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Addiction as a Coping Mechanism

Sarah Hendrickx

Sarah's Story

- Autism diagnosis aged 41
- Multiple anxiety diagnoses since teens
- Socially awkward teen
- Drinking alcohol from age 14
- Half bottle gin a day by age 17
- Vulnerable, risky, naive behaviour
- Pregnant at 18
- Becoming a parent stopped the drinking
- Married alcoholic x 2
- 'Half of cider'
- Now – very occasional drinker



Matt's Story

- Autism diagnosis aged 44
- Constant anxiety = 25 years alcoholism
- Alcohol enabled “normal” life
- Alcohol poisoning
- Liver failure
- Cirrhosis of the liver
- Lifelong medication
- 18 months CBT rehab
- New “dry” life



Matt - Now

Today

- Simple existence
- Partner & son
- Lives alone

Cope with anxiety by:

- Self-awareness
- CBT
- Mindfulness
- Medication (anxiety)



Defining Alcoholism

- Continuation of drinking despite it causing significant problems – economic, social, occupational
- Primary and secondary alcoholism (Royce & Scratchley, 1996)
- Reactive alcoholism (as opposed to ‘essential’) – alcohol used to medicate as ‘reaction’ to other issue



Why alcohol?

- No social network required to obtain – as for illegal drugs
- Inexpensive
- Immediate acting
- Social expected/accepted
- Reduces social inhibitions
- Numbs anxiety and sensory experience
- Increases tolerance and flexibility
- Media portrayal – friends, social life
- Alcoholics are: ‘Individualist and loners’ – no emotional connection through relationships; find it in alcohol (Ostrander)



Alcohol / substance use as effective coping strategy

- Alcohol / substance enabled “normal life”
 - Enabled tolerance of social situations
 - Enabled tolerance of relationships
 - Increased exposure
 - Access to social arena
 - More social skills practice
 - Better social ability
 - Greater invisibility of condition
 - Good social network – no isolation



A Link?

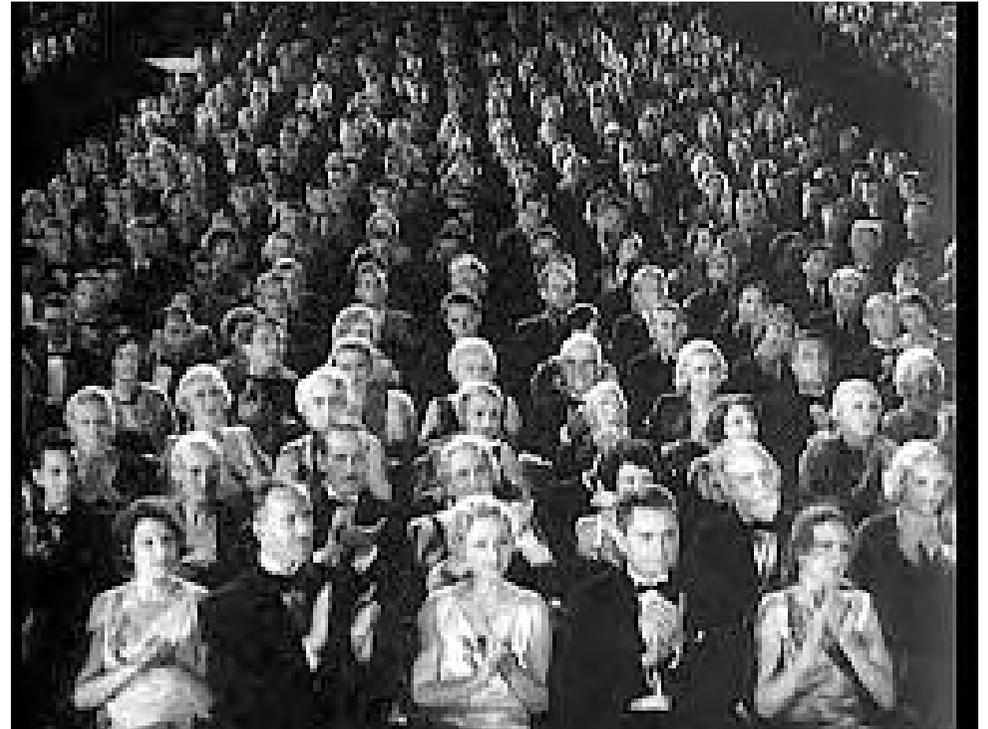
- There is virtually no research into alcohol / substance use + autism
- 'Most people with a drink problem have Asperger Syndrome' (Tantum)
- 'High numbers of autistic alcoholics' (Berney)

- Autism and social anxiety
- Alcoholism and social anxiety
- Autism and alcoholism

- 90% of people in the UK drink at least occasionally
- 12% male population of UK are alcohol dependent
- 65% of people admitted to alcohol rehab have anxiety disorder
- 65% (est) young people with Asperger Syndrome have anxiety disorder

Autism and Social Anxiety

- Anxiety in relation to people
- Hyper-sensitive to comment
- Dread, panic and ruminating
- Co-morbidity between social anxiety and AS (Scheiner et. al. (2002), Berney (2004))
- Social anxiety disorder – no diagnosis if PDD (AS) present (Ghaziuddin (2005))



Alcohol and Social Anxiety

- 40% people drink to feel less anxious
- Those for whom alcohol helps with anxiety drink almost every day
- Social phobia present before alcoholism
- 10% prevalence of alcoholism in general population
- 20% prevalence of alcoholism in those with social anxiety disorder



Alcoholics and Cognitive Processing

- Less able to de-code emotional, facial expressions
- Humour processing deficits – theory of mind and executive functioning
- Impairments in recognising prosody and in matching prosody to facial expressions
- ‘Alcoholics are specifically impaired on emotional non-verbal behaviour information processing: they are slower to correctly identify an emotion’
- ‘Don’t care as much if people don’t want to talk to me’.

Common Factors – Autistics and Alcoholics

- Frontal lobe affected
- Social anxiety
- Decoding facial expressions
- Executive functioning and theory of mind
- Language processing
- Information processing deficits
- Co-morbid mental health conditions



Autism and Alcohol/Substance Use

- Initially: an effective coping strategy
- Later: an addiction and illness
- Appropriate treatment – secondary alcoholism/substance use
- Primary need is autism/anxiety



Problems with Traditional Treatment

- May fail to recognise role of alcohol/substance as self-medication for anxiety / depression
- May refuse to treat whilst drinking/taking
- Abstract (12 step) methods
- Separates autism / anxiety / alcohol / substance
- Limited support network

Strategies and Support

- Support network
 - Autistic community & Others
 - Mentors / buddies
- CBT type approaches – formal/informal
- Help to see the 'grey' (binary thinker)
- Mindfulness / anxiety management
- Creating an autistic life
 - Structure
 - Capacity
 - Meaning

