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## Autism and the Influence It Has on Everyday Living



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### ABSTRACT

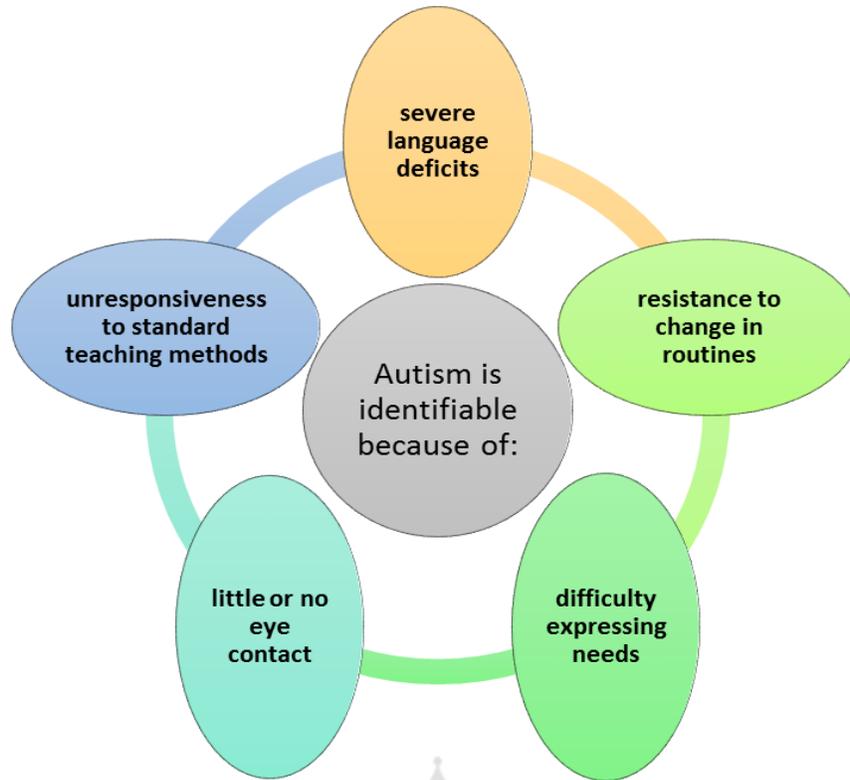
**Background:** Autism is a neurological disorder characterized by disruption of learning and limiting social interaction that is the third most common developmental disability globally. **Purpose:** The purpose of this review was to explore the concepts of living with autism and the influences it has on everyday living. **Method:** Various sources were analyzed, including data from scholarly articles and professional nursing journals. **Findings:** The findings included common themes such as inattention, speech difficulties, lack of social skills, and caregiver stress. **Conclusion:** It is important for nurses as well as any caregivers of a person diagnosed with autism to know the proper ways to conduct assessments, implement appropriate interventions, and ultimately provide the best care possible that satisfies the patient's needs and desires.



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## INTRODUCTION

Individuals living with autism experience a variety of moods and changes in behaviors daily. Some of the characteristics and behaviors that make autism identifiable in people include severe language deficits, resistance to change in routines, difficulty expressing needs, little or no eye contact, and unresponsiveness to standard teaching methods (see Figure 1). The topics being discussed throughout this article are the most common characteristics, symptoms, and behaviors of autistic people and the challenges that those who live with an autistic person encounter. Each autistic person experiences symptoms and behaviors differently depending on the severity of their condition. The topics discussed in this review cover the behavioral concepts of those living with autism and its impact on their lives. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes people living with autism as frustrating at times for themselves and stressful for those caring for them [1]. Financial, emotional, and physical stress are all components affected by a person living with autism. The CDC emphasizes that the needs of a person who has autism are essential to fulfill to keep the person healthy, safe, and less stressed about transitioning from early childhood to adulthood [1]. The purpose of this review was to explore the concepts of living with autism and the influences it has on everyday living. This may help nurses understand how to provide the best possible care for these types of individuals. A research question that is expected to be answered is what effect autism has on the patient's well-being and activities of daily living and the effects those who care for an autistic person encounter daily.



