Eating Disorders in Autistic Transition-Age Youth

Insights from the Healthy Minds Study (from 2018-2019 to 2024-2025)

Sarah Sherman [1,2], Joe Pereira[1,2,3], Jeremy Veenstra-VanderWeele[1,2], Amandeep Jutla[1,2]

[1]Columbia University Irving Medical Center, [2]New York State Psychiatric Institute, [3]NewYork-Presbyterian

There are no conflicts of interest.

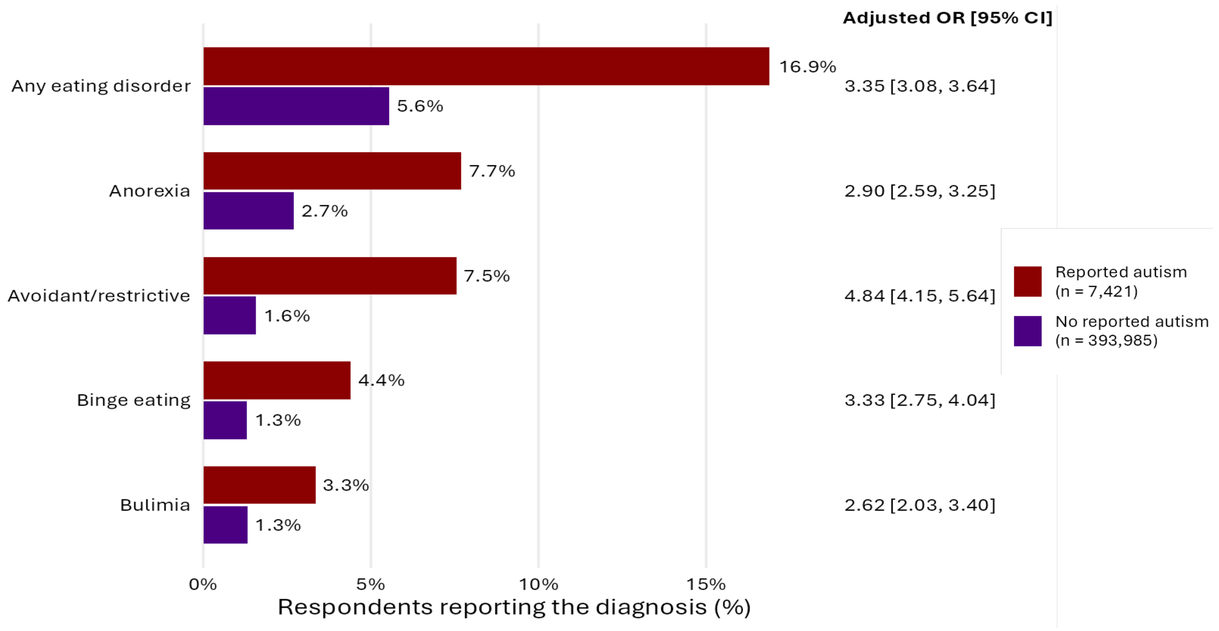
Background

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and certain eating disorder (ED) phenotypes, particularly avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID) and anorexia nervosa, are known to co-occur
- Existing studies have primarily focused on adolescents, leaving transition-age youth (TAY) understudied
- We examined the relationship between ASD and ED diagnoses in a large sample of students from the Healthy Minds Study (HMS) from 2018-2019 to 2024-2025

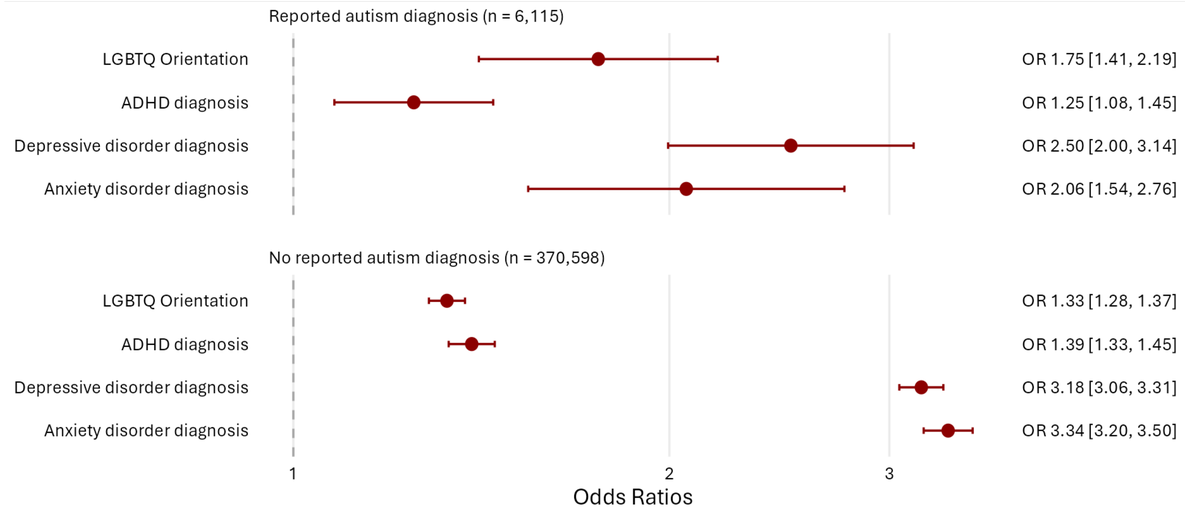
Methods

- HMS is a repeated cross-sectional survey focusing on the mental and physical health of undergraduate and graduate students
- We ran multi-level logistic regression models with ASD as a predictor of ED diagnosis
  - Adjusted for age (18-25) and sex
  - Academic institution was a random effect

Pooled Meta-Analytic Odds Ratios for ED Diagnoses Among Students by an ASD Diagnosis



Predictors of Any ED Diagnosis in Students With and Without an ASD Diagnosis



Results

- **ASD significantly associated with every individual ED diagnosis in transition-age youth across seven consecutive academic years**
- This association is **notably pronounced for ARFID** (OR 4.84, 95% CI 4.15-5.64)
- Autistic TAY had a higher prevalence of every ED diagnosis shown than students not reporting ASD
- LGBTQ orientation was a stronger statistical predictor of ED diagnosis in TAY with autism compared to their non-autistic counterparts

Discussion

- Autistic TAY may have eating-related difficulties that deserve attention even when they do not fit stereotypical presentations of EDs
- Future studies should investigate whether autism-informed screening improves early identification of EDs for autistic TAY
- Further research is needed to clarify ED risk in autistic TAY who are LGBTQ-identifying