

# **The Effects of Ableism on Autistic Young Adults**

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The treatment of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has been under scrutiny in recent years. Research indicates a variance in functioning among people on the autism spectrum. Many who are capable individuals with the diagnosis are not allowed inclusion or opportunities due to ableism (Arthur et al., 2023). Ableism is the discrimination against people who demonstrate atypical social behaviors. Arthur et al. (2023) note, “Ableism is very similar to that of stigma” (p. 212). Ableism places stigmatized people in a devalued category due to their atypical characteristics. Nachman (2023) points out that large institutions define socially acceptable behavior and decide who receives support, creating a stigma around certain types of support. The stigma causes young adults to mask atypical behaviors and needlessly suffer from a lack of support to avoid devaluation. Research on ASD increased as government-funded programs sought to reduce the disruptive behaviors of autistic children (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2023). The prior programs focused on shaping autistic children to demonstrate typical social behaviors, unintentionally reinforcing ableist ideology. Autism research historically has been a cause/cure reaction to a perceived increase in the number of ASD diagnoses.

### **Deficit-based Mindset**

Reasons for the rise in ASD diagnoses include changes in the method of identification and an increased awareness of frequent co-occurring conditions (Arthur et al., 2023). Ableist ideology does not differentiate between autism and medical/mental health conditions which accompany it. Disabling medical/mental health conditions and the complexities which accompany autistic people overshadow their psychosocial capabilities despite their atypical characteristics. Ableism consists of a mindset that perceives autistic people as having neurobiological flaws that need to be fixed or at least behaviorally mitigated. The mindset

emphasizes an individual's deficits, devaluing atypical behavior traits, calling them undesirable, and discounting the co-occurring medical/mental health conditions.

Research indicates autistic children, with their lack of typical developmental milestones, securely attach to their mothers in the same fashion as their neurotypical counterparts (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2023). Researchers with a deficit-based mindset flood the public with misinformation, which reinforces the ideology that autistic people are not interested in social engagement. Then, the public adopts an ableist mindset, believing autistic people are unaware of the discrimination against them. The social engagement of neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals is contingent on transactional interpretations. A deficit-based mindset is biased in thinking autistic people are behaving the way they do because of a lack of social skills, without consideration of the negative ways that neurotypical people react to atypical behaviors. Arthur et al. (2023) note that although autistic people “may not engage in social behaviors in the same way neurotypical individuals do, this does not mean they do not want a social connection” (p. 137).

### **Strength-based Mindset**

The strengths-based mindset is the beginning of eliminating ableism and its adverse effects (Nachman, 2023). There is no cure or prevention needed for autism spectrum disorder. Young adults with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis must recognize their value as human beings and their place in society if they are going to overcome the barriers in their lives, including the effects of ableism. Valuing interdependence leads to neurotypical and neurodivergent people taking responsibility for meeting each other in the middle. Neurotypical individuals must let go of mindlessly imposing their power and privilege on autistic people. Nachman (2023) notes that autistic young adults must “defy the commonality of non-disabled individuals” by seeing their differences and atypical behaviors through a positive lens (p. 37). A

strength-based approach does not mean autistic people ignore when they are ineffective. Setting goals and making plans to develop skills to address ineffectiveness are part of a strength-based mindset. The approach has a social justice foundation, recognizing everyone has strengths that deserve maximization and growth areas that deserve support. A growing number of neurotypical people recognize the autistic community as experience-based experts in autism (Arthur et al., 2023). The concept of experience-based expertise is not uncommon in the way educational institutions manage neurotypical development. It is ableism not to require a scope of competence for an autistic person. It is also ableist to assume someone who presents with atypical behaviors is incapable and, therefore, not offered academic or professional opportunities. An autistic person may still need support to fill specific gaps in behavior and learning. However, if they achieve the level of competence required to perform at a certain criterion level, the supports ought to be provided.

