

# INNOVATE

## EVIDENCE-BASED MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH



### Take Action for Autism

The transition from high school into adulthood is daunting and challenging, especially for young adults with autism. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong disorder but when young adults exit high school their supportive services come to a crashing halt. About 50,000 children with autism leave high school each year in the United States without transition services.<sup>1</sup> Natural next steps like working, continuing school, living independently, developing social networks and participating in the community become especially difficult for this wave of individuals with ASD. Marjorie Solomon, professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, and her team, including Tasha Oswald, Ph.D. and Steve Ruder, are attempting to address this gap in treatment with evidence-based interventions.

Currently, few evidence-based interventions or services are available to help adults with ASD achieve better life outcomes. Solomon developed one of the first empirically supported social skills interventions for higher functioning children and adolescents with ASD. The Behavioral Health Center of Excellence awarded Marjorie Solomon, Marvin ‘Buzz’ Oates Family Endowed Chair in Lifespan Development in Autism, one of 23 pilot awards for a study to integrate and expand upon this work. The pilot award is for “Improving the Lives of Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders and their Families: A Pilot Trial of the Adult Social Knowledge (ASK) Workshop.”

“Adults with ASD exhibit poor social and vocational outcomes, a higher burden of health and mental health issues and report low levels of life satisfaction,” she explained. “We are really looking forward to conducting

an experimental therapeutics trial to see if the intervention works and to see what its active ingredients are to better understand mediators and moderators of outcomes as well as treatment response.”

#### Social Skills

Solomon has developed a pilot trial of the Adult Social Knowledge (ASK) Workshop, an adaptation of the empirically supported Functional Adaptive Skills Training (FAST) program, which was initially designed for individuals with chronic mental illnesses. The program is targeted to higher functioning 18-35 year old adults with ASD. Participants will complete 20 sessions, each of which are 90-minutes long. The sessions include training in organization, goal setting and social communication to improve social and vocational functioning, community engagement and self-care. Technology is also integrated into the skills training to help individuals learn



Dr. Solomon conducts a social skills training.

calendar and organization skills through mobile apps.

Additionally, the project includes a coordinated parent program that provides an opportunity for parents of individuals with autism to discuss common issues and attend lectures hosted by the UC Davis Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD). Topics that are covered in these lectures include Department of Rehabilitation services, independent living solutions and healthcare needs.

Solomon explains the synergistic relationship between scientific and clinical research. “The clinic allows us to provide a service for whom there is so little and simultaneously advance the understanding of what is going on through research,” she said. “The clinic is integral to community partnerships, subject recruitment and building relationships with the community we serve.”

There is a great need for more evidence-based interventions and services for adults with ASD as they navigate challenging life transitions.

“The goal of the pilot is to close the gap in treatment by initiating the development of a potentially scalable,

culturally competent, community or clinic-based intervention/services model,” Solomon said.

### Autism

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is 1 in 68 children.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the face of autism continues to change as more individuals are being diagnosed on the spectrum. Of those diagnosed, over half have average or above average intelligence compared to only a quarter of those diagnosed a decade ago.<sup>3</sup> The misinformed assumption that those with autism have below average intelligence creates additional barriers for individuals trying to find their way in society. The ASK workshop is designed to improve social, vocational, self-care and community engagement outcomes for adults with ASD, thereby providing opportunity and hope for those too often overlooked.

“This pilot award will hopefully lead to a larger grant to study the effectiveness of an effective intervention to help young adults with autism that fit into today’s broader definition of what autism is. Previously, these individuals and their families were left to fend for themselves,” Solomon said regarding the future of the project and its refinement.

This grant has led to more robust collaborations with the MIND Institute Clinic Social Skills Program, the UC Davis Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), the UC Davis Student Disabilities Center, and the Regional Center.

To participate in one of the adult programs please contact Marjorie Solomon, Ph.D., Tasha Oswald, Ph.D., or Sarah Mahdavi, Project Coordinator at the MIND Institute.

[www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute](http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute)

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### Behavioral Health Center of Excellence at UC Davis

UC Davis launched the Behavioral Health Center of Excellence in October 2014 to advance mental health research and policy with initial funding from the Mental Health Services Act. The Innovate series highlights the Center’s \$4.3 million Research Pilot Award program.

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