Autism myths: How recent research challenges perceptions of autism

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What is autism?

Autism Spectrum Conditions

- Social communication
- Repetitive behaviours & restricted interests

Expressive language level
Severity

Source: APA, 2013
Myth: We should use person-first language

“Autistic person” or “person with autism”?

- 61% of autistic adults endorse “autistic person” and 28% “person with autism”
- 38% of professionals endorse “autistic person” and 49% “person with autism” (Kenny et al., 2016)

What this means in practice: The language we use to talk about autism is important – ask your students what they prefer

“Separating the person from their autism is damaging, as it reinforces opinions about autism being a ‘thing’ that can be removed, something that may be unpleasant and unwanted [...] Describing oneself as autistic is an extremely important and positive assertion about oneself; it means that one feels complete and whole as one is.”
Myth: Autistic individuals don’t care about what people think about them

• Do care about what other people think about them (Cage et al., 2013, 2016a, 2016b)
  • Might not automatically consider what everyone thinks, but can deliberately self-present
  • Lots of individual differences
  • Some adolescents show a desire to fit in but also want to be accepted for being “who I am”

What this means in practice: the social world is still important to many – provide support to overcome barriers
Myth: Autistic individuals have no empathy

- Alexithymia – a difficulty in describing and understanding own emotions
- About half of autistic people estimated to have alexithymia – but so do non-autistic people
- Alexithymia, not autism, is associated with reduced empathy (Cook et al., 2013; Brewer et al., 2015, 2016)

- **What this means in practice:** Autistic individuals can and do experience empathy – but might process it differently
Myth: Autism is a boy thing

- Prevalence underestimated in girls - 3:1, not 4:1 (Loomes et al., 2017)
- Girls show fewer obvious restricted interests (Frazier et al., 2014)
- Girls might be better at “masking” (e.g. Bargiela et al., 2016)

**What this means in practice:** Autism is more likely to be missed, misdiagnosed or late diagnosed in girls. Consider how girls might do things differently.
Take home messages...

- There are many more myths out there!
- Learn about the individual
- Read about the experiences of autistic adults
- Accept and encourage acceptance from peers
- Different, not less
Resources

- Blogs by autistic people: http://actuallyautistic.info/vv-index.php
Thank you for listening

Any questions?

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References

If you do not have access to any of these and would like to read them, please email Eilidh (eilidh.cage@rhul.ac.uk) who may have a copy available.