**Figure No. 1: Some of the characteristics and behaviors that make autism identifiable**

### Background

Autism is a condition that can impact all functions of daily living, even if it is the most subtle effect. The characteristics that define autism can be subtle indications or widely known signs and symptoms. There is no treatment for autism, but there are many advances in medicine and technology that have helped improve care and reduce the effects of the disorder. Some methods that can be used include encouraging them to participate in social groups or activities to focus on their weaknesses using therapies such as speech and physical therapists to help them gain independence. The new trends seen in the world today are allowing people with mental disorders and disabilities to get out and interact with peers. It is shown that allowing autistic persons to engage in regular day-to-day employment opportunities and participate in activities that non-autistic people can do independently provides an increase in self-esteem and confidence. Nurses and other healthcare providers must understand the difficulties that autistic people face mentally and physically and apply them to their plan of care to regain their confidence and independence.

## CASE STUDY

### Patient C.O.

Living and growing up with someone who has autism takes a lot of grace and patience. They need a lot of attention and care for their daily routines to be met. From having personal experience of living with someone who is autistic, it is a lot of stress for everyone within the household. C.O. has a mind of a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, even though he is in his upper 20's. C.O. can communicate what he needs but cannot correctly say his pronouns and often say words that do not make sense. He has difficulties making friends because he cannot hold a conversation for more than a minute from lack of attention and knowing what to say. He needs constant reminders about little things such as when to get out of the shower, what time it is, and many explanations in terms that he can understand. C.O. loves learning about numbers, and he will write out numbers for hours. He always says, "zoogillion 3,000 is a number." His other interests are bowling, diet coke, Hershey candy bars, pepperoni pizza, money, and listening to music. C.O. spends hours on end playing Wii bowling, and he always will say, "I'm going to get a perfect score of 300." Playing Wii bowling and listening to music on his air pods is a therapeutic measure for C.O because they both calm and relax him. Another one of C.O.'s interests is money. He loves the idea of having lots of money but yet does not understand the concept of it. He always says, "I'm going to buy 20 Hershey bars with this \$200".

C.O. is a very polite young man and is always nice to new people he meets. He will always go up to them and properly shake their hands. Once he is comfortable enough around people he just meets or is around his family members, he gets goofy and laughs a lot. He loves to dance and make others laugh. When he is in a happy or content mood, C.O. either paces around the house listening to music or mumbles little noises to himself. However, when C.O. is not in a good mood, he can get very aggressive or anxious. A lot of what triggers him to feel this way is if his routine is off. Autistic individuals are very routine orientated, and if C.O. does not get his diet coke or Hershey candy bar that he is supposed to get, he perseverates on it and becomes very upset. C.O. will display self-destructive behaviors such as pounding on walls and throwing items off counters or walls. He gets very agitated and threatens others with his words or gets aggressive by hitting others. C.O. needs many anti-anxiety and benzodiazepine medications,

such as Klonopin, to help control his agitation and aggressive behaviors. Other events that trigger his anxiety are external stimuli such as loud noises such as fireworks and crowded areas. Having a child who is autistic can be very challenging, exhausting, and stressful. They need a lot of attention, care, and recognition. Having valuable resources and family members who provide attention and love can make the care process much more manageable.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the literature review, resources from different databases have given insights into the common characteristics seen when living and caring for a person diagnosed with autism. Some of the databases were ProQuest Central, Wiley online library, Google Scholar, and Elsevier. The keywords searched were autism, social skills, inattention, aggression, speech impairments, and caregiver stress. All resources were peer-reviewed. All except two resources were in the date range 2016-2021. How these affect the family and the individual itself are analyzed, and explanations of why these characteristics are seen.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the DSM-5 criteria for autism are based on two prominent characteristics, followed by their effect on the individual. The first characteristic that needs to be present is deficits in social communication and interaction [2]. This could include difficulties with relationships, nonverbal or verbal communication. The other indicator is restrictive or repetitive behaviors. For diagnosis, at least two of the following need to be met: repetitive movements or speech, insistence on the same routine, fixation on interests, and hyper/hypoactivity [2].

