

FOUR MYTHS OF AUTISM

Myth #1: Autistic People Are All the Same

Facts:

Many people believe that if they have met one person with autism, all people with autism will be the same. Or maybe they saw a movie with a character with autism and think everyone with autism acts the same way as the character.

Autism, however, is a spectrum disorder. People can be highly functional, severely autistic, or somewhere in between. One of the main characteristics of autism is problems with social communication, and this symptom is present in most people on the spectrum. They have difficulties with conversation, eye contact, verbal and non-verbal communication, and understanding the emotions within a conversation.

Another characteristic of ASD is limited and sometimes obsessive interests, but the interests are highly varied—for example, trains, dinosaurs, washing machines, art, or zip codes. These interests might change over time or could be lifelong.

Myth #2: Autistic People Do Not Talk

Facts:

Based on what we have seen on television, people might believe that everyone on the spectrum does not talk or has a minimal vocabulary or ability to speak. About 25 percent of people with autism do not speak or say only a few words. One study found that children with ASD with limited speech do not quickly call up the name of an image or related items. For example, seeing a picture of a flower might bring up images of petals and leaves.

Although some people with ASD can be non-verbal or close to non-verbal, many people with autism are highly verbal and have high reading skills. Because this is a spectrum disorder, the diagnosis includes people who speak a great deal and those who are non-verbal. Previously, the belief was if a child on the spectrum did not begin speaking by four years old, they probably never would. However, this has been found incorrect.

One study found that almost half of children not speaking at four years old developed language skills and became fluent speakers. Many more could speak in simple phrases.

Myth #3: People With Autism Are Incapable of Empathy

Facts:

One myth about people with ASD is that they are incapable of empathy and don't care how other people feel. It is true that those with autism may have some difficulty in reading other people's feelings and that they might not show emotion in ways neurotypical people do; it is entirely false that they lack empathy and feelings.

Alexithymia is the inability to understand your own emotions, making it difficult to understand other people's emotions; this can occur alongside ASD. It does in 50 percent of those with autism. It can also occur without autism and is common in people with mental illness. According to one study, alexithymia, not autism, was more responsible for the perceived lack of empathy.

Myth #4: Most People With ASD Are Dangerous

Facts:

Some children and adolescents with ASD indeed have violent temper tantrums. You might hear about incidents on the news or through your neighbors. But what you don't hear about is all of those with ASD who are not violent or dangerous. One study found that only 25 percent of children with ASD showed aggressive behavior.

Aggression appears to be most common in people with ASD and low IQ scores. According to one study, violent behavior in some of these individuals with ASD may be linked to lower brain stem volumes. Researchers believe that frustration levels that cause signs of anger, such as clenched fists, increased heart rate, and sweating, can lead to aggression because the inefficiency of their brain function doesn't allow them to calm down on their own.

Another possible cause of aggression for some people with autism is the inability to communicate their inner selves to others; this can cause intense frustration, anger, and anxiety, which can lead to aggression. But the underlying cause of the aggression isn't malice; it is the need to be understood.