

About Autism

Autism is a neurological variation that occurs in about one percent of the population and is classified as a developmental disability. Although it may be more common than previously thought, it is not a new condition and exists in all parts of the world, in both children and adults of all ages. The terms “Autistic” and “autism spectrum” often are used to refer inclusively to people who have an official diagnosis on the autism spectrum or who self-identify with the Autistic community. While all Autistics are as unique as any other human beings, they share some characteristics typical of autism in common.

1. **Different sensory experiences.** For example, heightened sensitivity to light, difficulty interpreting internal physical sensations, hearing loud sounds as soft and soft sounds as loud, or synesthesia.

2. **Non-standard ways of learning and approaching problem solving.** For example, learning “difficult” tasks (e.g. calculus) before “simple” tasks (e.g. addition), difficulty with “executive functions,” or being simultaneously gifted at tasks requiring fluid intelligence and intellectually disabled at tasks requiring verbal skills.

3. **Deeply focused thinking and passionate interests in specific subjects.** “Narrow but deep,” these “special interests” could be anything from mathematics to ballet, from doorknobs to physics, and from politics to bits of shiny paper.

4. **Atypical, sometimes repetitive, movement.** This includes “stereotyped” and “self-stimulatory” behavior such as rocking or flapping, and also the difficulties with motor skills and motor planning associated with apraxia or dyspraxia.

5. **Need for consistency, routine, and order.** For example, holidays may be experienced more with anxiety than pleasure, as they mean time off from school and the disruption of the usual order of things. People on the autistic spectrum may take great pleasure in organizing and arranging items.

6. **Difficulties in understanding and expressing language** as used in typical communication, both verbal and non-verbal. This may manifest similarly to semantic-pragmatic language disorder. It’s often because a young child does not seem to be developing language that a parent first seeks to have a child evaluated. As adults, people with an autism spectrum diagnosis often continue to struggle to use language to explain their emotions and internal state, and to articulate concepts (which is not to say they do not experience and understand these).

7. Difficulties in understanding and expressing typical social interaction. For example, preferring parallel interaction, having delayed responses to social stimulus, or behaving in an “inappropriate” manner to the norms of a given social context (for example, not saying “hi” immediately after another person says “hi”).

Autism is diagnosed based on observation by a diagnostician or team of diagnosticians (e.g. neuropsychologist, psychologist, psychiatrist, licensed clinical social worker, etc.).

Source: ASAN Autistic Self Advocacy Network

www.autisticadvocacy.org

Common Autism Myths

- 1.) **Autism is an intellectual disability.** Self - advocate Michelle Dawson wrote in Science Daily: "while we know autistics process information atypically, very little thought has gone into how to fairly assess their abilities. In fact, there is so little understanding of what autistics do well that their strong abilities are often regarded as dysfunctional. Here we have again found that measurable strengths in autistic spectrum individuals are not "isolated islets of abilities" as previously thought, but are in fact representative of autistics' intellectual abilities. This in turn raises questions about how we can provide autistics with the kinds of information they can process well, as we do with non-autistic individuals. We consider the effort to understand and encourage autistic strengths to be of paramount importance."
- 2.) **Autistic people are either low or high functioning.** Autistic people – or any other people for that matter - do not “function”. Calling someone “low” functioning is, in a sense, putting someone down simply because they may need more supports and accommodations. By labelling a person who has fewer visible autistic traits as being “higher” than someone else can also be insulting and an inaccurate representation of what accommodations that person may also truly need. Always presume competence.
- 3.) **Autistic People Lack Empathy.** Research is finding that this is not the case. In fact, some people on the autism spectrum may feel *too much*, leading them to withdraw even further from things that overwhelm them. Also, autistic people express themselves differently, so when they feel they are being caring or helpful, others may not interpret it as being such.*
- 4.) **Autism is caused by vaccines.** There is absolutely zero evidence that vaccinations cause autism.
- 5.) **Autism is an epidemic.** Changes to diagnostic criteria as well as improvements in identifying people on the autism spectrum have led to higher numbers of people who have a diagnosis. Autism has always been part of human history.
- 6.) **Autism is caused by bad parenting.** Autism is a neurological condition. No matter how much discipline or attention a child may receive, that diagnosis will remain unchanged.
- 7.) **Autistic people express “undesirable behaviors”.** People on the autism spectrum process information and interpret the world differently than others. They may express themselves in unexpected or unconventional ways such as moving differently, flapping their arms, vocalizing, jumping, etc. Many falsely label these movements or expressions as choices that the autistic person makes. This is often simply not the case.

*<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-with-autism-can-read-emotions-feel-empathy1/>

Differences In Perspective

Autistic not weird

The problem with labels



“He loves school, has a keen interest in trains, struggles a little with his schoolwork but it’s ok- he has a great personality and is his own unique person.”

“He loves school despite his autism, and has an autistic obsession with trains. He also struggles with his work because of his autism. I worry about his future because he has such an autistic personality.”



Instead of:

Look for the warning signs of autism/red flags

A child is obsessive/rigid

Autistic people have social deficits

Autistic people have tantrums

Autistic people are either high or low functioning

Normal

Autism is a disability

Say this:

Look for the signs of autism

An autistic child has intense focus and special interests

Autistic people communicate and relate in different ways

Autistic may process emotions differently and can become overwhelmed

Autistic individuals have varying support and accommodation needs

Neurologically typical or neurotypical

Autism is a neurological condition

Phrases and actions to avoid:

Don't say negative phrases about autism such as – "Suffers from", "Deficits", "Disease/illness/handicap", "Abnormal", "Person on the autism spectrum will never _____"

Not presuming competence/assuming that the person on the autism spectrum cannot understand you.

Don't force eye contact or make eye contact a goal if someone is averse to eye contact. Teach ways to get around eye contact such as looking at someone's chin, turning their body towards someone to show they are listening, etc.

Make a person on the autism spectrum stop stimming simply because it makes someone else feel uncomfortable.

Don't ask an autistic person anything that you wouldn't feel comfortable asking a non-autistic person.

<https://www.wikihow.com/Talk-to-an-Autistic-Person>

Resources we recommend –

Websites/Blogs –

wikiHow – Autism – related articles

Emma's Hope Book

Thinking Person's Guide to Autism

Respectfully Connected

ASAN (Autistic Self Advocacy Network)

Look Me In The Eye

YouTube – "Ask an Autistic"

Autism Women's Network

Books –

Uniquely Human, by Barry Prizant

Look Me In The Eye, by John Elder Robison

Neurotribes, by Steve Silberman

The Reason I Jump, by Naoki Higashida