



AUTISM VS. MENTAL HEALTH MISDIAGNOSES:

Helping Parents Know the Difference



Feeling frustrated or lost about your child's potential autism diagnosis? **You're not alone.**

Figuring out what's really going on can be exhausting, especially when autism overlaps with other conditions, leading to confusion and misdiagnoses.

This guide is here to break things down in a way that actually makes sense so you can feel more confident, informed, and ready to advocate for your child in the best way possible.

SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER VS. AUTISM

Shared Symptoms	Key Differences
Difficulty in social situations	Autism: May process social cues, body language, or unwritten social rules differently.
Avoidance of social interactions	Social Anxiety: May understand social cues but fears negative evaluation or worries about being judged.
Shyness or withdrawal	Autism: Social interest varies; some autistic children want connection but may need different communication styles, pacing, or sensory supports.
Trouble maintaining eye contact	
Difficulty forming friendships	Social Anxiety: Desires social connection but fears it.

EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION VS. AUTISM

Shared Symptoms	Key Differences
Challenges maintaining relationships	Emotional dysregulation: Distress is more often tied to relationship stress, rejection fears, or intense shifts in emotion, rather than lifelong sensory differences, restricted interests, or repetitive patterns.
Sensitivity to perceived rejection	Emotional dysregulation: Relationship struggles may be driven by rejection sensitivity, fear of abandonment, intense emotional shifts, or difficulty recovering after conflict.
Difficulty managing intense emotions	Autism: Patterns are usually lifelong and may involve sensory differences, communication differences, routines, repetitive patterns, or focused interests.
Intense emotional reactions	Autism: Distress may be tied to sensory overload, communication mismatch, disrupted routines, masking, or unmet support needs.

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) VS. AUTISM

Shared Symptoms	Key Differences
Executive functioning challenges	Autism: Focus may center strongly on specific interests, routines, or patterns.
Difficulty focusing on non-preferred tasks	ADHD: Attention often shifts with interest, novelty, urgency, or stimulation.
Hyperactivity or restlessness	Autism: Social communication differences often involve reading cues, reciprocity, sensory load, or social expectations.
Impulsivity	ADHD: Social difficulties often involve impulsivity, interrupting, forgetfulness, emotional reactivity, or missed cues from inattention.
Trouble with social interactions	

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

ANXIETY DISORDERS

Anxiety affects about 40% of autistic individuals and can appear as:

- Excessive worry
- Specific phobias
- Panic attacks
- Social anxiety



DEPRESSION

Depression is common in autism, with symptoms such as:

- Persistent sadness or irritability
- Loss of interest in activities
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Feelings of worthlessness

Suicidal thoughts or self-harm concerns, which are more common in autistic adolescents than in the general population and should always be taken seriously. If there is immediate danger, call 911 in the Philippines or go to the nearest emergency room.



SCHIZOPHRENIA

Some features of autism, such as unusual speech, social withdrawal, and flat affect, can be mistaken for early signs of schizophrenia. Features that may be misread can include:

- Unusual speech or communication patterns
- Social withdrawal
- Flat or reduced emotional expression

Key Difference: Schizophrenia typically involves psychosis, such as hallucinations or delusions. Psychosis is not a core feature of autism, though autistic people can also have co-occurring psychotic disorders.



BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder can co-occur with autism and includes:

- Episodes of mania (high energy, decreased sleep)
- Depressive episodes similar to major depression



A THOROUGH AUTISM EVALUATION SHOULD CONSIDER:

- **Lifelong Symptoms:** Autism traits are present from early childhood.
- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Often more pronounced in autism.
- **Social Communication Patterns:** Challenges in reading nonverbal cues and forming friendships.
- **Repetitive Behaviors & Special Interests:** Assess their purpose and function.
- **Masking Behaviors:** Some autistic individuals camouflage their traits, making diagnosis harder.
- **Co-occurring Conditions:** Over 50% of autistic individuals have at least one co-occurring mental health condition.