



Essential Information

Intellectual Disability and Personality Disorders

Intellectual disability is associated with problems in intellectual and adaptive functioning in conceptual, social and/or practical domains. For example, people with intellectual disabilities may have difficulties with planning, learning from experience, problem solving, social skills and independent living. The difficulties experienced by people who live with an intellectual disability can sometimes overlap with personality disorder symptoms. These may 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). Care needs to be taken in determining if symptoms are due to a person's intellectual disability or a co-occurring personality disorder.

Co-occurring personality disorder and intellectual disability

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. However, co-occurring personality disorder is often unable to be diagnosed in people with moderate to severe intellectual disability due to difficulties in communication and describing internal experiences (e.g. thoughts and feelings).

Tips for supporting a person with intellectual disability and emotional difficulties

Working with and supporting a person's strengths increases their confidence and sense of wellbeing. Activities that incorporate these strengths help to maintain interest and commitment to treatment. The use of humour and playful activities can also reinforce appropriate social skills and build rapport.

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 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.

People with intellectual disabilities may find it difficult to understand complex instructions and may benefit from more concrete vs abstract interventions; all information needs to be presented at the level the person can understand. Try presenting information in visual and practical ways, such as providing psychoeducation about emotions by using pictures of faces that express different feelings or role-playing "how to ask for something", and "how to express how I am feeling". You could also try practicing social skills and coping strategies together when the person is calm and reinforcing a desired behavior through praise and rewards.

Using a star chart can provide a visual aid to assist with motivation for behavior change by reinforcing positive behaviours. For example, place a star on a chart for each instance of positive behavior. Once a certain, attainable number of stars has been accumulated, they can be exchanged for a healthy, tangible reward (e.g. favourite activity such as flying kites at the park). The stars and the rewards reinforce positive behavior.

People with intellectual disability may need additional opportunities to consolidate learning. Repeating skills and concepts over time can help the person remember the information and put it into practice.

Psychological therapy takes time. It is important to be patient and remember that set-backs are part of the learning process.

