

# **Drinking, Drug Use and Addiction in the Autism Community**

## **Program Description**

Recent studies indicate that adults with an autism spectrum diagnosis (ASD) have significantly higher risk of developing a substance use diagnosis (SUD) than the general population (Butwicka, et al, 2017). With its sensory complications, social deficits, rigid behaviors and rule following, autism was thought to offer protection for developing a SUD. In the 2008 book, *Asperger Syndrome and Alcohol: Drinking to Cope* the authors Tinsley and Hendrickx suggest being undiagnosed or misdiagnosed might lead someone with an ASD to use alcohol/drugs to self-medicate. However, studies suggest addiction is prevalent among a generation diagnosed young, offered early interventions and mainstreamed. Socializing after school/work, managing stress, meeting deadlines and fitting in are examples of the many challenges' adolescents and adults with autism face. The positive impacts of early interventions are diminishing aspects of autism (rule following, sheltered living environments, sensory aversions to alcohol/drug delivery and a distaste for environments where substance use may occur) once assumed to be protective factors for developing a SUD. The presenters hope to dispel the stereotype that individuals with disabilities, particularly developmental disabilities, do not have typical adolescent/adult desires and challenges. It is critical to destigmatize substance dependence by addressing it directly and without hyperbole. Though it is important to address alcohol/drug use as self-medication, it is also critical to factor in the behavioral and genetic connections between an ASD and SUD such as repetitive behaviors, obsessive focus and a desire for routine. A dual diagnosis of autism and drug/alcohol use is a new and under-researched topic and there appear to be no evidence-based screenings or treatments, but it is possible to craft evidence-informed assessments and interventions. Customized and adapted treatments such as social narratives, schedules, tracking logs and apps may be successful if the client's self-determination, collaboration and cooperation are honored throughout the therapeutic process.

The presenters, current and former UNC faculty members, represent interdisciplinary perspectives and experiences related to autism, developmental disabilities and addiction. Ann Palmer is a parent of an adult son with autism and has worked with families with developmental disabilities for close to 30 years. Elizabeth Kunreuther is a clinical instructor at an addiction and recovery treatment center with past work experience in ASD support and research. In addition to the presenters' experiences, this presentation will also include many quotes and videos from individuals who have co-occurring autism spectrum and substance use diagnoses.

## **Program Objectives**

Upon completion of this workshop, participants should be able to:

1. Identify protective and risk factors associated with an autism spectrum diagnosis (ASD) for developing a substance use diagnosis (SUD).
2. Recognize the behavioral connections between an ASD and a SUD including routinized and perseverative behaviors.

3. Implement strategies for co-occurring ASD and SUD such as specifically tailored assessments, schedules, narratives, and apps.

### **Target Audience**

Human Services Professionals, medical professionals, professionals working in the autism field, professionals working in the addiction field, family members, and anyone interested in this topic.

### **Contact Hours**

2.0 contact hours

### **Program Agenda**

2:30 PM – 3:30 PM

- Why there is interest in this topic
- Overview of available research
- Protective and risk factors of ASD for developing an SUD
- Overview of Autism and Substance Use Diagnosis
- Diagnosing and misdiagnosing ASD in adults
- Behavioral, genetic and neurobiological connections of ASD and SUD

3:30 PM – 3:45 PM

Break

3:45 PM – 4:45 PM

- Prevention: knowing the signs
- Prevention: how parents can be involved
- Assessments and screenings
- Harm reduction versus abstinence
- Treatment approaches and recommendations
- Targeted treatment strategies for those with co-occurring ASD and SUD

### **Faculty**

**Ann Palmer** is a parent of a 38-year-old son with autism, an author and presenter, and a professional having worked with families for close to 30 years. She was the Parent Support Coordinator at the UNC TEACCH Program and the Director of Advocacy and Chapters at the Autism Society of North Carolina. Ann is recently retired from being a faculty member at the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities (CIDD) at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She is the author of four books published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Her book, *Realizing the College Dream with Autism or Asperger Syndrome: A Parent's Guide to Student Success* was written about her son's college experience. *Parenting Across the Autism Spectrum: Unexpected Lessons We Have Learned*, was co-authored with Maureen Morrell and was the Autism Society of America's Literary Work of the Year. She is also the author of *A Friend's and Relative's Guide to Supporting the Family with Autism: How Can I Help?* and co-author of her newest book, *Drinking, Drug Use and Addiction in the Autism Community*.

**Elizabeth Kunreuther, LCSW, LCAS**, is a Clinical Instructor at the University of North Carolina Department of Psychiatry at the WakeBrook Addictions and

Detoxification Unit. Prior to working in addiction and recovery, Elizabeth was the Family Intake Coordinator for UNC's TEACCH Autism Program and was the Family Recruitment Coordinator for the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities' Autism Research Registry. Elizabeth is the co-author of the book *Drinking, Drug Use and Addiction in the Autism Community* published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.