

AUTISM AND ANXIETY

NEW SCHOOL OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING

THE HOME OF EXISTENTIAL TRAINING

DIGBY TANTAM

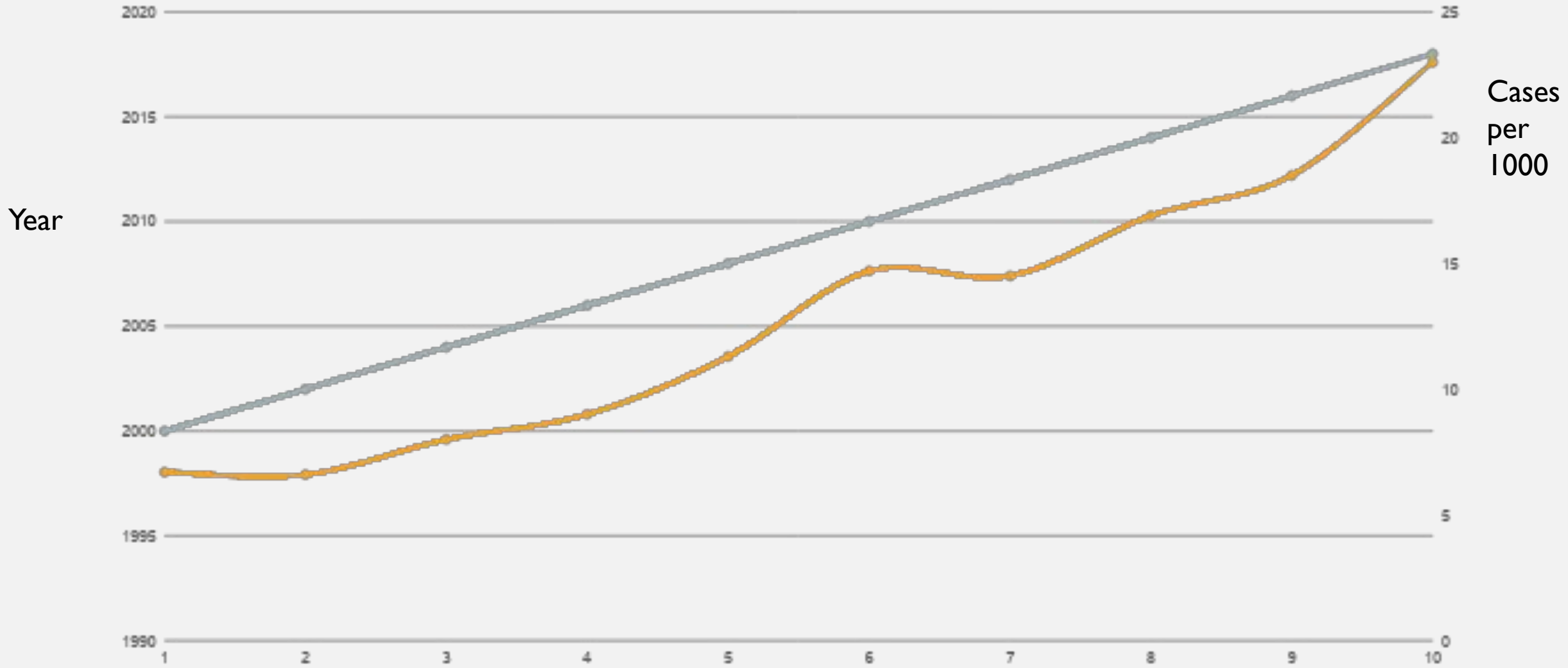
DANNY VAN DEURZEN-SMITH

+44 (0)203 515 022 // +44 (0)207 435 8067 ● OFFICE@NSPC.ORG.UK ● WWW.NSPC.ORG.UK ● @NSPCINFO



NSPC

Prevalence of autism in school age children



- 1966 Lotter reported 0.45 per 1000 (0.48 Camberwell survey)
- 1970 Presentation to National Autistic Society by Hans Asperger on Autistic Psychopathy
- 1967 Wing and Gould 0.48 per 1000
- 1980 Tantam awarded MRC Fellowship to study Asperger syndrome (supervised Uta Frith)
- 1980 clinic for adults suspected of autism
- 1980 DSM 'Pervasive developmental disorders' DSM-III-R Adopts Wing and Gould's triad of impairments and Spitzer condition of social impairment
- 1981 Wing on Asperger syndrome
- 1981 Tantam at American Psychiatric Association, 'Should Asperger syndrome be in DSM-IV?'
- 1988 Tantam invited paper in JCPP
- 1999 Fombonne 0.7 per 1000 autism prevalence
- 1994 DSM-IV included Asperger disorder

EFFECTS OF WIDENING CRITERIA

- Taking in a much wider group:
 - Less severely affected child
 - Adults
 - People with normal intelligence
 - People who wished for a diagnosis but who were less disabled

Community prevalence of anxiety disorders up to 33.7%

INCREASED AWARENESS OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES—IN AUTISM TOO

- 2022 meta-analysis of anxiety in autism in children 11.1%.
- Community prevalence of anxiety disorders up to 33.7%
- Anxiety in autistic adults estimate in Autism Spectrum Disorder through the Life Span 39.4 %
- Anxiety increases in adulthood
- Underrecognized

INCREASED AWARENESS OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES—BUT LAGGING BEHIND IN AUTISM

- Some may be preventable by preventing bullying
- Makes symptoms of ASD manifest
- Also creates possibility of recovery

WHAT I NOTICE IN MY PRACTICE:

