

Myths About Autism in Women vs The Facts

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When I was younger, I never understood why some people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) behaved differently than others with the disorder. However, after finding out my cousins had autism, I realized that autism could differ from person to person. Talking about this is very important to me because I used to believe most of the myths regarding autism were true until I met and interacted with my cousins. There are uncountable misconceptions and myths regarding autism, especially when it comes to females. Some people believe that men and women in the spectrum share the exact same characteristics and symptoms. Others think girls are less likely to be diagnosed with autism than boys, and even less when they reach adulthood. Some people believe that women with autism cannot form healthy relationships and/or have successful careers. However, based on experts' research and the experiences of the people who are under the spectrum, symptoms may vary depending on the person's gender and age; and even though autism is more usual in boys, it can be equally common for girls. Also, autistic people can acknowledge other people's emotions and care for them, and they can be just as gifted and successful as a person without the disorder.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a variety of complex neurodevelopmental conditions. These conditions may affect communication skills, behavior and habits, and social interactions. Most people start exhibiting symptoms during their childhood, and they may get diagnosed. However, some people don't get diagnosed until later in adulthood, but people with ASD may experience an extensive variety of symptoms that are characterized as the "spectrum," meaning that someone's symposium may be different from another person's symptoms. According to the article "What is Autism?" from *WebMD*, Alexandra Benisek (2023) states that "every person with autism will be affected differently." She explains that some people have more difficulty communicating with others during social interactions, and they might have a hard time

learning; this is considered “low functioning” autism. On the other hand, Benisek (2023) says that there are other people under the spectrum that experience the opposite. She says they may have “less obvious symptoms,” meaning that they can easily interact with others. Causes of autism are currently unknown; however, as mentioned by Benisek (2023), autism may be a genetic disease that may run in the family or caused by environmental factors. She says that a person with ASD can be affected from 40% to 80% by genetic factors, and she explains that “many of the genes that are involved in autism are related to brain development.” This is why many of the symptoms are linked to speech delays, lack of socialization skills, and analytical functioning.

There are individuals who believe that everyone under the ASD spectrum has the same behaviors and characteristics. Even though there are people who might share some common symptoms, there are some biases regarding females and males with ASD; some behaviors differ depending on the person’s gender and age. As mentioned by the article “Autism in Women: Here’s What You Need to Know” from the *Adult Ability Center of Lifetime Learning*, the Adult Autism Center (n.d) states, “When it comes to autism in women, research suggests that girls receive diagnosis later in life.” The majority of ASD research has been primarily focused on white males because they usually present more noticeable symptoms during their childhood. In addition, according to the article “How Men and Women Experience Autism Differently” from *Psychology Today*, Claire Jack (2021) explains that girls tend to be more socially driven than boys. They are more interested in making friends, but it can be hard for them to maintain long term friendships. On the other hand, boys appear to be less sociable and anxious. Jack (2021) talks about some of the most common autistic traits or stereotypes. One of these common traits is when an individual has an interest in “collecting items and gathering information about objects.”

But when it comes to girls, they appear to be more interested in things other girls without ASD are interested in, such as “celebrities, bands or ponies.” Neurotypical females think and act differently than males due to the hormones, and even though people with autism may share common symptoms, it does not mean all have to act the same. Autism symptoms are as likely to vary depending on the gender and age of the person. Females often get misdiagnosed because they usually present symptoms that look like “normal” behaviors as someone without the disease.

As I previously mentioned, autism is commonly seen in males at all ages. Many people believe autism only happens to males because they are more likely to express ASD symptoms than females, but females are as equally likely to have ASD as males even if they have different symptoms. According to the article “What Is the Male-to-Female Ratio in Autism Spectrum Disorder? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis” from *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Rachel Loomes, Laura Hull, and William Polmear Locke Mandy, PhD (2017), talk about fifty-four studies that were used to determine the ratio of males and females with autism. They state, “Of children meeting criteria for ASD, the true male-to-female ratio is not 4:1, as is often assumed; rather, it is closer to 3:1.” Based on old research, it was determined that approximately boys were four times more likely to have autism than females. However, in this research, it has been proven that some female symptoms are often overlooked and biased; therefore, in the study boys were only three times more likely. Also, the article “Why are so many autistic women overlooked or misdiagnosed?” from *Clinical Partners*, Clinical Partners (2020) explain that boys will often show signs of autism at an earlier age than girls. This is because women are expected to be more social; therefore, there is a lot of pressure for autistic females that need to meet these societal norms. They said, “Because many women