Children learn elementary concepts in developmentally appropriate environments which change over time, increasing autonomy and building a mastery of skills. Within the changing environments, neurotypical people have ample support and resources (Nachman, 2023). Providing increased accessibility and inclusion for autistic people in schools and workplaces requires a significant transition from educating the public on neurodiversity and addressing the needs of the neurodivergent community. Nachman (2023) notes that change “requires institutional stakeholders to shift their premises and priorities” (p. 41).

### **Negative Impact**

Molero et al. (2019) find that one of the most detrimental consequences of ableism is an autistic person adopting a negative self-stigma, known as internalized ableism. If a person perceives they are the object of personal discrimination, research indicates a significant negative

impact on self-esteem, causing them to feel less valuable than their neurotypical counterparts. If an autistic person perceives rejection as relating to an atypical behavior or characteristic, it makes them feel that ostracization is a permanent stance of society.

Another problem with ableism is its negative impact on families (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2023). Historically, mothers of neurodivergent children are demonized as being aloof and detached from their children, either causing autism or complicating the condition. The authors note that other factors, once considered antecedents to autism, are a mother's "education, participation in work, and perceived warmth" (p. 2). Although academia rejects the early ableist mindset, the stigma exists, causing unnecessary doubt in the minds of many parents. The goal of the neurodiversity movement is to empower families to advocate for the acceptance, understanding, and support for their neurodivergent children (Arthur et al., 2023).

### **Solutions**

Molero et al. (2019) note that associating with a community that has experienced similar discrimination is a protective factor for people who suffer personal discrimination. Their research indicates that identifying with a group reduces loneliness when suffering from personal discrimination. The Social Justice Model of Disability emphasizes that ableism exists on an individual, institutional, and societal level (Nachman, 2023). For this reason, autism-specific college support programs (ASPs) are on the rise, ensuring autistic young adults are empowered to seek quality education while adopting a strengths-based mindset that recognizes barriers to accessibility as the primary problem and not their atypical behaviors.

### **Conclusion**

Ableism impacts the autistic young adult community. Young people of every neurotype are launching into adulthood with various obstacles. The neurodiversity movement has made

slow progress due to the power and influence of large institutions catering to the loudest voices, the neurotypical community (Nachman, 2023). The rise in concerns regarding ableism is valid. Autistic young adults are failing to find a place in society. Many people working in large institutions are advocates for the autistic community. Many people in the medical and mental health industry believe a diagnosis does not devalue anyone (Arthur, 2023). Institutional leaders need to transition from a deficit-based mindset to a strength-based mindset to maximize the potential of autistic young adults (Nachman, 2023). Many capable autistic young adults presenting with atypical behaviors and learning differences are either discriminated against or do not have the support to help them increase their performance in school or work. The neurotypical community must make professional efforts to ensure autistic young adults receive opportunities to live rich, meaningful lives and reach their full potential (Arthur, 2023). Advocates for autistic young adults should amplify the voices of a suffering autistic community who are asking for inclusion and similar opportunities as their neurotypical counterparts.

There is a growing number of advocates for autistic people to extinguish ableism over time. As professionals and leaders make efforts to eliminate ableism, many neurotypical people attempt to make sense of the autistic community, adopting ableist terms without working from an ableist ideology. People who adopt a strength-based mindset use inclusive language and do not avoid inconvenient interactions with individuals who express themselves atypically. In the academic world, institutional leaders must restructure policies and procedures to include more autonomy in individualized education plans, especially in higher education (Nachman, 2023). Person-centered education plans ensure the student's experience-based expertise informs academic professionals providing support. Pillay (2022) notes that the evidence is clear for autistic young adults, and inclusion must be coupled with transition planning to ensure

accessibility and establish a higher quality of life. Autism is a spectrum that requires a wide range of perspectives to address the needs of the autistic community. The neurotypical community needs to work toward eliminating ableism and normalizing the frequency of problem-solving transactions. Autistic people need to work toward strengthening their ability to self-advocate in settings where their goals are out of reach due to discrimination. The solution to eliminating ableism is a bridge of interactions in which neurotypical people and autistic people bring their differences to the table, finding ways for everyone to have opportunities to be a part of a thriving, diverse community.

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