

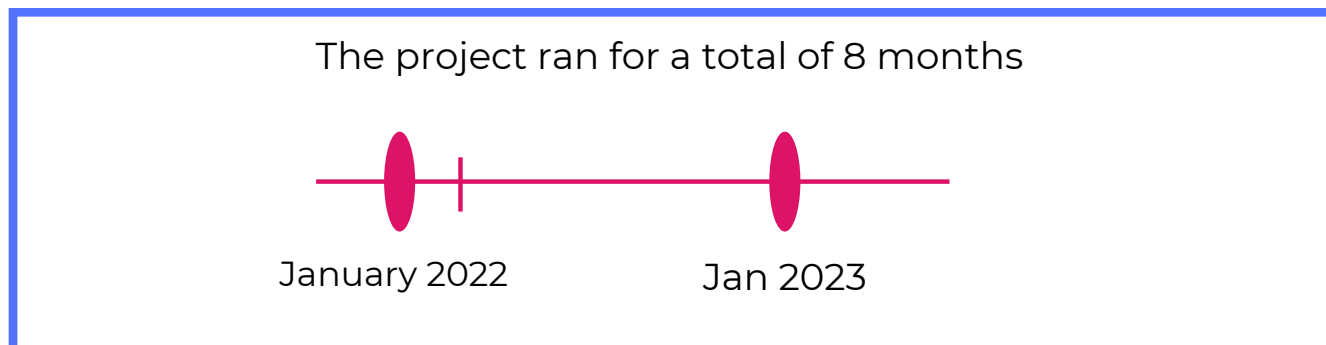
How do autistic adults conceptualise and recover from intimate partner violence and abuse?

Project report

Principal investigator: Dr Amy Pearson, University of Sunderland

Project background

This project was funded by the UKRI Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network as part of its workstream on the theme of interventions for violence, abuse and mental health.



Project team:

- Amy Pearson, Senior Lecturer at The University of Sunderland
- Felicity Sedgewick, Lecturer in Psychology of Education at The University of Bristol
- Monique Botha, Research Fellow at The University of Stirling
- Kieran Rose, Author, Consultant, Trainer, Public Speaker, Researcher at KMR Training and Consultancy
- Sarah Douglas

Project summary

Background

Autistic people are more likely to experience interpersonal violence and abuse compared to non-autistic people, yet to date there is very little exploration of their experiences and how to best support them. The aim of this work was to examine how autistic people recognise and understand violence and abuse, things that hindered or helped them in seeking and accessing support, what they think would help them and other people to access support and recovery in the future.

Methods

We interviewed 22 autistic people about their experiences. Some of these people took part in video interviews, and some wrote down what had happened to them. We analysed the data using a form of qualitative analysis called 'thematic analysis'.

Results

We found 5 key themes in the data. The first theme was about self and identity. Our participants had experienced mistreatment from an early age, which led to low self-worth. They were invalidated by others, and when things went wrong in their relationships, they blamed themselves. Theme 2 focused on conceptualizing abuse. Many of the participants had experience abuse multiple times, starting in childhood which led to abuse seeming 'normal'. This made it harder to recognize abuse and escape. Theme 3 focused on how power impacted perceptions of abuse. Participants felt they had no freedom to choose what they really wanted, and felt trapped. They felt no-one would believe them. Theme 4 was about being an autistic survivor. Participants said services need more training, and to provide accessible support. Theme 5 was about recovery, and the importance of systems being fair and for everyone.

Conclusions

Overall our findings highlighted some unique things that we can use to develop better services and support for autistic survivors.

Key messages

Top 3 key messages from the project



Autistic (and neurodivergence) informed support services for survivors are desperately needed, with practical training developed with and delivered with autistic people.

Relationship education should be provided to all children from an early age, to help them identify 'red' and 'green' flags within all relationships.



Autistic people feel that their abuse is normalised due to the way society perceived and treats difference, and intervention should also focus on removing stigma to affect first AND second order change.

The Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network

We will be sure to keep our members updated on any outputs linked to this project in the future. To keep updated you can sign up to our mailing list and receive our monthly newsletter. You can also follow us on our socials . All links can be found at the bottom of this page.

About the VAMHN

We are a network of individuals and organisations aiming to reduce the prevalence of mental health problems by addressing associated violence and abuse, particularly domestic and sexual violence. We bring together and support research by experts from a range of disciplines, sectors, and backgrounds - some with personal experience, others with expertise from the work that they do, and survivor researchers with both.

The activities of the network are organised into 3 themes:

Measurement	Measuring the extent and impact of domestic and sexual violence in relation to mental health. Our first year activities focused on the theme of measurement
Understanding	Understanding the pathways that lead to domestic and sexual violence and their relationship to mental health problems
Intervention	Planning interventions and services to prevent, reduce and address domestic and sexual violence in people with mental health problems or at risk of developing mental health problems

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