adopt such effective strategies from an early age, they make their way into adulthood without a diagnosis.” Autistic women are usually more interested in socializing and making friends with other people. Therefore, the ratio between men and women with ASD is higher for men because women must camouflage their distinctions to fit in with people without the disorder, and this is due to societal norms. Camouflaging one’s distinctions is commonly known as “masking.” Masking can be effective in order to achieve their expectations, but it can be extremely overwhelming to keep all those emotions and feelings bottled up.

Furthermore, there are some people who believe autistic women are not capable of having healthy relationships. Even though it can be difficult for women with ASD to maintain relationships, they can still manage to form close relationships with others, including romantic relationships. In the article “Sex, Love, and Dating for Women with Autism” from *Psychology Today*, Claire Jack (2020) talks about her love life and her romantic relationships. She comments that her friends didn’t understand why she was in a relationship where she would spend time together at her house with a guy only at night. Jack (2020) later responds, “I loved the fact that we didn’t have to go out together. The anxiety of getting ready for a date [...] and the discomfort of wearing anything other than a dressing gown after 6 p.m. were horrors I’d experience often enough” This might appear unusual to people without ASD, but she didn’t feel comfortable doing the usual “talk, dates, or the subtlety of courtship”, and later Jack (2020) explains how she managed to maintain her relationship by giving each other a healthy amount of space, and her partner is very accepting of her wishes. Also, according to the article “Autistic Women in Couple Relationships” from *Attwood & Garnet Events*, Professor Tony Attwood, and Dr. Michelle Garnett (n.d) argue that some women with ASD are more interested in forming relationships with other people. Most of the time they probably won’t realize the real intentions of others, and

they may end up getting taken advantage of. Attwood and Garnett (n.d) stated that “a recent study of several hundred autistic adults found that 46.5% of autistic women reported experiencing sexual violence.” They also said that many of these women didn't have anyone to rely on after those experiences. It can be difficult for autistic women to find the right person to form a relationship with, but Attwood and Garnett (n.d) also found out from one of their sources (Ying Yew et al. (2021). Personal Relationships) that “autistic individuals whose partners are also autistic report greater relationship satisfaction than those whose partner is not autistic.” This indicates that women with ASD are more comfortable in a relationship where she has a lot of things in common with her partner. However, there are times when a non-autistic person is willing to have a relationship with an autistic person because they are deeply in love with them.

On top of that, there are people who believe autistic individuals can't be successful in life. Still, people with ASD are just as capable of a successful life as someone without autism. In the article “What Success Means to Me as an Autistic Woman” from *The Art of Autism*, Baylie Nixon (2019) talks about what it means to her to be successful vs what it means to be successful for a regular American person. She states, “It is toxic to think that the worth of a person comes only from what they can provide. This is, in my opinion, a major source of ableism.” People often see productivity as successful, meaning that if one is not productive or does not contribute to society, they're not considered successful. Americans should start recognizing human worth rather than just productivity. Nixon (2019) also highlights that “happiness” is a form of success that a lot of people don't acknowledge. She suggests that success should be defined as personal fulfillment without harming others. Achieving happiness does not only include external factors such as social status or money, but it can include well-being, independence, harmony, mental health, etc.

Overall, based on the experiences of people with ASD and researchers we can learn that signs and symptoms of autism are different depending on the individual's age and gender. Also, autism does not only affect males, but it can also affect females. People under the spectrum are willing and capable of maintaining relationships with others while being free to be themselves. They are incredibly talented and are competent to succeed in their lives. I have learned that it is important to understand the effects of ASD on females, and that we need to focus on them as much as we do with males. Females usually "mask" their symptoms because society expects them to be more outgoing, and their symptoms also go unnoticed due to stereotypes. Also, there should be more inclusion in the workforce. Employers should educate themselves about neurodivergent individuals, so they can provide all the support they need to fit in at work. After getting to know my cousins a lot better I came to realize that one of them was quite different than the other one. They had different symptoms; some more noticeable than others, but with more knowledge and education about the topic I accepted them just the way they are.

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