

NEWS

Never mind statistics: Adults with autism may be happy

BY JESSICA WRIGHT

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Men with autism who have above-average intelligence may not achieve typical personal or financial milestones — but many are content, according to a new study¹.

Researchers at the Child Neuropsychiatric Clinic in Gothenburg, Sweden, followed 100 boys and men for roughly 20 years after their diagnosis of **Asperger syndrome**. The men ranged in age from 23 to 43 years at the time of the new study.

At the first follow-up, about 10 years ago, 26 percent of the 70 participants who responded had what the researchers called a “restricted life.” They had no **employment prospects** and few or no friends².

In the new study, the researchers offered the men a meal, reimbursement of lost wages (if relevant) and a movie ticket in exchange for traveling to the clinic. Over four to six hours, 50 of the men answered written questions about their friendships, employment status and other details about their lives (see graphic). They also rated their perceived quality of life and health, and took an intelligence test.

As in the previous assessment, the men had **many social and employment concerns**: 24 of them had never been in a romantic relationship, and only 7 lived with a spouse or partner. Another 8 men had a partner, but did not live with that person. Of the 50 men, 9 said they had no one they considered to be a friend.

The study used a broad definition of friendship, including people the men simply saw from time to time, says **Adam Helles**, clinical psychologist at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. “It was kind of surprising that even under that very loose definition of friendship, there were a lot of guys

who really had no friends at all.”

The men fared a little bit better with employment, with 26 of the 50 studying or working full-time; 6 of these men had their wages partially subsidized by the government. Another 11 were employed part-time in unskilled jobs that the city provides specifically for people with disabilities.

Overall, the men have high intelligence scores, with an average intelligence quotient of 110. Accordingly, seven have a university degree or were students at the time of the study. But another 12 had enrolled in a university and dropped out, suggesting they may not have received the support they needed.

Despite these troubles, 36 of the men had average to high scores on a measure that rates a person’s ability to deal with adversity — meaning they were well equipped to cope with their challenges.

After speaking with the men in the study, Helles found that many seem happy with their lives. “I think it is an important distinction that even though someone has severe difficulties with functioning in everyday life, they can still be happy,” he says. “Maybe we don’t think a person with Asperger’s is living up to his potential, but perhaps he feels that he is.”

The 24 men who have autism along with another psychiatric condition, such as **attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or depression**, seemed to have a worse quality of life than those who have autism alone, according to the adversity measure. This result suggests that the greatest hardship comes from having multiple conditions.

REFERENCES:

1. Helles A. *et al.* *Autism* Epub ahead of print (2016) [PubMed](#)
2. Cederlund M. *et al.* *J. Autism Dev. Disord.* **38**, 72-85 (2008) [PubMed](#)