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What Does Autism Look Like?

"You aren't autistic. You just seem like a normal guy to me." I heard many comments to this effect before my diagnosis. But what does autism look like? Can you really tell from the outside, or is it more nuanced than commonly thought? Many assume that autism manifests through plainly obvious traits, whether it be stereotypical mannerisms or even just mental disability. In truth, autism is a complex spectrum with many presentations, and assuming such stereotypes not only can harm the perception of people with autism, but also muddles the understanding of the condition, which is essential for promoting true awareness and acceptance.

The idea that autism implies intellectual disability is one very widespread misconception. Many expect someone who is autistic to stand out with clearly inferior intelligence to their peers. This is not at all inherently true – and while it is factual that many people with autism have a coinciding mental disability, autism itself does not have much to say about one's intellectual limits. This misunderstanding is one that I also fell into as a child. Throughout grade school, I had a classmate with autism who happened to also have a comorbid (simultaneously occurring) mental disability. Due to his difficulty with verbal communication and the requirement for nearly constant assistance, some people, disgustingly, would speak of him as though he was less than human at times. Not knowing anybody else diagnosed with autism, this experience led me to interpret autism as entirely an intellectual disability and is likely a large reason that I seldom

seriously considered the possibility that I could be autistic until I was older. Even my mother believed that I could not have autism because she thought that I was “too smart”. The truth is that people with autism can be just as intelligent as anyone else, which I would only learn later upon doing my own research.

Physical or verbal behaviors are another way that autism is stereotypically expected to be represented – and as with some of the others, it *can* be true in some - but not all - cases. I distinctly remember exhibiting some of these mannerisms into my late childhood: hand flapping, rocking, chewing on things, whispering back sentences after speaking, repetitive pacing-about or other actions, and so on. My parents interpreted this to be me *mimicking* my classmate with autism, probably because they really hoped that I did *not* have autism. As I grew up, my awareness of these “weird” behaviors led me to suppress them in public, out of fear of embarrassment. My success in masking these behaviors seems to be limited at times, as consciously trying to appear perfectly “normal” can make me feel far more awkward and robotic than otherwise. I notice that people older than me often speak to me as though I am a child, though I can’t be certain if this is only because I am clearly anxious. Ironically, my ability to understand that aspects of my behavior are abnormal and suppress them made me think that I was probably not autistic, as a total lack of self-awareness is another stereotypical “trait” of autism. One thing that I absolutely do retain, though, is difficulty making eye contact – I usually simply can’t look at people’s faces and may even look in a different direction when talking to them. While this is true for me, it isn’t necessarily so for everyone that has autism.

It is also a very common belief that people with autism are emotionally cold and lack empathy. A truer statement is that it’s common for us to exhibit our emotions in “unusual ways”. In my case, my relationship with empathy has been strange and nuanced throughout my life. I

have felt incredibly strong empathy for even the smallest animals, or sometimes even inanimate objects, but on the other hand, I frequently have trouble expressing empathy toward people when I know that I should. I sometimes feel pressured to fake tears to appear more "human". For example, there have been several instances where someone in my family suffers a tragedy, and I feel extremely ashamed to admit that it often does not give me a feeling of sorrow. But I do not think this is a complete lack of empathy – I logically understand when I should be sad and empathetic toward others, and when things are very unfortunate. When my maternal grandparents died, I could not cry at their funerals, and in one case I remember taking a tissue offered by my cousin and pretending to wipe tears. I would later ask my mother why I couldn't cry, and why I didn't feel much emotion even though I knew that I loved them. At most times, I deeply wish that I could properly express these feelings, but real tears may not come, and often neither does the feeling of grief. In this case, I would say that I do fulfill a stereotype at least in part, but I also have the self-awareness to recognize what is abnormal about me, and I find it hard to simply label this "emotional detachment".

In a similar vein to the former is the idea that people with autism are all antisocial or reclusive, and that they do not want to interact with others to a normal degree. Autism often introduces significant social difficulties, in fact. But I would not describe myself as "antisocial"; on the contrary, I feel a strong need to socialize all the time. But it can be *scary*. As a child, I did not have much difficulty making friends, though socializing was certainly stiff and awkward at times. As I grew older, however, I began to detach myself from friendships and I felt that the few I maintained did not feel 'real'. It was like there was a fundamental difference between me and my peers, and I often do feel that being autistic can feel like being of a "different species" in this regard: I seem to just think in different ways, feel or exhibit emotions differently, and have

different wants in life. I feel most comfortable with people who are much like me, but people I can truly relate to are usually hard to find. From around the age of twelve, the internet provided me with a refuge to socialize with others in which I was not limited by my difficulties in real life, and a means to meet similar people outside of my small-town bubble. Online communities such as forums centered around online games, and later, communication platforms like *Discord* allowed me to communicate with others more comfortably by being able to "draft" my thoughts. The fact that I felt so lonely without being able to socialize with similar people who I felt "understood me" actually led me to neglect my schoolwork in favor of talking to my online friends, often at late hours as they lived in vastly different time zones.

On the other side of the stereotypes are those which take it too lightly – those who consider autism to be a "superpower", or maybe just akin to nothing more than a "personality quirk". These romanticisms of autism seem to stem from and largely propagate on social media platforms in recent years. The issue with this perception is complicated to approach because it is a two-edged sword. For one, considering autism to be a benefit, or at least nothing detrimental, can obviously act to reduce the inherent stigma towards people with autism by painting it as a positive thing. It also may increase the recognition that autism is not just a monolith of stereotypical negative behaviors. On the other hand, these perceptions are dishonest about what autism actually is: a developmental disability, with a broad spectrum of better or worse presentations. Social media users emphatically insisting that it is a wonderful thing to be autistic; that every strange but charming behavior is "so autistic" (this is meant endearingly), often seem to shy away from empathizing with those on the autism spectrum who have any kind of outwardly negative manifestation. In other words, I think that overly sugar-coating the reality of autism reduces acceptance towards those who struggle the most with it, because they don't fit an

“ideal image” and plainly put – may be hard for many people to like. And just how having autism does not inherently mean that you also have a mental disability, it also does not mean that you are particularly savant. While we often have incredibly strong, focused interests that we dedicate much time to and understand exceptionally well, this does not indicate that our abilities in other areas are more likely to be elevated.

Autism is not always obvious, and the stereotypes surrounding it are not inherently true. While my individual experience cannot hope to speak for everyone with autism, I can disprove the idea that autism is always presented in set ways. Understanding how varied autism can be is crucial; far more people have autism than are currently aware of it, as indicated by the continuing rise of prevalence over the years. It was around the age of sixteen when I began to recognize my unusual mannerisms, as well as my struggles with socialization and empathy as autism. I would tell my few online friends that I was autistic as an explanation for my problems, despite having no diagnosis. Admittedly, I had no way of knowing at the time: I simply felt emotionally inhibited and sought a plausible explanation, nowadays, I consider this somewhat dishonest. Nonetheless, as I got older, I continued to question whether I was truly autistic due to not presenting many stereotypical traits, along with the doubtful expressions from my parents. Only upon receiving a diagnosis after high school did I finally feel validation, understanding the reasons behind my limitations and being able to work on self-improvement without self-hatred for things that are beyond my complete control. I would advise those struggling with similar problems, who suspect that they too may have autism, to get evaluated if they have the means to. I hope that the global understanding of autism will continue to improve beyond simplistic stereotypes, so we can recognize that difficult struggles and differences may persist under the

surface even when someone is able to outwardly appear more or less “like a normal guy” and create a more inclusive and accommodating world.