

SPECIAL REPORT SUBARTICLE, VIEWPOINT

Young woman with autism asks: ‘Am I so different?’

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As a college student on the spectrum, I have learned that women like me often present themselves differently from our neurotypical peers. You may ask why. I don't have all the answers, but I'd like to offer my perspective on what it's like to be a woman diagnosed with autism.

My diagnosis has affected me in many ways. Socializing and making friends have definitely been difficult. I have trouble understanding people and what they are trying to communicate. I find it hard to grasp that other people are different from me, and that I need to know them and understand their circumstances when trying to communicate with them.

For example, most people, when they run into someone they know from their childhood, might say,

“Hello, how are you?” I think this situation is difficult for people on the spectrum in general, and for young women with autism in particular, because we have trouble coming up with an appropriate response. I am often rapt in my own world. I tend to think of things off-subject and just daydream. I may understand one part of a conversation but then lose track of it. Often, I forget the context or lose interest in the topic we are speaking about.

It is hard for women like me to understand other people’s interests and make a connection with them, mainly if we have not practiced socializing. One of the most important times for this practice is middle school, and often girls on the spectrum are not social then. I was more into watching television or playing computer games at that time: I did not engage with others much; I did not play sports or go to dances much.

I shied away from social events because they sometimes made me feel lonely, as if I were by myself. I was unsure of how to carry myself. I thought to myself, “Do I do what others are doing?” Thinking about it now, going to more of these events could have really helped me socialize.

I feel that men with autism may have more struggles or feel their diagnosis more than women do, but you rarely ever see it because it is often difficult for men to express their feelings.

Seeking independence:

As I transition to adulthood, I find it particularly challenging to do things such as daily chores on my own. I struggle to remember to take care of myself by bathing, brushing my teeth and the like. I was so used to my parents either doing things for me or reminding me to do them. Getting myself prepared for the day, looking for what to wear to school or to meetings, activities or events has been challenging. I am often not sure which outfit is appropriate, professional or acceptable.

My parents have always given me a lot of support, but there were things they asked me to do or say that I did not always understand. I sometimes wanted to do things a certain way and they would say, “No, you have to do it this way.” I now know they were just trying to help me. But even today, there are times when I don’t think my parents really understand me. It is often hard for me to tell them what I am going through.

I do try to communicate with my parents as best I can now that I am not living at home. They let me know I am welcome to contact them and are always available.

I would like them to continue to help me — maybe with my bank account and with understanding how I am maturing into a young woman. I also want them to know that they can come over and are always welcome. My advice to parents of girls on the spectrum: Try to help your daughter as best you can, but also encourage independence; let her make her own decisions.

Role models:

If I am having a bad day, I like to read about women who are doing good in the world, such as First Lady **Michelle Obama**. I like to look at what these women have accomplished. Though they may have been afraid of failing despite all their hard work, they didn't give up.

Singer-songwriter **Demi Lovato** is another woman I admire. She went through a lot of mental health challenges. She **suffered from depression**, an **eating disorder** and bullying while growing up. She openly speaks about her past challenges with mental illness and has become a mentor to teens and young adults with similar problems.

I would similarly like to speak about autism to raise awareness of the condition and its effects on an individual and her family members.

My mother also inspires me, for everything she has done for me. In fact, my whole family has been a great source of emotional support, and I know I can trust them. I also look up to **Jocelyn Howard**, my career coordinator at the College Internship Program. The program assists young adults on the spectrum with career development, academics, and social and life skills. Jocelyn has helped me succeed in college and at my internship at **Found Animals** pet adoption center.

Although I admire some celebrities for specific things they have done, I don't try to look or be like them. I have tried to be like others in the past, but this only made life harder for me. At this point in my life, I have realized that self-esteem comes from accepting who I am and realizing that it is okay to be me.

Claire Bachman is a student at Long Beach City College in Long Beach, California. She holds an internship in the adoption center at Found Animals, a nonprofit that aims to decrease the number of pets euthanized in shelters.