

Autistic Females

Diagnosis

- Receiving a diagnosis of Autism can be challenging for females. Often they are misdiagnosed with another psychological disorder.
- This is in part due to the stereotypes surrounding typical presentation of Autism and who can be seen as Autistic.
- Common misdiagnoses include anxiety, OCD, or depression.
- Research indicates that 80% of Autistic girls will remain undiagnosed at the age of 18. As a result many Autistic females complete their education without support services in place.

Presentation

- Autism in females may appear outwardly unlike their same-aged male peers.
- For example, special interests are still intense in nature, but often blend in with surrounding culture such a pop music, animals, or the environment.
- Repetitive behaviors are often missed. While some Autistic females may use rocking or hand flapping, more often repetitive behaviors look like hair twirling, gum chewing, or reading the same books over and over.

Key Differences

- These differences in characteristics of Autism can be summarized as externalizing behaviors and internalizing behaviors.
- Most externalizing behaviors are easily seen by others such as ...physical stimming, outbursts or conduct difficulties.
- Internalizing behaviors are much more common in Autistic females and cannot easily be discerned, especially for individuals with limited social emotional skills and insight into their own experiences. This may present as chronic headaches, stomach problems, and even eating disorders.

High Risk

- A growing body of research raises serious concerns for the incidence of violence and assault against Autistic women.
- One study reports that Autistic women are over 7 times more likely to be assaulted by a peer during their adolescent years.
- Another research article reports that 9 out of 10 Autistic women disclosed at least one incidence of sexual assault in their lifetime with the average age of first assault being just 8 years-old.
- These differences when compared to non-Autistic peers may be in part due to difficulties with social reasoning, missing contextual cues, and a tendency to process information literally. Often these skill deficits look like difficulty discerning when one is being manipulated or difficulty knowing when or how to disclose abusive behavior.
- Additionally Autistic women are much more likely to be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and they are 13 times more likely to die by suicide when compared to the general population.

For Educators

- Stay open minded regarding what Autism can look like in female students.
- Teach all students about successful Autistic adults with a variety of backgrounds, support needs, and life experiences.
- Connect students with similar passions and hobbies to foster friendship based on shared interests.
- Be watchful for signs of abuse or victimization. Teach and re-teach students using clear and concrete language about the ways to identify abuse and seek help in unsafe situations.

How can we better recognize the needs of all Autistic scholars?

References

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