

WELLNESS

5 MYTHS ABOUT

AUTISM

No, the condition is not an epidemic—but misunderstandings about it are. Here are a few, as well as the truth about what it means to be neurodivergent in this way.

BY TULA KARRAS

GETTY IMAGES.

1

MYTH :

Autism is a mental disorder.

MYTHBUSTER

Autism spectrum disorder (or disability), or ASD, is actually a developmental and neurological condition, not a mental illness or disease. People with autism have brain differences that cause them to experience and interact with the world in atypical ways, which is why it is called a “neurodivergent” condition (as opposed to being “neurotypical”). A person may have some of its traits and not others, but many of the differences it leads to are communication-related (for example, being less able to interpret facial gestures than others are), atypical

behaviors (such as repetitive movements, sensitivity to light and sound, and intensive focus on particular interests), and challenges mastering social skills. Though

it is not a mental disorder, people with it have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and ADHD, in part because it’s stressful living in a world set up for neurotypical people.

2

MYTH :

There’s an epidemic of autism.

MYTHBUSTER

It may seem as if autism is on the rise—about one in 31 eight-year-olds was diagnosed with it in 2022, which amounts to an increase of more than 300% over the past 20 years—but much of the upward trend has to do with increased awareness and knowledge about autism and the fact that more professionals are able to diagnose it, says Helen Tager-Flusberg, Ph.D., director of the Center for Autism Research Excellence (CARE) at Boston University. “There may be a small increase because people are delaying childbirth—we know that older parents, especially older fathers, contribute a small amount of additional risk,” she adds.

3

MYTH:

People with autism are not successful in life and can't have deep relationships.

MYTHBUSTER

This is a stereotype, and public figures with autism—including Greta Thunberg, Anthony Hopkins, and the singer and songwriter Sia, to name a few—blow it out of the water. “There’s a view of what autism looks like—that people can’t hold conversations, have close friendships, go to college, or even have

a sense of humor, and so often this is not the case,” says Vanessa Bal, Ph.D., director of the LifeSpan Autism Lab at Rutgers–New Brunswick Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology.

Depending on how much support an autistic person needs, they can hit standard societal milestones or even exceed them. Lots of people with ASD proudly identify as autistic and view their neurodivergence as a gift. That said, the effort

it takes for autistic people to function in a world with rules that aren’t intuitive to them, especially if they have profound difficulty communicating, often makes them feel depressed and isolated, says Tager-Flusberg. The bottom line: People with autism have a wide range of abilities and experiences.



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MYTH:**It's clear when someone has autism.****MYTHBUSTER**

Not everyone with autism exhibits the behaviors commonly associated with it (such as hand-flapping and difficulty making eye contact) during their childhood. This is why many who have it reach adulthood without a diagnosis—especially if they are bright and have good verbal skills. “Commonly adults will ask for an evaluation after they see a TikTok or a TV show about autism and say, ‘That sounds like my life,’” notes Bal. For some, it’s only when they’re starting college or entering the workforce—transitional periods when they may have more independence or interaction with new people than before—that their challenges become apparent, and this can lead them to getting a diagnosis. Finding out that they have ASD is often a relief, she says, as it helps them understand themselves and why they find certain aspects of life especially challenging.

(The fact that the MMR vaccine is given to kids when they are around the age at which autism is often first diagnosed has fueled the myth.) So what *does* cause autism? “We know for

sure that genetics are the main contributor,” says Tager-Flusberg, “but there are likely other things—such as having older parents—that can increase the probability of it.”

4

MYTH:**Vaccines cause autism.****MYTHBUSTER**

Absolutely not—reputable studies around the globe have assessed this idea, and not a single one has found a link between vaccines (or additives to them) and autism, says Tager-Flusberg. “This myth started because of a fraudulent 1998 study in which the author faked data and had a financial interest in discrediting the MMR vaccine,” she adds.