

Mental Health and Wellbeing: The Missing Dimension of Policy and Services for People with Developmental Disabilities Across the Lifespan

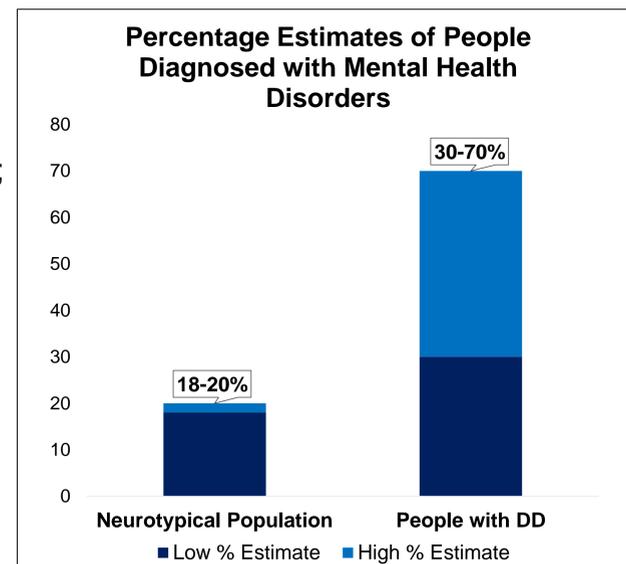
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The Problem

- Rates of mental health disorders in individuals with developmental disabilities (DD) are startlingly high. Yet, mental health is an area often overlooked in research, education, policy and program development within the DD field.
- Unfortunately, instead of collaborating, DD and mental health services wind up competing for the same state and federal funding.
- Lack of training for professionals in this realm also means that many mental health problems in people with DD go untreated or are wrongly assumed to be components of their disability.

Important Facts About Mental Health

- According to the American Psychiatric Association, as many as 70% of individuals with autism spectrum disorder have one comorbid mental health disorder (such as depression, anxiety disorders, ADHD, etc.) and up to 40% may have two or more.
- Rates of comorbidity in people with intellectual disabilities (ID) are similarly high, though the APA is vague, stating that rates of comorbidity are three or four time higher than in the neurotypical population.
- Children with DD are more likely to experience traumas such as bullying, social isolation and abuse (Algood, Hong, Gourdine & Williams, 2011; Tantum, 2012). Childhood trauma is a known risk factor for developing mental health problems in adulthood.
- Comorbidity in people with DD has not been well studied. It is recent that the psychological community acknowledged certain comorbidities could exist, so the field of research is beginning to take shape (Matson & Williams, 2014).



Recommendations

Increased Research

- Increased research focused on mental health in people with DD across the lifespan is needed to better understand comorbidity, how symptoms present, differential diagnosis, the influence of social stigma on mental health, common risk factors, and effective treatment models.

Training for Clinical Professionals

- Better training is needed for clinical and support professionals to address mental health issues facing people with DD. To demonstrate this point - according to the Council on Social Work Education, only 20 out of 262 accredited master's level social work programs in the US offer a concentration in disabilities.
- This training needs to be integrated into general clinical education in fields such as psychology, psychiatry and social work as this knowledge is critical not only for professionals who specialize in this field, but to all professionals-in-training. Clinical professionals in virtually any setting will work with people with DD and need to be prepared to provide empathic, high quality and effective clinical services and assessment.

Changes in Policy and Funding Systems to Promote Integration of Mental Health into Programs and Services for People with DD

- Policy changes need to be made to enhance coordination between DD and mental health service systems.
- Most importantly, the conversation about mental health is one that needs to be integrated into every aspect of the DD service system whether it be in early intervention, educational supports, clinical services, housing, employment, or future planning (just to name a few).
- This will ensure that mental health problems are not only accurately assessed and treated when they arise, but that the mental health and wellbeing of people with DD is considered throughout the lifespan as part of best practice person-centered service delivery.

Conclusion

Effectively preventing/ treating mental health disorders would enhance wellbeing and quality of life for people with DD. It could also cut the cost of services over the course of a person's life by reducing hospital visits, medication use, family stress and levels of professional support needed across a variety of programs and services.

For More Information

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- Percentage Estimate Sources (Chart):**
Neurotypical Population: National Alliance on Mental Illness
People with ID/DD: American Psychiatric Association, National Association for Persons with Developmental Disabilities and Mental Health Needs, & National Core Indicators (NCI compiled by Human Services Research Institute and The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services)