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Exploring Autism in Girls and Women: How is it Different? (Part 3 of 3)

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Emotional Expression:



There tends to be a perception that autistic* individuals “live in their own world” or are not as emotionally complex or empathetic as their neurotypical peers. However, many autistic adult self-advocates explain that they actually feel many emotions too acutely. This can cause them to appear to “shut down” or “zone out.” Emotional expression can vary greatly in autistic males and females, but it is often also interpreted differently due to societal or cultural norms. Autistic girls may also be more likely than boys to have a co-occurring mental health condition such as depression or anxiety, but it is unknown if this correlation has more to do with biology or society. A 2018 Iris interview titled “What Women with Autism Want You to Know” shared the opinions of several women who were all diagnosed in early adolescence through adulthood.



Dating and Navigating Romantic Relationships:



Girls and women on the spectrum often need support in learning about the nuances of communication, body language, and how to recognize potentially dangerous situations when it comes to navigating the world of dating and intimate relationships. Despite potentially-damaging societal beliefs to the contrary, people on the spectrum usually desire relationships and intimate connections with others, though they are often not provided with adequate sexual education and support for learning to interpret and respond to the social subtleties of dating. Statistics show that disabled people face a significantly higher risk for sexual abuse and mistreatment across their lifespan, and autistic girls are at an increased risk due to their gender and social differences. This is why it is incredibly important for autistic girls to receive comprehensive sexual education including instruction on consent, non-verbal communication, and romantic social pragmatics.



“I would definitely disagree with the idea that we’re not emotional. I think we are actually highly emotional. I think that... many times we don’t express it [in] the way that people expect.”

—Sybelle, diagnosed at 27.



Regarding emotions: *“We can’t filter them out, because we feel them so strongly. So we shut down as a way of processing all of those emotions.”*

—Amy, diagnosed at 11.



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(cont.)



"You invite a girl back to your apartment to 'watch a movie,' and she thinks you're [actually] just [planning on] watching a movie... That often does happen when you have someone who is inherently a little bit more naïve because they're so literal."

—Kirsten, on interpreting the nuances of social cues, especially while dating.

Summary:



Though there can be a difference in the way autism presents between boys and girls, it is still important to seek an early diagnosis so that autistic individuals can receive support and develop a positive autistic self-identity from a young age. The diagnostic assessments and criteria for autism will continue to evolve as we learn more about the diverse range of autistic strengths and characteristics across the lifespan and between individuals.

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[644 – Exploring Autism in Girls and Women: How is it Different? \(Part 2 of 3\)](#)

[630 – Autism—the Basics](#)



**The identity-affirming term "autistic" is used in this article series instead of the previously promoted person-first term, "person with autism". Based on recent research findings, many adults on the spectrum prefer the term autistic and reject person-first language which they feel pathologizes autism as one might a disease.*

Resources:

May, Tamara, and Carol Adams. "Autism Is Still Underdiagnosed in Girls and Women. That Can Compound the Challenges They Face." *The Conversation*, May 16, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/autism-is-still-underdiagnosed-in-girls-and-women-that-can-compound-the-challenges-they-face-176036?fbclid=IwAR240NXElvjK6uBB5Fnkjin2IJ2c-cYXOx0t7-9DAwym6ZQOGww2kCyvaRXrg>.

Rudy, Lisa Jo. "Could Your Daughter Be Autistic? 11 Signs of Autism in Girls." *Verywell Health*, November 2, 2021. <https://www.verywellhealth.com/signs-of-autism-in-girls-260304>.

"What Women with Autism Want You to Know | Iris." *Condé Nast, Iris*. YouTube, November 12, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwEH9Ui4HV8>.

Zeliadt, Nicholette. "Girls with Autism at High Risk of Sexual Abuse, Large Study Says." *Spectrum*, May 14, 2018. <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/girls-autism-high-risk-sexual-abuse-large-study-says/>.

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