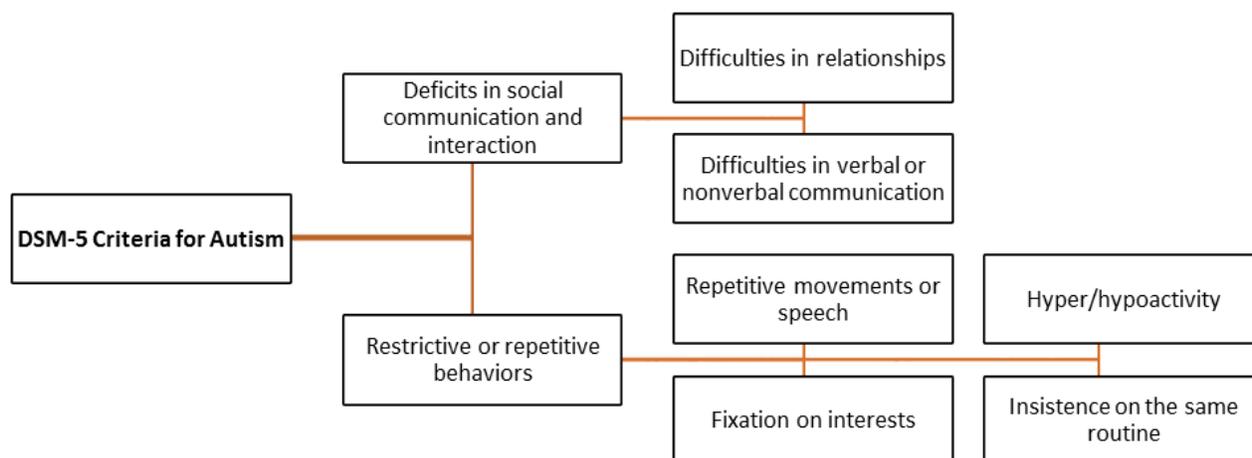


Figure No. 2: DSM-5 Criteria for autism [2]

### Inattention

Inability to stay focused is a common characteristic seen among autistic people. One study found that 30-50% of people diagnosed with autism also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) manifestations [3]. The study indicated that two-thirds of people diagnosed with ADHD show features of autism [3]. The link between attention deficit and autism is strong and very commonly seen. The same is seen in another study about the relation between ADHD and autism disorder. Their case study indicated that 20% of 1500 children with autism were also given a diagnosis of ADHD [4]. It is very common to meet someone diagnosed with autism who cannot stay focused on one thing at a time. When having a conversation with someone with autism, they may be looking around, fidgeting, pacing, and talking about off-topic things. It puts a lot of stress on the family when they are responsible for teaching their children everyday things and keeping them in school.

### Lack of Social Skills

People diagnosed with autism generally have a more challenging time developing relationships with their peers because they lack social skills. Lack of social skills results from not having many opportunities to interact with their peers [6]. The most significant proportion of people with autism live at home with their parents and are underemployed or not employed at all. They

tend to depend on their parents more than other young adults, which, unfortunately, relays a lack of social exposure [6].

Children with autism have difficulties with social intention in relation to motor skills [6]. A study involving children with autism, intellectual disabilities, and typically developing children found weaker aiming and throwing skills correlated with higher social impairment. Mirror neuron impairments were to blame for the lack of social skills. These neurons are responsible for communication, action, and understanding, which is often what autistic children lack [6]. Autistic children who lack motor skills early in life face more significant social problems later, which can also go along with the theory that autistic children are not exposed to normal social interactions with their peers [5, 6]. Thus, less chance for playtime to advance their motor skills. It is challenging for parents to see their children suffer in the social environment. Many times, autistic children are misunderstood because of their introvertedness or presumably shyness.

### **Speech**

People with autism often have a difficult time sculpting their speech. They can experience echolalia (repetition of heard words or phrases), delayed speech, flat tone, giving unrelated answers, and more [1]. Echolalia can be immediate, which means that they repeat something someone just said, or it can be delayed where they say something they heard from someone a while back [7]. Disorganized speech can put a lot of stress on a family because it is hard for them to communicate what they may need or feel. Having speech impairments also makes it harder for them to fit in with their peers when they are younger and, in turn, leads to being more dependent on their parents.

### **Aggression**

It is not unusual for people with autism to become easily agitated. Aggression is often the biggest reason for caregiver burnout among parents who have children with autism. In autism, aggression can be shown in different ways. Aggression can cause very negative effects to someone with autism; it further impairs social relationships. It also may lead to them being placed in different schools more specialized to handle these behaviors, which leads to further social isolation [8]. It also causes the use of physical interventions when people must subdue the