- Consistently high levels of anxiety with very low variance from session to session compared to NT clients
- Very little time away from the background noise of anxiety causes frequent burnouts and shut down
- This leads to a feeling of inadequacy which easily spirals
- Often a sense that the goal is to 'overcome' the anxiety and that this would be seen as being 'functional'
- Sometimes the anxiety can become the special interest

COMMON SOURCES OF ANXIETY

External

- Bullying/harassment
- Isolation/Minority Stress
- Social Pressures
- Sensory Issues
- Change
- Managing tasks/responsibilities esp. in relation to executive function

COMMON SOURCES OF ANXIETY

Internal:

- Grappling with the absurdity of life
- No inherent sense of meaning or a shifting sense of meaning
- The tension between trying to belong and individuating
- Acute awareness of finiteness
- Awareness of the complexity of self and a desire for this to be simplified
- Awareness of the vastness of choice and freedom

ANXIETY AND AUTISM

- Autism may not be life-long
- More or less manifest according to anxiety leading to particular crisis periods:
aet 7, early adolescence, late 30s

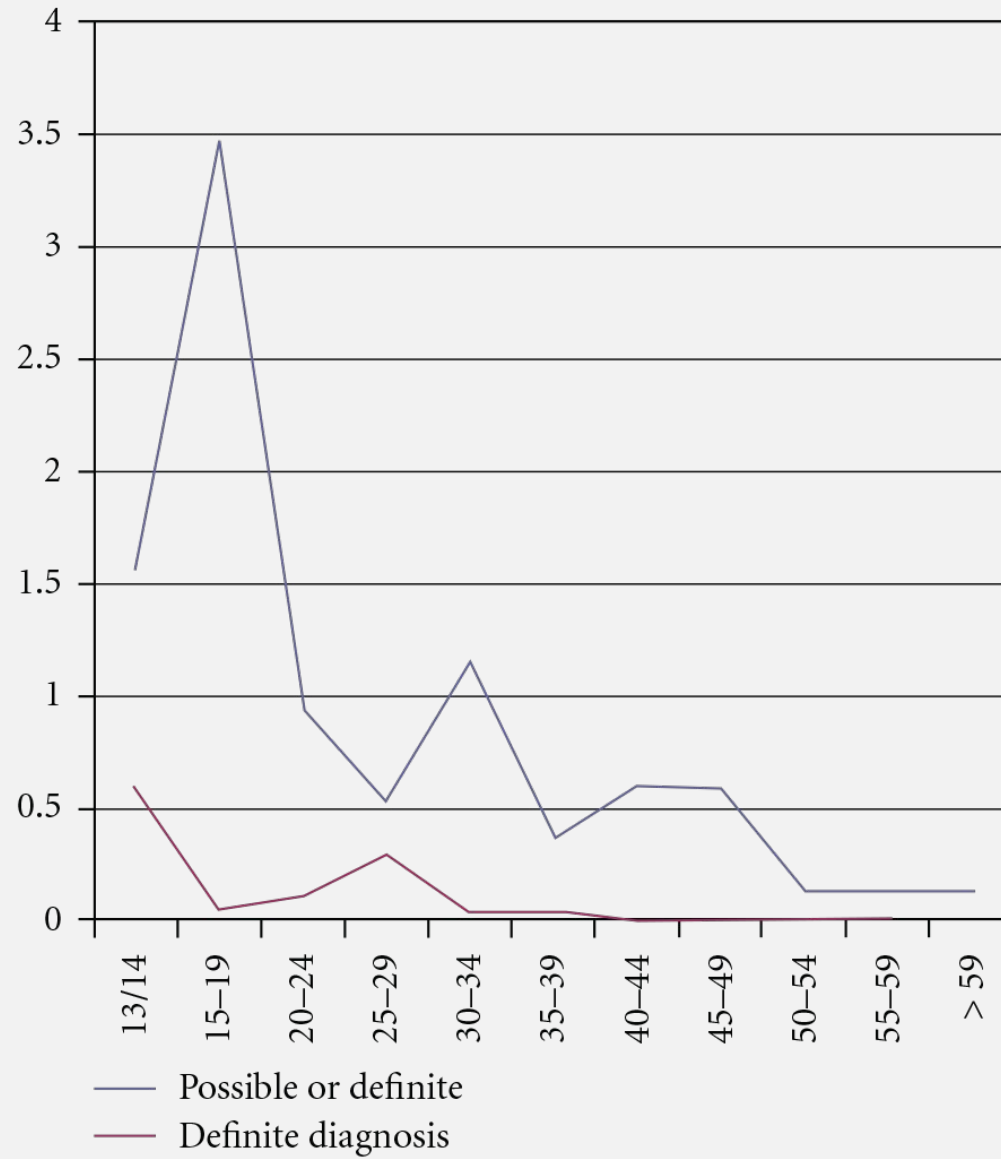


FIGURE 1: Age-related prevalence of HFPDD in males per 1000 population of the city of Sheffield in that age group.

AUTISM IS NOT AN ILLNESS

- Being autistic does not mean you have an illness or disease. It means your brain works in a different way from other people. It's something you're born with or first appears when you're very young...Autism is not a medical condition with treatments or a "cure". But some people need support to help them with certain things."

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/what-is-autism/#:~:text=Autism%20is%20not%20an%20illness,re%20autistic%20your%20whole%20life>

WHAT IS NEEDED?

- Not just about standard anxiety mitigation or working with the external triggers
- Affirmative care which recognises the inherent intelligibility in autistic anxiety
- Philosophically informed support
- Safe Spaces for respite from anxiety