

Myths

Stereotypes

You don't look autistic:

Autism is an invisible disability. You cannot see it. Not all autistic traits will present outwardly and unfortunately a lot of autistic people are forced to learn how to mask or hide their autism to be accepted or considered successful in society. This takes a significant toll on many autistic people and oftentimes means they will have a harder time accessing the supports they need because they 'look' fine.

Autistic people don't make eye contact

For a lot of autistic people, eye contact doesn't serve the same purpose as it does for neurotypical people. Some autistic people can't listen while making eye contact because it's simply too intense or even painful. There are also neurotypical social rules around how much eye contact to make and when to blink and when to look away and that's something that can be very confusing and difficult to get right while also trying to manage the sensory environment, any other social expectations, and listening at the same time.

On the other hand, some autistic people make a lot of eye contact. Some autistic people mask and will make eye contact even if it's uncomfortable. Some have no issues with eye contact at all.

At the end of the day, we don't listen with our eyes, we listen with our ears. So if you are worried that you're not being heard, just ask!

Autistic people don't like being hugged or touched

Autism is a spectrum. Every autistic person is different. For some autistic people, being hugged or touched may be uncomfortable or painful but for others, it's something they seek. It's important not to make assumptions or generalisations about autistic people just because we're autistic. We're still humans with different preferences and experiences.

Autistic people don't have an imagination

Lack of imagination is one of the stereotypical traits and signs of autism. It is looked for in the assessment process. However, it simply isn't the case for many autistic people. Some autistic people might not be imaginative in the sense that they cannot create ideas of things they cannot physically see, or they might not understand or be interested in pretend play, but they may still be very creative individuals who just work within certain boundaries. On the other hand, many autistic people are extremely imaginative and may even have whole made up worlds inside their minds. If the person has PDA (Pathological demand avoidance) this is also particularly common as a coping mechanism.

Autistic people are always rigid about routines

Many autistic people do struggle with change and prefer to have routines and familiarity. However, many autistic people also have ADHD and can be very spontaneous or thrive in fast changing environments. Many autistic people are okay with changes to their routines if there is enough time to process and regulate themselves. It is a spectrum; some autistic people need their routines to be very rigid. Sudden changes can have much larger domino effects on our plans for our days as well as how we're going to cope with our emotions, sensory environment, executive functioning, and social capacity. Changes may seem small to everyone else when they have much more significant impact for us.

Autistic people have super powers or special abilities

For a long time there has been a lot of stigma around autism and there is absolutely a need to turn that around and create more understanding and positive narratives. However, it's also important that we don't shoot too far in the other direction. Viewing autistic people as superheroes or having special abilities places unfair expectation on us to exceed or excel in certain areas of society. It also feels kind of gross being viewed as inspiration just because we have a different neurotype or disability. A lot of us just want to be treated as equals, with the accommodations that mean we are not at a disadvantage to our peers. There are some struggles that we should celebrate overcoming but, in general, we don't need to be placed on a pedestal just for being different.

Autistic people don't understand sarcasm

There are a few things at play when it comes to sarcasm but first and foremost, autism is a spectrum so while some may not understand sarcasm, some do.

Sarcasm is expressed in a wide variety of ways, which can be difficult to interpret for autistic people who learn social interactions as a set of rules. Sometimes sarcasm relies on tone of voice which some autistic people don't always pick up on. Other times we may not pick up on it because we take things literally or we're more inclined to trust people's words, we're not expecting people to say something and mean a different thing entirely. I find I only pick up on sarcasm if I know the person well and know the kinds of things they would and would not say in a genuine manner.

Some autistic people may not pick up on sarcasm but might be particularly sarcastic themselves. Some, particularly those who also have pathological demand avoidance, might also use sarcasm as a coping mechanism. And of course, since it is a spectrum, there are autistic people who have no difficulty with sarcasm at all.

Autistic people don't have empathy

Empathy is a tricky concept. Autistic people are often actually very empathetic and caring but may express that differently to what is expected and therefore come across as lacking in empathy. It's important to understand that empathy means to be able to understand someone else's experiences. Sometimes we can't do that because we've not been through that experience ourselves and cannot pretend to know what it's like. That doesn't mean we lack care. Alternatively, sometimes autistic people are hyperempathetic, to the point that it can be hard to differentiate their own emotions from others.

Often what happens though, is that we express empathy and care by sharing a story of a similar experience we've had. This is a way of saying we understand, and giving evidence of how we understand. However, neurotypical people can interpret this as trying to turn the attention to ourselves, and so it is seen more as self-centred rather than empathetic.

It's not that autistic people don't have empathy, it's that the empathy is getting lost in communication between neurotypes.

