

Mental Health Conditions in People with IDD

“Dual diagnosis” is a term used to indicate the coexistence of two different conditions. Usually when clinicians hear the term “dual diagnosis,” it means people with a mental health issue and a substance abuse issue. When it is used in reference to people with IDD, it usually means the coexistence of an intellectual or developmental disability and a mental health condition.

The most important thing is to rule out an underlying organic or environmental cause.

In people with IDD, diagnosing a mental health condition can be very difficult. In neurotypical people, mental health conditions are usually diagnosed by an interview where symptoms are described, testing is done using things like a depression scale or anxiety scale, and then by using diagnostic criteria such as that found in the most recent Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) to make a diagnosis. In people with IDD where verbal communication skills can be limited or non-existent, it is very difficult to identify thought disorders or to understand what a person is feeling or experiencing. We often have to look to observations to try to figure out what is going on.

In general, mood disorders like depression and anxiety are underdiagnosed, and psychotic disorders are overdiagnosed. Always remember to assess for medical, environmental, and social situations that could present with signs similar to personality disorders, depression, anxiety, psychosis, or other mental health conditions. People who are experiencing abuse may also present with symptoms that mimic mental health conditions. It is most important in people with IDD not to attribute adverse behaviors to a mental health condition without ruling out an underlying medical or environmental condition first.

A good reference to help assist in mental health diagnosis in people with IDD is the intellectual disability version of the DSM called the Diagnostic Manual—Intellectual Disability (DM-ID). Its purpose is to provide clinicians such as physicians, psychologists, social workers, counselors, and therapists with a comprehensive method to make an accurate diagnosis of mental health conditions in individuals who have an intellectual disability. It is available for purchase online.

Once medical conditions are excluded, there are a few things to consider that may point to a mental health diagnosis in people with IDD.*

Things to Consider:

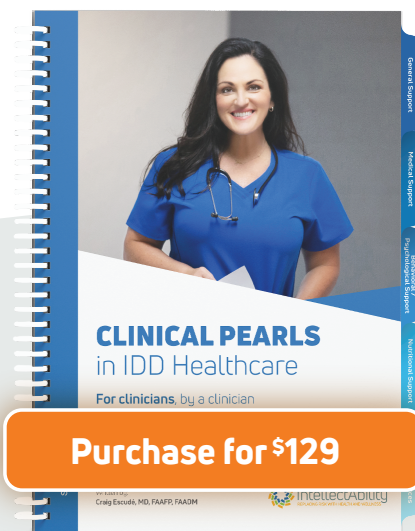
- The behavior occurs in all environments; it is not just exhibited in certain settings
- Behavioral strategies that would be expected to work have been largely ineffective
- The person does not appear to have control over their behavior. (S)he does not appear to be able to start or stop the behavior at will
- There are changes in sleep patterns; increased, decreased, or disturbed sleep
- The person is experiencing excessive mood or unusual mood patterns
- There are changes in the person's appearance and a decline in their independent living skills
- The person may start to engage in purposeful self-harm (cutting, hitting, scratching, pulling out hair)
- The person may start to show signs of hallucinations, such as staring to the side or corners of a room and not appear to track conversations or appear to respond to things that are not there
- There may be changes in eating patterns such as eating less or more
- The person in service has a history of a psychiatric disorder that was in remission
- There is an acute onset of the behavior. If there is a particularly rapid onset with a significant change in mental status or cognitive functioning, rule out a possible delirium due to an underlying medical cause
- There is an unusual change in behavior patterns, such as a significant change from baseline behavior

Many people with IDD are on psychotropic medications for behavioral issues, and a large percentage of them do not have a psychiatric diagnosis. Care should be taken to use drugs only when necessary to treat a mental health condition.

Using these guidelines can be helpful in making a more accurate diagnosis and targeting treatment with more appropriate interventions. Treatment should also include things like applied behavioral analysis and other accepted psychological treatments and not solely consist of medications, as they are not without complications.

*Adapted from Intellectual Disability and Mental Health: A Training Manual in Dual Diagnosis, McGilvery & Sweetland, 2011

This IntellectAbility Resource Sheet is sourced from *Clinical Pearls in IDD Healthcare: Second Edition*, written by Craig Escudé, MD, FAAFP, FAADM, FAAIDD.





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