

THE MYTHS OF AUTISM

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Author’s note: by writing “autism” I am including Asperger syndrome; read on to find out why.

Author’s note number two: I am writing about autism; I am categorically not writing about people who have both autism and learning disabilities.

Author’s note number three: if anything upsets you while reading this, please accept my apologies. All this is simply my opinion — open to question, absolutely. Nothing written here is intended to offend anyone.

This article is not (necessarily) fact. I do not claim to know all there is to know about autism; indeed, all I can claim is that I have a very keen interest in autistic people and have been working in “the field” for twenty years or so. I probably know a bit more than the “average man/woman on the street” but am more than happy to embrace the notion that in light of what there is yet to learn, I remain pretty ignorant. The main point of this article is to try and highlight all the so called “facts” that are peddled about autism which lead to ignorance and misunderstanding; my intention is to question the building blocks upon which many professionals have based their knowledge, to create fissures in the foundations, and to urge the professional sector, simply, to think again. I am somewhat constrained by a word limit; well, that and the fact that I want to keep some of the detail to include in a publishable book, so I am not going into as much detail as I could. If you’re a professional reading this and getting all indignant that I am suggesting that you are not as clued up as you should be, then you’re probably one of the good ones.

Myth: autism is a mental illness and/or a disease

Okay, now I am not suggesting that in modern times people are still suggesting that autism is a mental illness or a disease (please don’t tell me if they are, there’s only so much ignorance a person can take). *But*: if this is the case, why are sets of criteria to be found in the International Classification of *Diseases* and in the tome published by the American *Psychiatric Association*. Why do people often get referred to a *psychiatrist* for a diagnosis, why are children often referred to Child and Adolescent *Mental Health Services* (when there are no mental health

issues evident)? I am not suggesting for one moment that there are not good psychiatrists or mental-health professionals out there, but what “qualifies” them to work with autistic folk? Surely, the erroneous connotations twixt autism and mental illness/disease are not safe, nor sensible.

Myth: Asperger syndrome is mild autism

Excuse me for while I grind my teeth and bang my head against this convenient wall. Just don't go there — ever. Just because someone is articulate, intelligent, amusing, fun to be with, interesting, loyal, fervently determined to right the wrongs of the world does not mean that they are “mild” anything. (In fact, that list could be the beginnings of the new set of diagnostic criteria for AS). People are either autistic or they are not. The severity (that is, the impact on the individual) will vary, dependent on numerous factors. So-called “severely autistic” individuals may be supremely happy; so-called “mildly autistic” individuals may be suicidal; you do the maths.

Myth: autism consists of a triad of Impairments

No, it doesn't. There are clear differences between the development of the autistic child and the predominant neurotype (PNT). Difference does not equal impairment. A different way of developing does not automatically mean the individual is impaired. Even if one might argue that a certain “skill” is lacking, does that mean that the individual should be branded inferior? The PNT have the “skill” of chatting at length about essentially nothing: quite the coup, perhaps, but is it sensible? Many autistic people have the “skill” of chatting at length about subjects that are important to them: neither group is “right” or “wrong”, they simply possess different skills. Professionals must stop this branding of autistic people as impaired, deficient, or inferior, as it's simply not true. Of course many people face problems; those problems are a combination of the individual plus the environment — not simply the autism. In this case, surely the sensible way forward is to change the environment, rather than somehow trying to change a person's autism (which ain't ever gonna happen).

Myth: autistic people are not sociable

Where did this bizarre and incalculably inaccurate notion come from? Some people with autism will happily while away their lives with no

interest in others, and this should be perfectly acceptable (note: if a person genuinely does not want to engage socially, don't force them to; it can be tantamount to bullying). However, others might be hugely sociable, seeking company left, right, and centre. I suspect the PNT population is pretty similar. Sociability has nothing to do with whether someone is autistic.

Myth: Asperger Syndrome is an intelligent form of autism

Yes, people with AS have average or above average intelligence. But, since when did autism denote intellectual impairment? If this was the case then surely the notion of “co-morbidity” with a learning disability would be defunct? (I am deliberately using “learning disability” here to denote intellectual impairment; as opposed to “learning difficulty”, such as dyslexia, which has nothing to do with intelligence). As far as I am aware, being autistic does not equate to being intellectually impaired, so the distinction between autism and AS can be questioned. Unfortunately, it appears that some diagnosticians make the assumption that the diagnosis of autism implies intellectual impairment; in isolation this is not accurate.

If one (rightly, in my opinion) recognises that all autistic people are very much individuals, then such sub-classifications become highly questionable. What's wrong with simply identifying the individual as autistic, and leaving it at that? As a brief aside, is there anything more ludicrous than the notion of “atypical autism”: if it wasn't so tragic it would be laughable.

Some other myths that clearly speak for themselves

Autistic people:

- Can't look you in the eye
- Can't have a relationship
- Won't ever work
- Don't make excellent friends
- Will never be independent
- Are no good at sports
- Can't be good leaders
- Never show their emotions
- Are unfeeling and cold

The above are so obviously insanely ridiculous I shall not waste any more words expanding on them.

There is nothing that an autistic person cannot achieve in life as a result of being autistic. All sorts of other things will come into play, of course,

but autism alone is not a barrier to anything. Those professionals who turn into soothsayers for parents, and who predict doom and gloom at every turn should be ashamed. They are not fortune-tellers, and there is no way of knowing at childhood what the future holds. Yes, life is considerably tougher for most autistic people than their PNT peers, but it does not mean that dreams cannot be achieved.

I've merely skimmed the surface of the sea of ignorance that is evident "out there"; by no means am I suggesting that all, or even most, clinicians and professionals are ignorant to a significant degree. However, I would stand by the sentiment that there is enough ignorance in enough clinicians and professionals for there to be a significant and negative impact on the lives of people with autism and their families. Clearly, this is unacceptable. Until it is accepted that the autistic population is not one to fear, to marginalise, to brand inferior, or to decry as impaired, it seems obvious that there is still work to be done. Such ignorance is neither an excuse, nor is it in any way, bliss.

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