https://adhduk.co.uk>



[www.adhdfoundation.org.uk](http://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk)





COURSE MODULE TRAILERS

**Module 37A - Common  
Neurodiverse  
Conditions**



COURSE MODULE TRAILERS

**Module 37B - The Link  
Between ADHD and  
Substance Use**



COURSE MODULE TRAILERS

**Module 37C - ADHD  
When Using  
Substances**

<https://stayingsafe.university/>

# Contact:

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 [dsmfoundation.org.uk](http://dsmfoundation.org.uk)



A new resource designed to accompany *I Wish I'd Known...*

