Autism and Addiction

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Substances and Behaviours

For the purpose of managing a huge topic, I will be focusing on two classes of addiction here:

- Addiction to Alcohol (Substance)

- Addiction to Gaming and Gambling (Behavioural)

I am also a ‘lived experience’ communicator – though I will touch on research, I will also explore how addiction and autism interact from my own experience and knowledge of both.

Are we vulnerable to addiction?

Evidence is beginning to mount up to suggest that yes, autistic people in particular are vulnerable to developing certain addictions, with the most research having gone into alcohol and gaming addictions.

Possible mechanisms:

- Self-medication and social anxiety
- Monotropic attention style
- Routine and predictability

What are we self-medicating?

Alcohol (and other substance addictions) might be a risk due to self medication:

- Social anxiety – can be extremely strong
- Sensory overwhelm – need to deaden the senses
- Sensory seeking – need to find new, exciting sensory experience
- Pain conditions – very common in the neurodivergent community

Monotropism?

This is the term given to the single-minded focus an autistic person can put on a topic or activity. This has huge ramifications fordeveloping behavioural addiction.

In this flow state:

- Few other stimuli can ‘get through’
- Transition to doing a new activity can be difficult and slow
- The feeling of being in flow is, itself, very pleasant and calming

Routine and Predictability

Autistic people prize strong routines, rituals and a predictable experience. This is, potentially, a huge risk factor for both substance and behavioural addiction behaviours.

But we must take care to not assign routine behaviours as always being addictions!

- Viewing an alcoholic drink as a ritual or routine
- Believing that a substance or behaviour is ‘necessary’ in order to feel calm and in control
- A developing addiction *becoming* part of the normal routine and therefore ‘bedding in’ even further.

Yes, we are vulnerable

- Ultimately, yes – autistic people are vulnerable to developing addiction due to several common experiences we have.
- However, many autistic behaviours that are often feared to be addictions may just be normal autistic behaviour – and this is particularly true of gaming.
- Repetitive grinding on a video game for hours and hours can *just* be monotropic bliss – it is not necessarily something more negative.