Autistic people are rude

Are they being rude or are they being literal? Are they being rude or are they being direct and to the point? Are they being rude or did they miss an unclear social signal? Are they rude or are they just honest? Are they just stating facts? Are they simply treating you as an equal instead of following the rules of hierarchy? Are they offering you new information? Are they trying to be helpful? Did you perceive them as rude because they didn't use the tone you were expecting? Did they simply decide not to waste time with small talk and fluff? Are they just not making eye contact (because many autistic people can't listen while making eye contact so they're actually being more respectful by not making eye contact)?

Autistic people are perceived as rude because of neurotypical communication and social expectations but often it comes down to a misunderstanding. The autistic person is not actually being rude.

Autistic people lack social skills

Autistic people do not lack social skills, we are simply on a different operating system. Think of it as though neurotypical people run on an android system and autistic people run on an apple system. When either system interacts with its own type, there are generally fewer issues. It's when the two try to interact with each other that issues start to arise.

So, it's not that autistic people lack social skills, it's that autistic people aren't wired to follow neurotypical social rules and the same could be said for neurotypicals in an autism context.

There are some neurotypical rules and skills that we need to learn to get by in life but both neurodivergent and neurotypical people can learn to understand each other and work around the varying challenges rather than blaming one group for lacking the ability to be something they're not.

All autistic people are antisocial or prefer to be alone

This is a very common myth. In fact, a lot of autistic people feel very lonely because they do want friends but often aren't sure how to make friends, or it is assumed that they prefer being alone. Autistic people are also misinterpreted or misunderstood and told they're rude, and it's rare to have social contexts that are intentional about considering sensory needs.

Another challenge is that invitations to social gatherings may be missed. For example, "we're all going out to lunch" doesn't tell the autistic person that it includes them, or "you can join if you want to" isn't a direct invitation and can make the autistic person feel unsure if their presence is wanted or not.

Socialising or being friends with an autistic person can look different as well. Sometimes simply existing in the same space or doing the same activity separately is enough.

Just because an autistic person isn't talking or initiating the interaction, doesn't mean they are antisocial or don't want your company.

Autistic people can't talk

Autism is a spectrum. Some autistic people can't or don't talk, some have delayed milestones in regards to their speech, some can talk sometimes but not other times. Some autistic people talk via devices, text, writing or even pictures. Some autistic people talk just as much as the average person and some autistic people are hypervocal and exceed typical milestones or talk a lot. We're autistic but we're also human; we are all different. We have different personalities, different challenges, different strengths and different presentations. Speech is just one part of that.

Non-speaking autistics don't understand

Oftentimes when an autistic person is not communicating via spoken language, people seem to assume that the autistic person does not understand. They talk louder, slower and with more childlike vocabulary when trying to communicate with the autistic person or they bypass the autistic person entirely and try speaking only with their support person or carer. This can be very frustrating and infantilising. It takes our autonomy away in situations where we should still be allowed to make our own decisions and be independent. There are many ways to communicate, just because one method isn't accessible, doesn't mean there aren't alternatives.

Autistic people can't learn or understand

Autistic people (without co-occurring learning/intellectual disabilities) are perfectly capable of learning and understanding right from wrong. Yes, we have additional needs and there is a time and a place for understanding meltdowns and overload and not mistaking it for misbehaviour. However, it is still essential that autistic people (particularly as children) are taught appropriate boundaries, consent, natural consequences etc. That doesn't necessarily mean there needs to be punishments but have conversations. Without being taught these concepts, autistic people are excused for inappropriate behaviour because they 'won't understand'. This sets them up poorly for life and they find themselves in more trouble than necessary.

Autism affects intellectual ability

There are often beliefs that all autistic people are geniuses or that autistic people must have a learning disability to be autistic. Neither of these are true. Autistic people can have significant strengths in some areas and difficulties in others but, once again, it is a spectrum and everyone is different. Generally speaking, intellectual ability is not impacted by being autistic. It may be common for there to be co-occurring conditions or disabilities that impact this but that does not mean it is because they are autistic. Intellectual or learning disabilities are in addition to being autistic, they are not part of being autistic.

Everyone is a little bit autistic

The autism spectrum is not linear. There is no such thing as a little bit autistic or severely autistic. The spectrum is more like a circle, where every autistic person has different experiences with different traits. However, these traits are not exclusive to autistic people. Anyone could have similar traits or experiences without necessarily being autistic themselves.

Not many girls/women are autistic

Autistic females often slip through the cracks, get a diagnosis later in life or get misdiagnosed entirely. Until diagnostic bias is eliminated, it's hard to know the true autistic male-to-female ratio.

So the statement "not many girls are autistic" may be true in the sense that they haven't been formally diagnosed, however that doesn't mean women aren't autistic.

Autistic females tend to be more inclined to mask or otherwise present differently to the stereotypes that are generally looked for in the assessment process. There still seems to be a very narrow view and understanding of how autism might present, and this means those who fall outside of that stereotypical lens, or those who might mask their traits are less likely to be diagnosed. On top of that, there is often a belief that girls can't be autistic and so they get overlooked even if they do present with stereotypical traits.