

Autism and Diversity

This video series was produced from the Autism Mental Health Literacy Guide by the Autism Mental Health Literacy Project (AM-HeLP) Group.

This video is one of six in the series about different aspects of autism mental health literacy. For this video, we will talk about: “Autism and Diversity”

We will talk about what autism is and what it isn’t and how diverse the Autistic population is. We will also correct some common myths about autism.

Autism is not a mental health problem, but many Autistic people experience mental health difficulties.

People who are not Autistic sometimes have difficulties understanding Autistic people’s experiences. Knowing more about autism can help to create more accepting and positive experiences.

Autism is not a mental health problem. It is a neurological difference a person is born with. It is described as “neurodevelopmental” because it involves the brain and the nervous system. Autism is also described as a social-communication difference. It is not something that can be “cured”. Autism is a way of being.

Autistic people interact with others in different ways from what is expected by non-Autistic society. Non-Autistic people can have difficulty understanding the way that Autistic people express themselves. And Autistic people may have difficulty understanding the way others communicate with them.

Autism is understood to be a *spectrum* of experiences. Saying “spectrum” emphasizes how different each Autistic person is; no two Autistic people experience the world in the same way. It is not accurate to say that the autism spectrum goes from “severe,” or “low functioning,” to “high functioning”.

In fact, this way of describing the “spectrum” is inaccurate, harmful, and stigmatizing. A person can be “low functioning” one day and “high functioning” the next. Fixed labels like these are not correct definitions of an Autistic person’s experience.

The Autistic population is diverse, and it is impacted by many factors. Autistic people can be found across cultures, ethnicities, and income levels. Here are some important factors to consider:

Many Autistic girls and women express autism differently than boys and men. They may have been overlooked when they were children, even though they may have been struggling and felt that they

were different. Many Autistic women are diagnosed later in life, and before an autism diagnosis they have been given other diagnoses.

Autistic people's gender and sexual identities are often disbelieved. There is a myth that because a person is Autistic, they cannot understand gender and sexual orientation. In fact, many Autistic people are part of the LGBTQA2I+ community. Autistic adults are more likely than non-Autistic adults to have a gender identity that is different from their assigned gender at birth.

Autistic experience can be different because of race, religion, and culture. In many societies, racialized groups are often diagnosed later than their white peers. The Indigenous Autistic community is very much underrepresented and often forgotten due to the oppression and discrimination they consistently experience. In certain cultures, stigma and a lack of knowledge and acceptance of autism can also make it hard to find proper support.

Socioeconomic status is your position in society. It involves factors like where you go to school, your job, how much you earn and how much money you have.

People with lower socioeconomic status and who live in disadvantaged, underserved and remote neighbourhoods are less likely to receive an autism diagnosis on time and access the right supports.

To sum up, Autistic people have gender, racial, cultural, social, and economic identities that impact their experiences and affect their life course. This diversity needs to be considered in the care and supports for Autistic people.

There are many myths in society about autism. Here are a couple that that we want to correct:

- **Myth:** Vaccines cause autism.

Fact: They do not. People are born Autistic, not made Autistic.

- **Myth:** Autism is only in children.

Fact: People don't outgrow autism. Autistic children grow up to be Autistic adults.

- **Myth:** Autistic people are violent.

Fact: Autistic people are diverse. Being Autistic DOES NOT mean being violent or having aggressive tendencies. Behaviour problems in Autistic children or adults can come out because of frustration and a lack of understanding from others. The media can push stories of violence in Autistic children or adults that can make it seem like this is common, but these are exceptions. Sensational stories create more harm than good when it comes to Autistic people.

- **Myth:** Autistic people cannot parent.

Fact: Autistic parents are just like non-Autistic parents in that there are parts of parenting that can be hard and some that are easier.

You can read more information about autism in the AM-HeLP Guide. Knowing more helps more.

Knowing more, helps more.

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More information can be found in **Section 3** of the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism.

To learn more about AM-HeLP and to read the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism visit: <https://www.yorku.ca/health/lab/ddmh/am-help/>

Watch the animated video: <https://youtu.be/Y6yiLifDb2o>

Credits

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