

Autism and Mental Health: Shifting the Lens Through Lived Experience

Moderator: Becca Lory Hector

Introduction: Janet Barbieri, MSW, LICSW, Deputy Director, AANE

Panelists: Jay Eveson-Egler, Ryan Walsh, Maggie Bowlby

December 16, 2025



For Today's Discussion

- ❑ Introductions
- ❑ Developing a Shared Language
- ❑ Support When it's Needed Most
- ❑ The Cost of Non-Affirming Models of Care
- ❑ A Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach

**We will be discussing topics associated with mental health including suicide.*



During this conversation we will:

share current thinking about autism and mental health through a
neurodiversity-affirming lens

I am not here to:

tell you what is right for your work, yourself or your family
shame you for any of your current or past practice
tell you what you have the time and energy for
fix the various systemic issues your managing in one discussion

Introductions



Developing a Shared Language

An Evolving Conversation About Language

Medical Model/Diagnostic	Person-First	Identity-First
Autism Spectrum Disorder	on the Spectrum	Autistic
Asperger's Syndrome		
High/Low Functioning Autism	with an Autism profile	Autist
Suffers from Autism	with Autism	Neurodivergent

***73-81% of Autistic adults have one
mental health diagnosis***

Support when it's needed most

- ❑ **Depression:** 4x as likely
- ❑ **Anxiety:** 30-70%
- ❑ **OCD:** 2x as likely
- ❑ **PTSD:** 32% Autistic v. 4% non-Autistic
- ❑ Autistic people at 7x **increase risk for suicide**
- ❑ **Increased risk for LGBTQ+ Autistic folks:**
 - Trevor Project Survey: LGBTQ+ Autistic people 50% more likely to have attempted suicide in the last year as compared to Autistic people
- ❑ Common **chronic health conditions:** Epilepsy, Ehlers-Danlos, disrupted sleep, GI issues, pain/fatigue:
 - **Compounding impact on mental health**

The cost of non-affirming models of care

- Shame
- Internalized ableism
- Misdiagnosis and delayed diagnosis
- Deficit-based psychoeducation resulting in inaccurate framing of needs
- Treatment goals that promote masking and neurotypicality
- Pathologizing Autistic traits
- Lack of responsiveness to sensory, executive functioning and communication needs
- Harm and mistrust of the mental health system
- Reduced likelihood of accessing care
- Increased negative mental health outcomes

A neurodiversity affirming approach

- ❑ Validates lived experience
- ❑ Communication aligned with client communication style
- ❑ Offers a sensory responsive care environment
- ❑ Helps identify executive functioning supports
- ❑ Promotes:
 - self-understanding
 - self-advocacy
 - self-determination
 - meaningful community participation
 - sensory safety and regulation
- ❑ Reduces isolation and increases connection to safe, supportive community
- ❑ Promotes authentic Autistic living

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for you



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who understands



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info@aane.org
(617) 393-3824

AANE Mental Health Lived Experience Panel

Moderated by
Becca Lory Hector
Director of Training, AANE



Meet our Moderator



Becca Lory Hector (She/Her), Director of Training, AANE, is a passionate and seasoned autism and neurodiversity advocate, consultant, researcher, and author with a career dedicated to supporting and educating about autism in adulthood. As an openly Autistic adult, she is deeply involved in Autistic Quality of Life (AQoL) research, striving to uncover insights that can make a meaningful impact on the lives of Autistic individuals.

Today's panel centers the voices of Autistic individuals speaking from lived experience at the intersection of autism and mental health.

Too often, conversations about mental health and care happen without the input of those most affected. This panel invites us to listen deeply, challenge assumptions, and learn directly from Autistic people about what true inclusion, affirmation, and support can look like.

Content Warning:

With the focus of our discussion being Autism and mental health, this panel may include dialogue about suicidality, self harm, eating disorders, and other related sensitive topics.

Please take care of yourself and
step away as needed.

Meet our Panelists

Meet our Panelist



Maggie Bowlby (She/Her), M.Ed, is the Assistant Director of Individual & Family Services at AANE, and has been with the organization since 2020. Maggie is neurodivergent herself (ADHD) and is married to an Autistic man. At AANE, Maggie manages Individual and Family Services programming, supports staff, and facilitates support groups and workshops. Prior to joining the AANE Staff, Maggie spent 8 years as a Special Educator in Massachusetts. Maggie is committed to amplifying autistic voices and incorporating an understanding of a variety of autistic perspectives into her practice supporting autistic people, their families, and other professionals in the field.

Meet our Panelist



Jay Eveson-Egler (They/Them), Senior Manager of Individual and Family Services, AANE, is an Autistic self-advocate and who has worked with neurodiversity based organizations in a variety of roles, including as a 1:1 community companion, teacher, recruiter, and administrative assistant. Jay's primary interests lie in assisting Autistic individuals with transition into post-secondary educational settings, supporting Autistic peer-to-peer connections, and understanding LGBTQ+ issues and their intersections with autism. They have prior experience founding and facilitating neurodiverse peer support groups at both Holyoke Community College and Mount Holyoke College and remain active as an adviser with the Neurodiverse Students Association at Mount Holyoke, where they graduated with their bachelor's degree in Psychology and Education in 2020.

Meet our Panelist



Ryan Walsh (He/Him), Individual and Family Services Support Specialist, AANE, always enjoys and appreciates the opportunity to speak on his lived experience as an Autistic individual, and has been doing so with AANE since 2014. Ryan speaks on topics related to self-advocacy, mental health, education, employment, building meaningful connections, and language usage relating to autism. In addition, Ryan facilitates support groups and workshops for the AANE community. Ryan graduated from Westfield State University with a Bachelor's in Sociology.

Panelists' Perspectives



Based on your lived experiences, please share how being Autistic has shaped your relationship with the mental health field.



From your perspective,
what does “mental health
support” look like
when it’s truly
neurodiversity-affirming?



Have you ever had a moment in your mental health journey where you felt seen, heard, or supported in a meaningful way? What made that possible?



Many systems aren't built with Autistic people in mind. What kinds of systemic changes do you believe would help improve mental health outcomes for our community?



What role does
community, peer
connection, or belonging
play in your mental health
and overall well-being?



How has your understanding of your own mental health evolved over time, and what has helped you the most in that process?



If you could leave the audience with one thing to carry forward, what would it be?

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