

Amaze submission to Discussion Paper for the Victorian Eating Disorders Strategy.

7 November 2022

Amaze is a community organisation established over fifty years ago by Autistic people and their families. We work to build community understanding of autism, influence policy change for autistic people and provide independent, credible information and resources to individuals, families, professionals, government and the wider community. We are closely connected with the autistic community through our national help line Autism Connect, our peer support networks and community capacity building initiatives.

We thank you for the opportunity to respond to your Discussion Paper for the Victorian Eating Disorders Strategy, and for the opportunity to participate in your Targeted Consultation on neurodiversity and eating disorders on 7 November 2022.

Further to the challenges and ideas discussed at the Targeted Consultation, the purpose of this submission is to highlight the importance of Autistic people being identified as a priority group under the strategy.

Autistic people experience significantly higher rates of eating disorders compared to non-Autistic people, with research showing that up to 30% of patients with anorexia are Autistic or display high levels of Autistic traits.^{i ii iii} Research relating to Avoidant and Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) is limited given ARFID has only recently been included as a DSM 5 diagnostic category. However emerging research suggests that there is a strong correlation between ARFID and autism, and in turn harmful nutrition deficiencies.^{iv v vi} For example, a 2019 study found that atypical eating behaviours are significantly more common in Autistic children (70.4%) than in children with other disorders (13.1%) and neurotypical children (4.8%). For Autistic children who had atypical eating behaviours, the most common behaviour was limited food preferences (88%), followed by hypersensitivity to food textures (46%), other eating patterns, most often eating only one brand of food (27%), pocketing food without swallowing (19%), and pica (12%).^{vii}

As discussed during the targeted consultation, there is an urgent need for:

- better approaches to screening for eating disorders among Autistic children.
- clearer and better co-ordinated care pathways.
- improved understanding of eating disorders and autism across the healthcare community, including emergency departments.
- a focus on how early intervention services, schools and community services may better identify and support Autistic children and teens with eating disorders.
- Equitable access to service providers trained in the support needs of Autistic people, including access to funding and a reduction in wait times for services.
- Tailored treatment approaches that are respectful, safe, accessible and appropriate for Autistic people.
- Tailored information and resources to support families, including access to peer support networks.

Please contact Nicole Antonopoulos, Policy Consultant on 0417 577 874 or at Nicole.antonopoulos@amaze.org.au if we can provide further information or answer any questions you may have.

References

- ⁱ Claire M. Brown and Mark A. Stokes, 'Intersection of Eating Disorders and the Female Profile of Autism', *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 29, no. 2 (April 2020): 409–17, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2019.11.002>.
- ⁱⁱ Eating Disorders Victoria, 'Eating Disorders and Autism', Eating Disorders Victoria, accessed 25 September 2022, <https://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/eating-disorders-a-z/eating-disorders-and-autism/>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Brown C et al 2019. Intersection of Eating Disorders and the Female profile of Autism. *Child Adolesc Psychiatric Clin N Am* 2020 Apr;29(2):409-417. Available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32169270/>; Brede J et al 2020. For Me, the Anorexia is Just a Symptom, and the Cause is the Autism: Investigating Restrictive Eating Disorders in Autistic Women. *J Autism Dev Disord* 50, 4280–4296. Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-020-04479-3>
- ^{iv} Susan Dickerson Mayes and Hana Zickgraf, 'Atypical Eating Behaviors in Children and Adolescents with Autism, ADHD, Other Disorders, and Typical Development', *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 64 (August 2019): 76–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2019.04.002>.
- ^v Jessica Baraskewich et al., 'Feeding and Eating Problems in Children and Adolescents with Autism: A Scoping Review', *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* 25, no. 6 (August 2021): 1505–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361321995631>.
- ^{vi} Eating Disorders Victoria, 'Eating Disorders and Autism'.
- ^{vii} Mayes and Zickgraf, 'Atypical Eating Behaviors in Children and Adolescents with Autism, ADHD, Other Disorders, and Typical Development'.