

# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## Exploring Autism in Girls and Women: How is it Different? (Part 2 of 3)

by Dani Kinsley, M.S., OTR/L

### How the Definition of Autism is Evolving:



The conversation around autism has been changing for the better over the past few years. Autistic adults have begun advocating for a change in language including the use of identity-affirming language\*, decreasing the use of functioning level labels (like “low-functioning” and “high-functioning”), and replacing the use of the term “nonverbal” with “non-speaking.” There has also been a push to promote awareness of the *double empathy problem*, or the acknowledgment that autistic individuals and neurotypical individuals inherently communicate differently, and that doesn’t mean that the autistic people always need to be the ones to adjust or remediate their behavior. A 2018 *Iris* interview titled “What Women with Autism Want You to Know” shared the opinions of several women who were all diagnosed in early adolescence through adulthood.



### Masking:



One thought common to many social theories attempting to explain the diagnosis rate gender differences between boys and girls relates to the female tendency to “mask” (camouflage or hide their autistic traits) more in social situations. Some experts believe that many girls are more socially driven toward acceptance and therefore will mask their autistic traits by observing and attempting to copy the social skills and habits of non-autistic girls.



**“Autism isn’t a linear spectrum of ‘high’ and ‘low’. It’s a whole bunch of different traits that are on their own spectrums...”**

—Kirsten, diagnosed at 19.



**“Autism is simply a different way of thinking, and seeing, and interacting with one’s world.”**

—Morénike, diagnosed at 32 after her children were diagnosed.



**“All the little things that everyone does unconsciously, autistic people do manually—so that adds up. What I’m doing with every part of my body, I’m to some degree aware of—and trying to do.”**

—Kirsten, referencing the demands of masking and the psychological/energy toll it takes.



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(cont.)



***"It takes a lot of effort to appear the way I do right now. It takes a lot of conscious awareness. Social skills are like a muscle for us."***

—Joan, diagnosed at 13, discussing the need to practice and strengthen social skills to "fit in" with neurotypical peers.



## Varied Interests:



One aspect of autism that is fairly well-known is the tendency toward monotropism, or the intense focus on one or more specific interests at a time.

According to some social theorists, autistic girls' interests can be varied and potentially more "socially acceptable" than those often enjoyed by boys. For example, autistic girls may show more interest in music, the arts, drawing, theater, writing, or specific genres of literature. Self-consciousness about one's narrow interests may lead to additional masking behaviors as school-aged autistic children or adolescents attempt to connect with peers.

### Related Handy Handouts®:

[643 – Exploring Autism in Girls and Women: How is it Different? \(Part 1 of 3\)](#)

[645 – Exploring Autism in Girls and Women: How is it Different? \(Part 3 of 3\)](#)

[630 – Autism—the Basics](#)

*\*The identity-affirming term "autistic" is used in this article series instead of the previously promoted person-first term, "person with autism". Based on recent research findings, many adults on the spectrum prefer the term autistic and reject person-first language which they feel pathologizes autism as one might a disease.*

### Resources:

May, Tamara, and Carol Adams. "Autism Is Still Underdiagnosed in Girls and Women. That Can Compound the Challenges They Face." *The Conversation*, May 16, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/autism-is-still-underdiagnosed-in-girls-and-women-that-can-compound-the-challenges-they-face-176036?fbclid=IwAR240NXElvjK6uBB5Fnkjin2IJ2c-cYXOx0t7-9DAwym6ZQOGww2kCyvaRXrg>.

Rudy, Lisa Jo. "Could Your Daughter Be Autistic? 11 Signs of Autism in Girls." *Verywell Health*, November 2, 2021. <https://www.verywellhealth.com/signs-of-autism-in-girls-260304>.

"What Women with Autism Want You to Know | Iris." *Condé Nast, Iris*. YouTube, November 12, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwEH9Ui4HV8>.

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