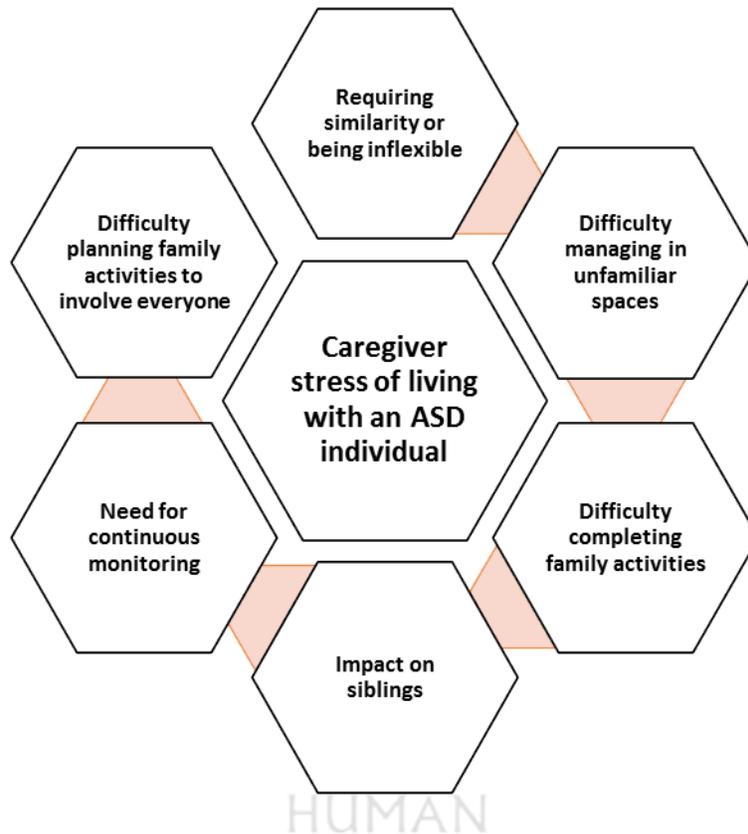
person and risk being victimized [8]. When a person with autism acts out in anger, they can be very dangerous as they may not understand the effect of their actions. Families often need extra help when this becomes a frequent problem, such as group homes or extra aides.

In a study on the risk factors for irritability and aggression among autism, researchers named three variables: good indicators of self-injurious behavior, impulsivity, intellectual functioning, and stereotypy [9]. The sample was 2612 participants of the autism spectrum disorder (ASD), all of which were given informed consent. One of the research questions was how irritability and aggression are associated with other autism spectrum disorder symptoms. The researchers developed other common behaviors among people with autism and studied which of these were linked together. They found that the top behaviors that impacted each other were quick mood changes, temper tantrums, and crying or screaming inappropriately [9].

### **Caregiver Stress**

Parents of autistic children undergo many stresses and hardships raising a child diagnosed with autism. In a qualitative study about the effect of raising an autistic child on parents, researchers found that sensory-related behaviors are the most reported area when seeking treatment [10]. The sensory-related behaviors include self-stimulation, avoiding, sensory seeking, and “turning out” behaviors.” It is estimated that 80% of autistic individuals have poor sensory modulation behaviors [10]. This study included four families of a child with autism. Interviews were held over the phone within two weeks. Researchers wanted to discover the meaning of living with a child with autism. They explored how families use routines to support their children's participation in activities inside and outside the home. Often, the child with autism has difficulty functioning outside of their home where their parents often support them in almost every aspect. They gave sensory processing measures (SPM) to each parent to evaluate the sensory-related behaviors of the child. The seven areas of the SPM included: social participation, visual, hearing, tactile, proprioceptive, vestibular functioning, and praxis functioning [10]. It was important to gather all sensory fields because not all people may experience the same behaviors that the other has; each person may act their way. As illustrated in Figure 3, the most prominent themes the researchers found were flexibility, familiar vs. unfamiliar space, difficulty completing family

activities, impact on their siblings, need for monitoring, and the strain of developing ways to improve participation for the family as a whole [10].



**Figure No. 3: Some stressors caregivers of an individual with autism experience**

Parents have difficulty managing their children when dealing with the unpredictable and tiring behaviors brought into the family. They often get burnt out and require assistance outside of the home or need the child to move out of the house. The stress of a parent raising any child is a lot to handle; it is not uncommon for parents of children with autism to feel extreme anxiety and burnout.

### **Routine**

A common characteristic seen in many autistic children and adults is that they are very routine orientated. Many autistic individuals use routines to deal with depression, anxiety, or uncertainty. For anyone, routines can be very positive and beneficial to incorporate into their everyday life. Daily routines are a collection of typical activities that are repeated at a fixed interval every day [11]. Engaging in these activities structure an individual's day to be more organized and efficient.

