

Intellectual Disability & Personality Disorder

The difficulties experienced with intellectual disability can sometimes overlap with those of personality disorder. These include difficulties with communication, relationships, regulating emotions, coping with distress and engaging in challenging behaviours (such as impulsive aggression, sexualised behaviour, substance use or self-harm). However, care needs to be taken in determining if these are due to a person's intellectual disability or a co-occurring personality disorder.

CO-OCCURRING PERSONALITY DISORDER AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

Co-occurring personality disorder is often unable to be diagnosed for people with moderate to severe intellectual disability due to difficulties in communication and describing internal experiences (such as thoughts and feelings). Therefore, co-occurring personality disorders are mostly considered when a person with intellectual disability has mild to moderate cognitive and verbal impairments and severe behavioural and emotional difficulties.



TIPS FOR SUPPORTING A PERSON WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AND EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

- People with intellectual disabilities sometimes use impulsive and challenging behaviours in an attempt to cope with overwhelming emotions. These behaviours can include aggression, self-harm and substance use. Therefore, it is important to develop a plan to ensure everyone's safety in the event of a crisis.
- All information needs to be simplified and presented at a level the person can understand. Try presenting information in visual (for instance pictures or charts) and practical ways, such as role-playing social skills or practicing coping strategies together when the person is calm.
- It is important for everyone in the person's support network to communicate and develop consistent boundaries and goals. This creates a predictable environment and helps the person feel safe.
- People with intellectual disability need opportunities to consolidate learning. Repeating skills and concepts over time can help the person remember the information and put it into practice.
- Providing tangible rewards for behavioural improvements can help to reinforce gains. A chart outlining progress towards goals and rewards can increase motivation and help keep everyone on-track.
- People with intellectual disabilities often find it difficult to understand abstract concepts. Therefore, try to focus on simple skills, such as reinforcing or role-playing how to ask for something and how to tell someone how I feel.
- Psychological therapy takes time. It is important to be patient and expect set-backs.
- Working with and supporting a person's strengths increases their confidence and sense of wellbeing. Activities that incorporate these strengths maintain interest and persistence. The use of humour and playful activities can also reinforce appropriate social skills.

The Project Air Strategy acknowledges the major support of NSW Health and NSW Family and Community Services. The Project works with mental health clinicians, consumers and carers to deliver effective treatments, implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries, and offers high quality training and education. Contact us at info-projectair@uow.edu.au or visit www.projectairstrategy.org