

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

When an Overwhelming World Drives the Need to Self-Medicating



What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental condition that affects how a person processes social information, sensory input, and change. People with ASD often experience the world as louder, faster, and more unpredictable than others do, making everyday situations exhausting to navigate.

What Does it Look Like?

- **Difficulty with Social Interaction**
Social cues get missed and connecting with others takes constant effort.
- **Sensory Sensitivities**
Certain sounds, textures, or crowded environments cause distress or withdrawal.
- **Rigid Routines and Repetitive Behaviors**
Even small changes to routine provoke intense anxiety.
- **Masking and Exhaustion**
They perform “normal” in public, then crash behind closed doors.

How Does ASD Contribute to Relapse?

For someone with ASD, the world is a constant source of sensory and social overload, and substances become the fastest way to quiet the noise.

- 1) Sensory and Social Overload Drives Use**
Substances quiet a world that feels too loud and too unpredictable.
- 2) Standard Programs Aren't Built for ASD**
Group-heavy, socially demanding environments increase distress rather than relieve it.
- 3) Without Treating ASD, Relapse is Likely**
They return to the same overwhelming world with no new strategies.

Prevalence:

2.3% of U.S. adults¹

Co-Occurrence:

25-38% Up to 36% develop a substance use disorder in their lifetime²

Relapse Risk:

2x more likely to develop substance use problems³

Sources: ¹ Dietz et al., *CDC National and State Estimates of Adults with ASD* ² Ressel et al. (2020), *Systematic Review, Autism* ³ Butwicka et al. (2017), *Population-Based Cohort Study, J Autism Dev Disord*

Long-Term Treatment for ASD and Addiction

ASD doesn't respond to the high-intensity, group-focused model most programs rely on. Our **long-term, progress-based approach** gives clients the time and structure to develop social skills, sensory coping strategies, and emotional regulation at a pace that works for their brain. Clients advance when they demonstrate genuine change, not when a calendar says they're done.



"Most programs ask clients to process emotions in groups and build trust with strangers overnight. For someone with ASD, that's overwhelming. Real progress requires a fully individualized approach."



 **Meghan Bohlman, LPC-S, LCDC, EMDR-Trained**
Executive Clinical Director, Burning Tree Ranch

Dual Diagnosis Treatment for ASD Co-Occurring with Addiction

When ASD and addiction occur together, treating only the substance use ignores why it started. Sensory overload and social exhaustion remain untreated.

- **Treating Both Conditions Together**
Sensory and social challenges keep substances necessary.
- **Building Coping and Communication Skills**
Practical strategies for managing overload reduce reliance on use.
- **Providing Enough Time**
New coping patterns require months of consistent practice.

Dual Diagnosis:

The presence of **both a substance use disorder and a mental health condition** occurring together. Effective treatment for dual-diagnosis addictions must address both aspects simultaneously.



Have Other Treatment Programs Missed the Deeper Issues?

Burning Tree Ranch is the Nation's only authentic long-term treatment program for chronic relapse. Call us at (866) 287-2877 or visit us online at www.BurningTree.com.

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