



Autistic Girls and Women



In Northern Ireland, males are 3 times more likely to have a diagnosis of autism than females. *

Often, autistic girls and women are diagnosed later than their male counterparts due to misconceptions. Together we can increase discussion and promote better understanding of autistic females who are active participants of the autism community in Northern Ireland.

Disrupting the narrative

Just like everyone else, autistic females are unique and their personalities vary from individual to individual. However there are some common characteristics that may apply!



Autistic females may mask their difficulties. Many appear able to manage their sensory differences, social situations, emotions and communication skills, but inside they are struggling and focusing on 'getting by'. This can have a tremendous impact on their mental health and wellbeing due to the inability to be who they really are.



They may 'internalise' their issues and then have regular 'meltdowns' or 'shut down' at home or in their safe/ comfortable space. Some autistic females may exhibit extreme reactions, compared to the size of the problem.



Autistic females may experience extreme sensory differences (clothes, noise, temperature etc).



They may be extremely nurturing, sensitive and empathetic.



Autistic females may go 'under the radar' by following the lead of others by watching what their peers are doing, how they interact, and how they utilise tone and gesture.



Autistic females may appear to be social but have less noticeable issues with friends or friendship groups. For example, they may have one close friend who they have an 'intense' friendship with, they may teeter on the edge of multiple friendship groups but lack any meaningful connection with those within the group, or they may 'fleet' from one friendship circle to the next. Struggling to keep or make friends.



Many autistic females have specific interests in which they are creative, imaginative and passionate about. However, many have interests like those of their peers but spend more time developing or concentrating on their interest than others would.



Stimming can be a form of verbalisation that soothes or comforts. It feels nice in the mouth and the individual likes to repeat it. This can be a song, a word or a phrase someone else said or a noise which is not words at all. Other types of stims may include finger flicking, hair twisting, swinging, soft objects, visual stims or fidgeting etc. There may be a strong urge to repeat it or the individual may not realise it has been repeated at all.

What should I do to support an autistic female?

First and foremost, a diagnosis is an essential step in supporting any autistic individual. For many awaiting and/or receiving a diagnosis can create fear or anxiety, but it can also bring a sense of relief and understanding of oneself.

It is also important that relevant supports are put in place at home, school, work and in the community to support autistic females in participating fully. Many autistic individuals note they respond well when simply asked 'what would help you'? Each autistic female has their own unique abilities, needs and sensory differences. Many report benefitting from practical and emotional supports that are person centred and involve working together collaboratively.

Top Tips

The following tips have been created in collaboration with autistic females:-



Many autistic females can make eye contact with others. It is important to remember this does not mean they are comfortable or enjoy it.



Be consistent.



Too many choices can be overwhelming. Try to be supportive by narrowing this down and sticking to a schedule. Maintaining routine and structure can alleviate some of the anxieties around the unknown.



Sometimes, it may take a few seconds or minutes to process what has been said or asked – be patient. Actively listen to responses, understanding what is 'actually' said. For example, do not perceive 'I'm struggling to be social' as 'I am anti-social' or 'I need some down time' as 'I hate everyone'.



Ask autistic people how they are feeling. There is a perception that autistic people have less empathy, this is not true. Many autistic females are overwhelmed by their emotions and may require support managing them. Look for the nonverbal cues.



If you are unsure how to support an autistic person, try asking them first. Many autistic individuals can express their needs and desires. Working collaboratively, enables meaningful and relevant supports can be put in place.



Sensory kits should include a portable option such as (a draw string bag). Sensory aids are important for self-care and enable the management of stress. Autistic people report that they are as necessary as glasses or a hearing aid.



Pay attention to individual sensory sensitivities, these can contribute to increased stress levels. Create a safe sanctuary at home.



Prepare for transitions and changes in advance. Any change may affect regulation and engagement across home, school, community and work.



Recognise that being social, requires lots of energy and it may occur for limited periods. It is important to have an exit plan and provide opportunities to re-charge.

Resources

There are some useful online resources that help explain autism more.

- Autism NI Girls & Autism Project (GAP)
- Right Click - Autistic Women and Girls
- Amazing Things Happen - Autism
- Amazing Kids - Autism Spectrum Condition

Useful Books

- **The Awesome Autistic Go-to Guide A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens:** Yenn Purkis (author), Tanya Masterman (author)
- **What Every Autistic Girl Wishes Her Parents Knew:** Emily Paige Ballou, Kristina Thomas and Sharon Davanport
- **The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic:** Siena Castellon
- **Girls Growing Up on the Autism Spectrum:** Shana Nichols, Gina Marie Moravick and Samara Pulveer Tetenbaum.
- **Camouflage: The Hidden Lives of Autistic Women** by Dr Sarah Bargiela
- **Odd Girl Out: An Autistic Woman in a Neurotypical World** by Laura James
- **Spectrum Women 'Walking to the Beat of Autism'** edited by Barb Cook & Dr Michelle Garnett

**Information is correct at time of print*