

SPOTTED

Gaze anxieties; college considerations; social chemistry and more

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Gaze anxieties

Some researchers interpret eye-contact avoidance among people with autism as a sign of **low social motivation**. But adults and teens on the spectrum **have other views**, according to a compendium of their insights published 28 November in *PLOS ONE*. For them, eye contact is uncomfortably intimate, and they're never quite sure how long to hold a gaze.

Their struggle with this social expectation can be intense. One individual said that it "... saps my energy [from] my core like being hypnotized by a cold-blooded energy sucking vampire." Another said that eye contact with "someone I don't know very well ... can feel downright creepy."

The miscommunication can go both ways. Another person on the spectrum noted that people misinterpret their "blank facial expression/lack of eye contact as either sadness or boredom with them."

SOURCES:

PLOS One / 28 Nov 2017

How do adults and teens with self-declared autism spectrum disorder experience eye contact? a qualitative analysis of first-hand accounts

<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0188446>

Insurance risk

More than 30 U.S. states will **run out of money** for the Children's Health Insurance Program by early January, according to a 27 November op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*. The program, which

ensures health coverage for children in low-income families, is in jeopardy for the first time in its 20-year history, after Congress allowed funding to expire in September. Colorado state officials are already **sending out letters** warning families that coverage could end on 30 January.

SOURCES:

Los Angeles Times / 27 Nov 2017

On children's health coverage, congressional inaction has brought us to the 'nightmare scenario'
<http://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-fi-hiltzik-chip-nightmare-20171127-story.html>

College considerations

Almost one in two students with autism **continues formal education** beyond high school. But these prospective undergraduates could use guidance about which schools would be a good fit. About 60 U.S. colleges offer **autism-specific support programs**, but they often charge a fee, according to a 21 November report in *U.S. News & World Report*.

The cost of these programs is not negligible, averaging \$3,000 per semester. Families should look into how many students these programs serve, the experience the staff have with students on the spectrum and what kind of counseling is available, Jane Thierfeld Brown of the Yale Child Study Center told the magazine.

Checking in with residential facilities staff during a campus visit is also a good idea, Brown says. She suggests that some students would do best easing into post-secondary education by way of community college.

SOURCES:

U.S. News & World Report / 21 Nov 2017

Families: Learn how to find autism-friendly colleges

<https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2017-11-21/families-learn-how-to-find-autism-friendly-colleges>

Social chemistry

The scent of a skydiver's sweat, presumed to transmit the "smell of fear," reduces trust in typical men, but men on the spectrum **have the opposite response**. Researchers reported the findings on 27 November in *Nature Neuroscience*. The study suggests that this altered reaction to odors partly explains the misreading of social signals that can be a feature of autism.

SOURCES:

Nature Neuroscience / 27 Nov 2017

Altered responses to social chemosignals in autism spectrum disorder

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41593-017-0024-x>

Disciplinary dangers

A few studies point to **higher-than-average rates of arrest** among some children with autism. These students also often experience being disciplined at school, having contact with police and undergoing psychiatric hospitalization as **co-occurring events**, according to findings published 21 November in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

SOURCES:

Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders / 21 Nov 2017

School discipline, hospitalization, and police contact overlap among individuals with autism spectrum disorder

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10803-017-3359-y>

Election success

Sarah Selvaggi Hernandez became one of the first people with a disclosed autism diagnosis to be **elected to political office** in the United States. The occupational therapist won election to the Enfield, Connecticut, Board of Education on 7 November. She was open about her autism throughout the campaign, *NOS Magazine* reported 29 November.

Campaigning brought Selvaggi Hernandez some distress. She participated in an election debate and found the bright stage lights “nauseating” and the toughest part of the proceedings. Despite that experience, she “strongly encourages” other people on the spectrum to run for office if they have political ambitions, but to first establish the supports they need for success.

SOURCES:

NOS Magazine / 29 Nov 2017

First openly autistic woman elected to public office

<http://nosmag.org/first-openly-autistic-woman-elected-to-public-office/>

Acting autism

The increasing presence of **characters with autism on television** and in movies is a **mixed bag**, researchers say in a 23 November editorial in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Accurate portrayals of autism raise awareness, they write. But misleading ones simply reinforce stereotypes.

SOURCES:

Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders / 23 Nov 2017

Pros and cons of character portrayals of autism on TV and film

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10803-017-3390-z>

Universal screening?

Should all U.S. children **undergo screening** for autism at age 2? An opinion piece published 29 November in *Slate* argues 'yes.' The rationale is that universal screening would capture non-white or non-English-speaking toddlers earlier, opening the way to therapy sooner. Black and Hispanic children receive diagnoses as much as 2.5 years later than white children in the United States.

SOURCES:

Slate / 29 Nov 2017

Should we screen all 2-year-olds for autism?

http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2017/11/we_should_test_all_2_year_olds_for_autism.html

Clock disruptions

Changes in body-clock genes may be associated with the **sleep disruption** often seen in autism. These genes are also **implicated in epilepsy**, which up to a third of people on the spectrum have. Brains of people with epilepsy show reduced levels of clock proteins, according to a study published 11 October in *Neuron*, and removing these genes lowers the seizure threshold in mice.

SOURCES:

Neuron / 11 Oct 2017

Loss of CLOCK results in dysfunction of brain circuits underlying focal epilepsy

Invisible struggle

A woman diagnosed with autism as an adult says that **executive-function difficulties** — problems with self-control, short-term memory and task-switching — are her biggest problem. In an essay published 30 November in *The Establishment*, Reese Piper writes that the focus on communication in autism diagnostics takes attention away from executive-function struggles. “Difficulty with EF [executive function] is treated as a byproduct of autism, not a defining feature,” she writes.

SOURCES:

The Establishment / 30 Nov 2017

‘I thought I was lazy’: the invisible day-to-day struggle for autistic women

<https://theestablishment.co/i-thought-i-was-lazy-the-invisible-day-to-day-struggle-for-autistic-women-6268515175f3>

News tips

Do you have a new paper coming out? Are you making a career move? Did you see a study or news story that you want to share? Send your news tips to news@spectrumnews.org.
