



Technologies to Lessen the Distress of Autism

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1st [Ron Oberleitner](#)



2nd [James Ball](#)



3rd [Dan Gillette](#)

+ 1



Last [Beth Hudnall Stamm](#)
25.79 · Idaho State University

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Abstract

This article explores aspects of autism that make it a potential traumatic stressor for family members, and may put them at risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or its sub-syndromal variants. It also surveys current trends in autism, including the growing number of families affected by autism. Because PTSD and its sub-syndromes can benefit from prevention or at least bolstering the resources of the person and their social support system, this article...

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Technologies to Lessen the Distress of Autism

Ron Oberleitner
James Ball
Dan Gillette
Robert Naseef
B. Hudnall Stamm

SUMMARY. This article explores aspects of autism that make it a potential traumatic stressor for family members, and may put them at risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or its sub-syndromal variants. It also surveys current trends in autism, including the growing number of families affected by autism. Because PTSD and its sub-syndromes can benefit from prevention or at least bolstering the resources of the person and their social support system, this article will then focus on relevant technology trends being used to mediate or ameliorate aspects of living with autism. This technology includes telehealth, distance education, information technology, video-conferencing, and computer software. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com>*

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222 *TRAUMA TREATMENT TECHNIQUES: INNOVATIVE TRENDS*

KEYWORDS. Autism, telehealth, telemedicine, traumatic stress, PTSD

Families dealing with special needs children face amazing challenges. Giving birth to a severely developmentally delayed or handicapped baby has been referred to as a trauma (Stern & Bruschiweiler-Stern, 1998). It is a crisis that is emotionally staggering, and it obliterates the hopes and fantasies of the pregnancy. For families who have children diagnosed with autism, one of the most devastating and misunderstood of childhood development disorders, they frequently experience additional layers of distress because of the unique nature of the syndrome. For example, one parent of a child with autism stated,

Just hearing the Autism word was a trauma to me at first. It took me a long time before I could use my son's name and the "A" word in the same sentence. Now, finally, I feel that using it empowers me. It takes the stigma away from my son personally and puts it where it belongs, on a neurological condition.

Historically, autism has been relatively unknown by the mainstream medical community, yet recent estimates show between 0.5 and 1.5 million Americans suffer from an autism spectrum disorder (Autism Society of America, 2002). Typically, autism causes irreparable neurological damage affecting the child's ability to communicate and socialize ade-

quately, and triggering behaviors that range from compulsions to painful responses to normal stimuli, along with self-harming or violent behavior towards others. Autism is a lifelong disability with no known cure and no

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While most families adapt to the unique challenges of having a member with autism, they generally experience loss and face ongoing autism-related stress. In some cases, living with autism itself produces situations in which there is danger to the person with autism or his or her family members. In these cases, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may emerge. Whether or not the person with autism will, or even can, develop PTSD is poorly documented and poorly understood (Newman, Christopher, & Berry, 2000) and deserves additional study. The risk to parents and family members has not been discussed in the literature and is a focus of this paper. This risk can come either by being inadvertently

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hurt by the person with autism as a result of an aspect of their disease, or witnessing the person with autism in danger as a result of the person not understanding the danger of a situation. Another parent stated:

Just the other day, Jimmy stepped out of the street-side door of the car and began to run directly into the street without looking. I grabbed him just as a minivan put on the brakes. The brakes didn't screech, but the driver looked badly shaken. I held Jimmy to me with all my force. If only my mother love could protect him! My friend who was picking up her child at my house held my hand—hers was shaking. Jimmy seemed completely unfazed by any of this.

This article explores aspects of autism that make it a potential traumatic stressor for family members,¹ and may put them at risk for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or its sub-syndromal variants. It also surveys current trends in autism, including the growing number of families affected by autism. Because PTSD and its sub-syndromes can benefit from prevention or at least bolstering the resources of the person and their social support system, this article will then focus on relevant technology trends being used to mediate or ameliorate aspects of living with autism. This technology includes telehealth, distance education, information technology, video-conferencing, and computer software.

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...ns, the disease is characterized by social, communication, motor, and sensory problems that frequently create distressing behaviors. The diagnostic criteria address impairment in three areas: (a) social interaction, (b) impaired communication, and (c) stereotypic and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). Impaired social interaction includes reduced eye contact; failure to develop peer relationships; absence of spontaneous joy or interest; and lack of social or emotional reciprocity. The second diagnostic criterion, impaired communication, involves delay in or failure to develop spoken language; impaired ability to have a conversation; stereotyped, repetitive, idiosyncratic language; and lack of sym-

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procedures which capitalize on the often observe..."

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"...tion reduced overall stress in the family, and saved time and financial resources (see also **Oberleitner, 2006**; Reischl and Oberleitner, 2009).Figure 1 demonstrates a flow diagram of a strategy developed by Talk..."

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