

Autism and Autistic Traits

A Strengths-Based Perspective



1. WHAT IS **AUTISM**?



Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition. “Neuro” means that autism affects a person’s brain in areas of thinking, learning, and experiencing the world. “Developmental” means that autism is a condition that is present from birth and persists throughout a person’s lifetime, although characteristics of autism may change over time. There is no “cure” for autism, and in fact, we would not want to cure autism because it is a unique way of being human. People of all genders, races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds can be diagnosed with autism.

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD THE FOLLOWING:

**If you’ve met one person
with autism, you have met
one person with autism.**

-Stephen Shore

This saying is often used when teaching others about autism. It emphasizes that autism is a spectrum condition with a wide variation of traits, both in terms of strengths and challenges. One must not make assumptions when supporting an autistic individual. (If you want to understand more about what is meant by the “autism spectrum”, check out this explanation:

<https://the-art-of-autism.com/understanding-the-spectrum-a-comic-strip-explanation/>

BUT YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD THIS (YET!):

**If you’ve met one
autistic person,**

**that person has a lot in
common with other autistics.**

@NeuroClastic

This saying is becoming increasingly popular in the autistic community. It highlights the reality that autistic people also share many things in common with other autistic people. It is important to recognize this in order to support an individual’s sense of community and belonging.

2. WHAT ARE AUTISTIC TRAITS?

- Autism is often described using a diagnostic-driven, deficit-based framework. However, autism is much more than a collection of impairments! When viewed from a strengths-based perspective, autism can be understood as an essential part of an individual's identity. Every autistic person experiences autism differently, but there are some characteristics that many autistic people have in common. These are sometimes known as "autistic traits." Let's take a look at some traits that many autistic people have in common:



- **Unique social interaction style**

Autistic people demonstrate a variety of interaction styles and preferences that may be different than those among neurotypical people. Autistic social preferences could look like, but aren't limited to: a preference to engage in their interests on their own, a preference to be in the same room with another person with minimal talking but engagement in similar or different activities, discussing special interests in extensive detail, or sharing deeply personal events and bonding over highly personal experiences (Dorsey & Proctor, 2021). Many autistic people find direct eye contact uncomfortable when interacting with others. In the past, many believed that autistic people were not interested in others or did not want friendships. This is a harmful myth! Autistic people have a deep desire for friendship and connection with others. Many first-hand accounts of autistic people describe greater comfort and ease interacting with other autistic people compared to non-autistic people.



○ **Unique communication style**

There are many ways to communicate, and all ways are valid! Some autistic people do not use spoken language to communicate but rely more on non-spoken forms of communication (i.e., gestures, facial expressions, body language, vocalizations, etc.) or learn to use augmentative/alternative modes of communication (i.e., voice output devices, written text, picture boards, letterboards, etc.). Some autistic people use echoed or scripted phrases to communicate. Some autistic people may use highly verbose language, whereas others may use less complex language to communicate. Familiarity and trust with communication partners or the setting may impact the type of communication that is used in different contexts and situations.

○ **Ability to remember, store, and digest large amounts of information on a specific topic of interest**

These topics of interest are often referred to as “special interests”, “intense interests”, or a person’s “hyperfocus.” Not all autistic people have an intense interest. If they do, interests range from a variety of topics from person-to-person, however, research shows that autistic females are more likely to intensely engage in more “typical and gender-stereotyped interests” compared to autistic males (Hiller et al, 2014).



○ **Use of repetitive movements to self-regulate**

All humans engage in various behaviours to regulate their emotions and energy levels across the day. Many autistic people use repetitive movement as a way to self-regulate, commonly referred to as “stimming.” For example, in moments of frustration or excitement, an autistic person may engage in physical stimming (i.e., hand flapping, body rocking), object stimming (i.e., using objects in an repetitive manner), or verbal stimming (i.e., repeating words or phrases).



STRENGTHS-BASED AUTISM RESOURCES

Check out the following resources to learn more about autism for yourself or to teach others about autism from a strengths-based perspective:

BOOKS

PICTUREBOOK: "Nathan's Autism Spectrum Superpowers" by Lori Leigh Yarborough (2018)

PICTUREBOOK: "I See Things Differently" by Pat Thomas (2014)

PICTUREBOOK: "All My Stripes" by Danielle Royer and Shaina Rudolph (2015)

BOOK FOR KIDS: "The Survival Guide for Kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Parents" by Elizabeth Reeve and Elizabeth Verdick (2021)

BOOK FOR KIDS: "The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic" – Siena Castellon (2020)

BOOK FOR KIDS: "The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide: A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens" by Yenn Purkis and Tanya Masterman (2020)

BOOK: "Welcome to the Autistic Community" by Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (2020)

VIDEOS

Sesame Street "Meet Julia"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKCdV20zLMs>

"Amazing Things Happen!"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezv85LMFx2E>

"Five Questions About Autism"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IApo5TBR7jc>

"You Can't Ask That – Season 1, Episode 4: Autism" by CBC Gems

<https://gem.cbc.ca/media/you-cant-ask-that/season-1/episode-4/38e815a-010f385fad1>

"Ask an Autistic" Series – Amythest Schaber

<https://www.youtube.com/user/neurowonderful>

ONLINE CONTENT

Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

Neurodiversity Resources for Students

<https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/student-resources>

Kits for Kids - Organization for Autism Research (OAR)

<https://researchautism.org/resources/kit-for-kids/>

Peer-to-Peer Handouts - Center for Secondary Education for Students with ASD (CSESA) <https://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/resources/peer-to-peer>

REFERENCES

Dorsey, R. & Proctor, M. (2021, June 2). Reframing social differences for autistic kids [Audio podcast episode].

In Two Sides of the Spectrum. Learn, Play, Thrive LLC.

https://two-sides-of-the-spectrum.simplecast.com/episodes/reframing-social-differences-for-autistic-kids-with-rachel-dorsey-autistic-slp-XTG_rQxp

Hiller, R. M., Young, R. L. & Weber, N. (2014). Sex differences in autism spectrum disorder based on DSM-5 criteria: Evidence from clinician and teacher reporting. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 42, 1381-1393.