ASD turns to routine and obsessive, repetitive behaviors to comfort themselves and bring them to a calm instead of the anxious state of mind. Many adults and children with ASD find comfort and feel most comfortable when provided with the stability and structure of daily routines [11]. However, a minor or significant change in routine can create problems and lead to a lot of distress and sometimes even anger for these individuals. It is vital that caregivers reorient these ASD individuals to help them feel more at ease and less anxious by providing them with therapeutic interventions such as music or coloring to feel calmer and feel safer.

### **Sensory Overload**

Autistic children and adults have typical sensory overload characteristics, such as loud noises, crowded environments, and foul-smelling odors. It causes significant discomfort and can lead to severe anxiety attacks and sometimes aggressive responses. It is overstimulation of events that can trigger the brain not to process the sensory information correctly, which causes uneasiness and anxious feelings. Not much research has been conducted that included autistic participants' perspectives as part of the data collection due to deficits in social skills and communication [12].

A recent study was conducted that included the sensory experiences children with autism endure. The study aimed to gather accurate data regarding an autistic person's insight into what they experience and interpret these sensory stimulations. The style of data collection was interviews with the autistic children themselves [12]. Fourteen children participated in the study. Each of their gestures and facial expressions was assessed while the basic interview was taking place. The questions included, for example, "What do you like to do for fun?" Each answer was then coded based on the amount of sensory feedback they gave during the interview process. The results showed similarities between the 14 participants, including them grouping their sensory responses into likes and dislikes, describing their sensory experiences as ever-changing over time, storytelling their responses, and having uncontrollable physical responses from negative sensory experiences [12].

### **Summary**

It is estimated that 1,500,000 people in the U.S. have autism [13]. Having an autistic family member can put a lot of pressure and stress on a family. Dealing with the inattention issues when

raising a child with autism is difficult, and their lack of socialization, speech impairment, aggression, routine orientation, and increase in sensory overload. It is hard for any parent to see their child struggle outside of the home, but with autism, it is also inside of the home. The common signs are seen in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) relating to inattention issues, including not focusing on one thing for a long time and fidgeting one's hands.

Regarding lack of socialization, it is hypothesized that this is due to limited opportunities to interact with other peers and possible speech and communication skills. Aggression, sensory overload, routine, and caregiver stress are all correlated with each other because aggression is shown to be an effect of sensory overload or disruption in routine and caregiver stress is a result of trying to help control aggressive behavior (see Figure 4). As shown, all these characteristics correlate with one other, so it is vital to understand and help identify risks that could cause a domino effect.

Ensuring the areas where their child lacks is often a challenging case in many families, but it is a further issue in the child with autism. As a nurse, it is important to connect with not only the autistic person but also the family members. Discuss with those taking care of the patient to understand the dynamic and interrelationships between each person of the family and their defining roles. Help advocate and educate family members on ways to reduce risks of stress on the family and the autistic person. It is essential to encourage autistic people to enjoy activities outside and collaborate with other peers in public settings to help improve their independence and ultimately grab hold of positive influences from other peers.

Themes found in the literature regarding autism	Lack of social skills
	Difficulty with sleep
	Aggression
	Sensory-related behaviors
	Routine oriented
	Inattention

