

**Understanding
the Spectrum
Without the
Stereotypes**



What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that affects how people experience the world. There is no one way to be autistic. Here are a few examples of common characteristics of autism:

- Autistic people often think differently — including having deep special interests, strong attention to detail, strong problem-solving skills, and differences with executive functioning.
- Routines and predictability are often very important; unexpected changes can feel overwhelming.
- Sensory processing is different — autistic people may be very sensitive (or not sensitive enough) to light, sound, pain, hunger, or body signals.
- Stimming (repetitive movements or sounds) helps regulate the nervous system and manage sensory input.

More Characteristics of Autism

- Movement and motor coordination can be different — including fine motor challenges, difficulty starting/stopping tasks, or speech coordination differences.
- Communication styles vary — including echolalia, scripting, use of AAC, behavior-based communication, or being nonspeaking. All autistic people communicate in some way.
- Social interaction may look different — including discomfort with eye contact, being more direct, difficulty reading social cues, or experiencing empathy differently (sometimes very deeply).
- Daily living can require more energy in a world built for non-autistic people, and support needs may vary day to day.
- The term “Asperger’s Syndrome” is no longer used as a diagnosis due to its origins in Nazi death camps as a way to exterminate disabled Germans

ADHD & Autism – Cousins, Not Strangers

Autism and ADHD are closely related neurotypes that often overlap. Many people have both, and they share traits while still being distinct diagnoses.

- Many people are both autistic and ADHD (often called “AuDHD”)
- They share traits like executive dysfunction, hyperfocus, sensory differences, and emotional intensity
- ADHD primarily affects attention regulation and impulsivity
- Autism primarily affects social communication, sensory processing, and pattern recognition
- The same behavior can have different root causes (e.g., avoiding a task due to boredom vs. sensory overwhelm)
- They were not allowed to be diagnosed together until 2013 — now dual diagnosis is common

Autism Across Race & Gender

Autism exists across all races and genders, but it has historically been studied and diagnosed based on white boys. Because of this, many people are overlooked or misdiagnosed.

- Girls and AFAB people often present with more internalized traits.
- Many learn to mask or mimic social behavior from a young age.
- Special interests in girls may appear more “socially acceptable” and go unnoticed.
- Black children are more likely to be labeled with behavioral disorders instead of autism.
- Brown and Indigenous children are underdiagnosed due to systemic bias.
- Cultural differences affect how communication and eye contact are interpreted.
- LGBTQ+ individuals have higher rates of autism diagnoses.
- Late diagnosis is common in women and people of color.
- Bias in healthcare can delay access to support service

Masking

Masking is when an autistic person consciously or unconsciously hides autistic traits to blend in to social environments. While it can increase social acceptance, it often comes at a high emotional cost.

- Copying facial expressions, tone, or slang
- Forcing eye contact despite discomfort
- Suppressing stimming behaviors
- Rehearsing conversations in advance
- Studying peers to learn “correct” social responses
- Laughing or smiling when confused
- Avoiding discussing special interests to seem “normal”
- Constant self-monitoring of body language
- Long-term masking can lead to burnout
- Masking is linked to higher rates of anxiety and depression

Meltdown vs. Shutdown

Meltdowns and shutdowns are nervous system responses to overwhelming stress or sensory overload. They are not attention-seeking or intentional misbehavior.

- A meltdown is an outward expression of overload
 - May include crying, yelling, pacing, or loss of emotional control
 - Often triggered by sensory overload or sudden change
- A shutdown is an inward response to overwhelm
 - May include going quiet, freezing, or becoming nonverbal
 - Shutdowns can look like withdrawal or dissociation
- Both occur when the nervous system is past its limit
- Recovery may require reduced sensory input and rest
- Support, not punishment, is the appropriate response

Comorbidities & Whole Body Impact

Autism and ADHD frequently co-occur with other medical and mental health conditions.

Differences in brain development can influence the entire nervous system and body.

- ADHD commonly co-occurs with autism
- Higher rates of anxiety and depression
- Increased prevalence of OCD
- Epilepsy and seizure disorders are more common
- Higher rates of connective tissue disorders (e.g. Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, hypermobility spectrum disorder, etc.)
- Gastrointestinal disorders are frequently reported (e.g. IBS, crohn's, gastroparesis, etc.)
- Sleep disorders are very common
- Autonomic nervous system differences occur at higher rates and can affect heart rate and digestion
- Long-term stress (caused by masking or adapting to allistic society) can worsen physical health

Representation in Media

Autistic characters have historically been portrayed through narrow stereotypes, but newer media is beginning to show more varied and human portrayals. Many viewers and autistic communities recognize certain characters as positive or relatable representations.

- Dr. Mel King - The Pitt
- Abed Nadir - Community
- Sheldon Cooper - Big Bang Theory
- Entrapta - She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (no longer available)
- Quinni Gallagher-Jones - Heartbreak High
- Detective Robert Goren - Law & Order: Criminal Intent
- Sam Gardener - Atypical
- Dr. Shaun Murphy - The Good Doctor
- Renee - Loop
- Louie - Little Voice

