**Related Conditions**

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**Associate Professor Amanda Richdale:** People with an Autism Spectrum Disorder often have a number of what we might call comorbid conditions or other conditions that can affect their behaviour, their ability to learn, have an impact on their family and also may be fundamental to a diagnosis of autism, we don’t know at this point in time, and these include things like sleep problems which are extremely common in these children and adults and adolescents, and also anxiety and depression, symptoms related to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, more problems with attention but also some children may be overly active.

It’s important for us to look at these related conditions because, first of all if I take my own particular interest which is the sleep problems that the children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder have, we find that about at least two thirds of children have significant sleeping difficulties, if we have poor sleep it impacts on our ability to learn the next day, it impacts on our attention and in children we also know that it impacts on their daytime behaviour and their behaviour is worse so they can’t make the most of learning opportunities. It keeps their parents awake at night, particularly their mothers, and then their mothers become sleep deprived. When you’re sleep deprived you’re at higher risk for developing problems related to anxiety and depression because we know that these are interrelated.

Anxiety, in people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, has a negative impact on their ability to function in everyday life so they may become overwhelmingly anxious if something unpredictable happens. For example we’ve been doing some work with university and TAFE students, looking at how we might support them and a number of them reported having symptoms of anxiety, or their parents who we also spoke with, reported symptoms of anxiety. So the fact that a room is changed for a class, the student may not know what to do, may become extremely anxious, may not find the class, may not be able to go to class; if students are put in a group, because of their social skills problems.

I hope that by looking at things like the poor attention that these students have, why they have it, we will be able to try and I think one of the major things that we will hopefully find out from looking at attention, anxiety, sleep, depression, and so on, is to find ways of actually preventing these conditions from occurring, and if not preventing them from occurring, to provide appropriate interventions so that they don’t become debilitating, so that they don’t interfere with people’s ability to learn, to interact, to participate in society. I think that’s the most important thing we can do but I also think more fundamentally that in some ways they may be related to the actual core symptoms of an Autism Spectrum Disorder and that they may tell us something about the systems in the brain that are not functioning.