**Figure No. 4: Emerging themes from the literature regarding autism symptoms**

*Citation: Samuel P. Abraham et al. Ijssrm.Human, 2021; Vol. 18 (3): 176-190.*

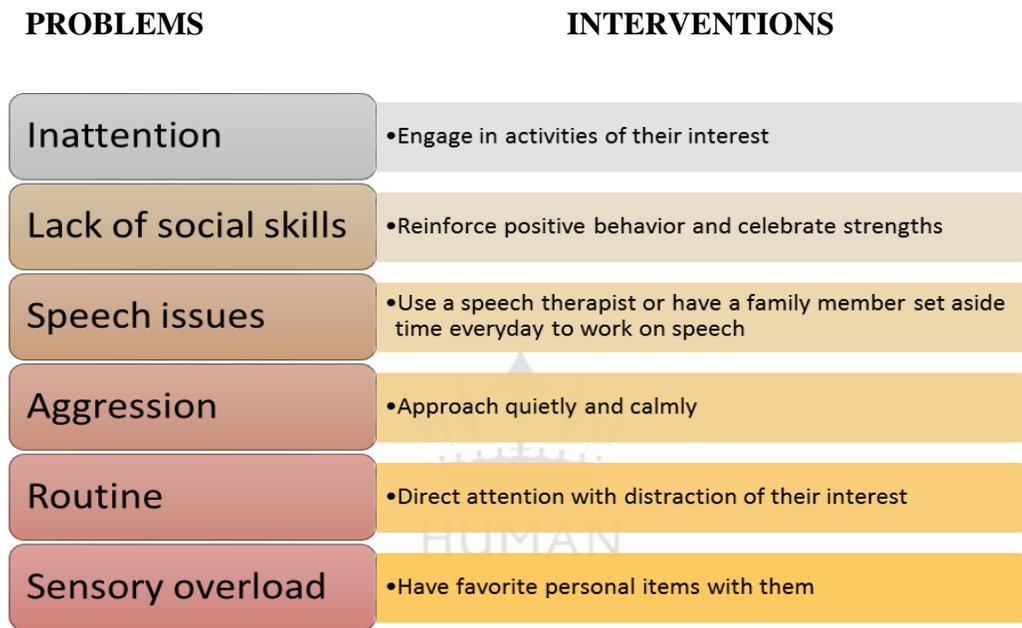
## DISCUSSION

Based on the literature review and the characteristics seen within ASD individuals, there are several short-term and long-term interventions that should be implemented daily for autism. For inattention, interventions could include engaging them in activities of their interest so that they remain focused for more extended periods. Others could also include teaching them to maintain eye contact, use close-ended activities, and repeat what they say and do to be curious about what will happen next. Lack of social skills is very dominant within autistic individuals and communicating with others by trying to make friends can be very challenging for them. Some helpful interventions and tips that could help ASD adults and children include reinforcing their positive behavior and celebrating their strengths. Doing this will increase their confidence and self-esteem. Others could also include modeling and practicing social skills with them to visualize and provide structured social interactions. For speech, these individuals can have echolalia, delayed speech, or have trouble forming sentences with the correct words and pronouns. Referrals to a speech therapist or even working with a family member every night for a little bit can be beneficial to improve their overall speech.

Aggression is prevalent and seen in many ASD individuals if their routine is off or if they are having a bad day. Proper ways to help them handle their anger and stress could include talking with them quietly and calmly and just asking, "what is bothering you today, and what can I do to help?" Reassuring them that everything will be okay and that it is just a bad day and tomorrow will be a better day can go a long way for autism.

Caregiver stress is also prevalent among families who have a child with ASD. Caring for someone who has autism can take a toll on a lot of family members. It can be very stressful and take away time from personal freedom and leisure activities. A few ways to relieve some of the anxiety and stress are to take some personal time and do a few things weekly that they enjoy. It is crucial for everyone's mental health to relax and take time for themselves when life gets hard. Routine is the most distinguishable characteristic that is seen in individuals with autism. When their routine is off, they can become very anxious, stressed, and angry. Some practical interventions to maintain their mood could include distractions of their interests such as coloring, reading, or watching television to help divert them from thinking about those negative thoughts

and the perseveration of the routine. Not only does a change in routine cause excessive amounts of stress and anxiety, but sensory overload is commonly seen in ASD individuals. Fireworks, bright lights, concerts, or loud music can be a lot for someone with autism. To help them manage these unwanted feelings and overstimulation, some interventions that could be useful could include having their favorite personal items with them (see Figure 5). This could help create a sense of calm and security for them. Ultimately, ASD individuals need to feel safety, love, and structure to maintain a happy mood and interact with others.



**Figure No. 5: Problems and interventions for ASD individuals**

## CONCLUSION

Living with autism is a challenge for the person living with this disorder and those who take care of them, including family, friends, and other caregivers. This review has summarized the characteristics and behaviors of autistic people and their challenges in everyday life. These include lack of attention span and social skills, difficulty with speech, aggression, caregiver stress, the importance of routine, and sensory overload. Knowing how to provide appropriate care to these individuals is vital to keep the person healthy, safe, and less stressed about transitioning from early childhood to adulthood.

It is essential to understand that autism affects different people in different ways, so medical professionals continuously find ways to improve their practices. This is another reason why the nurse's role in assessing, educating, and advocating for an autistic patient is vital because each nursing care plan can be different for each person. Nurses must learn to understand the expected behaviors and sensory deficits experienced by autistic persons and learn how to implement appropriate responses to provide the best care.

Those living with autism need to be offered the same opportunities as everyone around them and be offered the resources and support to carry out these everyday tasks to regain confidence in their ability to live as independently as possible. Living with ASD is not easy, and no one said it was. It is such a common disorder; therefore, it is essential to understand what it is, who it can affect, and how to implement patient-centered interventions.

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