

Girls and women on the autism spectrum

More boys and men have a diagnosis of autism than girls and women, but recent data tells us that the gender gap in prevalence might be smaller than previously thought. This information sheet describes the current understanding of the gender gap, possible explanations that might explain it, and some insight into the life experiences of girls and women on the autism spectrum.¹



Does autism look different in girls and women?

There might be some ways in which girls and women differ in their behaviour compared to boys and men on the autism spectrum.

- ✓ Might show more interest in their peers and social relationships
- ✓ Might be better at using non-verbal forms of communication such as eye contact, gesture and facial expression
- ✓ Might have special interests that more closely align with 'mainstream' interests of their peers compared to boys (e.g. animals, celebrities or literature)
- ✓ Might be less likely to show externalising behaviours (impulsivity or hyperactivity), and may be more likely to internalise (anxiety or depression)

Why is there a gender gap?

There are a few possible explanations as to why more boys and men have a diagnosis of autism compared to girls and women.

- The way that autism is diagnosed is biased towards the 'conventional' (male) presentation, and may need to be modified to be more appropriate for women and girls
- Autism in women and girls is 'overshadowed' by a mental health (mis)diagnosis (e.g. anxiety, depression, eating disorders)
- Females on the autism spectrum may be more socially motivated to engage with peers contributing to a missed diagnosis
- Women and girls on the autism spectrum may be better able to camouflage or mask their challenges through social imitation
- Of course, it is also possible that autism may actually occur more frequently in males than females, as is the case for a number of developmental conditions

Life experiences of girls and women on the autism spectrum

Research has identified some commonalities regarding the life experiences of Autistic girls and women.

- The reaction to feeling 'different' may be to cope by learning strategies to 'mask' in order to fit in socially
- Having alone time may be especially important to re-charge from the exhaustion of masking
- Disproportionate rates of victimisation
- Tendency to defer to others and engage in 'people pleasing'
- Feeling a tension between being their true self and their perceived pressure to conform to societal expectations of females
- Feeling isolated because of not being believed when sharing their diagnosis of autism with others
- Late or delayed diagnosis

Mental health of girls and women on the autism spectrum

It is important to recognise that girls and women on the autism spectrum may experience unique challenges that might have an impact on their mental health.

Some of these experiences could include:

- Feeling unheard or unsupported due to misdiagnosis or not receiving the support needed
- Stress, exhaustion and anxiety from camouflaging and masking, and the sense of being forced to be something you are not
- Strong feelings of needing to withdraw from social interaction to re-charge
- Trauma response due to violence or victimisation
- Feeling isolated due to being discriminated against in the workplace
- Profound sense of inner turmoil

There are mental health professionals that can provide support for these feelings and work with you to develop strategies to help navigate these challenges and facilitate coping. Your GP is a good place to start, as they can provide a referral to an appropriate mental health professional.

Strategies to support the wellbeing of girls and women on the autism spectrum

- Provide support and education, especially regarding safety
- Seek out mental health professionals who have understanding and expertise related to working with Autistic women and girls
- Understand and acknowledge strengths
- Recognise and openly discuss the challenges of being female on the autism spectrum, this can be very validating
- Making contact with Autistic-led peer groups such as [Yellow Ladybugs](#) or [Reframing Autism](#)

Resources

Books

Spectrum Women: Walking to the Beat of Autism edited by Barb Cook & Dr Michelle Garnett. 2018. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder - Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age by Sarah Hendrickx. 2015. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Life on the Autism Spectrum - A Guide for Girls and Women by Karen McKibbin & Tony Attwood. 2015. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Camouflage: The Hidden Lives of Autistic Women by Sarah Bargiela. 2019. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder) by Liane Holliday Willey (Foreword by Tony Attwood). 2014. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Asperger's and Girls by Tony Attwood (Edited by Temple Grandin). 2006. Future Horizons Incorporated, Arlington, US.

Been There. Done That. Try this! : An Aspie's Guide to Life on Earth edited by Graig Evans, Anita Lesko & Tony Attwood. 2014. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Web

Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)
<https://autisticadvocacy.org>

I Can Network (for teens and adults)
<https://www.icannetwork.com.au>

"Women and girls on the autism spectrum are better able to camouflage or mask their challenges through social imitation which results in them not receiving a diagnosis."

autismspectrum.org.au

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