



Five Frequent Myths about Autism

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1. Autistic people are unable to identify and express their emotions.

A first myth about autism is that autistic people have difficulties in identifying and expressing their emotions. Having difficulties to identify, express and recognise one's own emotions or others' is a condition named alexithymia. A recent meta-analysis¹ on alexithymia in autism showed that 50% of autistic people are alexithymic as compared to only 5% of neurotypical people. Although half of autistic people are alexithymic, this study also shows that about 50% of them have no problem processing their emotions. Moreover, alexithymia is not only linked to autism. It is indeed associated with other conditions, such as eating disorders and schizophrenia and even people without any diagnosis can be alexithymic.

2. Autistic people have exceptional skills in a specific field.

Several movies and TV series staging an autistic person link autism to outstanding skills. Such a belief is well illustrated in the movie « Rain Man », where an autistic man, Raymond Babbitt, has an exceptional memory. However, exceptional skills among autistic people are not always as impressive. In fact, autistic people skills are generally defined as a difference between a person's performance in a specific field

and his/her overall level of functioning. Moreover, not all autistic people have exceptional skills. A study with 254 autistic participants² showed that 63% of them had at least one skill, most often related to memory, significantly above their level of ability in other fields. Also, exceptional skills can be found among people with conditions other than autism and among neurotypical people. In short, all autistic people do not have exceptional skills and all those who have exceptional skills are not necessarily autistic. Furthermore, although having a skill in a specific field is frequently found in autism, that skill is not always « exceptional ».

3. Autistic people have no interest in developing relationships with other people and in making friends.

Since social and communication difficulties are associated with autism, it is commonly believed that autistic people are not interested in developing relationships with other people. This is usually not the case. A meta-analysis³ focusing on friendship among school-age children published in 2016 showed that there are more similarities than differences between autistic and neurotypical children regarding friendship. Contrary to the common belief that autistic children have no friends, this study shows that most

although having a skill in a specific field is frequently found in autism, that skill is not always « exceptional ».



Main references:

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of them have at least one friend. It also shows that autistic people are willing to make friends and that they have the capacity to develop mutual friendships. However, autistic people seem to have fewer friends than neurotypical people and what they expect from a friendship, as well as the way they express it, may differ from neurotypical people.

4. All autistic people want to work in the field of computer sciences.

Autistic people's minds are often compared to a computer. Like computers, autistic people are often described as having an "all or nothing" way of thinking. Moreover, two abilities often linked to autism, paying close attention to details and the capacity to recognise patterns, are widely sought for in programming. Thus, some people may think that autistic people naturally have an interest in computer sciences. But this is not the case. A study on autistic university students' career interests⁴ showed that their career goals were similar to those of neurotypical students. In order to analyse the participants' career interests, an adapted version of the Holland career interests' inventory was used. That tool classifies a person's career interests according to six main categories. While that study showed that fewer autistic people were interested in enterprising careers, which are associated with jobs linked to entrepreneurship and politics, no other significant difference between autistic people and neurotypical people was found. Thereby, autistic students show as much interest in social or artistic jobs as non-autistic students. Thus, the career goals and interests of autistic people are far from being limited to computer sciences.

5. Autistic people are unable to look into other people's eyes.

In fact, autistic people can make eye contact with other people, but usually don't do it on their own initiative. Several theories were proposed to explain that behaviour. One is the hyperarousal model. According to this theory, eyes are unpleasant stimuli for autistic people, which leads them to avoid eye contact. Eye contact would therefore be perceived negatively by autistic people because they link it to a feeling of stress. Another theory is the hypoarousal model. According to this theory, autistic people do

not look into other people's eyes because they do not attach a positive value to eye contact. Therefore, autistic people would not seek to avoid eye contact; their attention is simply not drawn spontaneously towards other people's eyes. In comparison, neurotypical people's attention would be attracted by faces and they would experience eye contact in a positive way. In 2017, a study⁵ investigated how autistic people experience eye contact. For some autistic people, eye contact was linked to negative emotional and physiological reactions or was felt as intrusive and uncomfortable. It was also described by some as being unnatural and awkward. Besides, several autistic people felt it was difficult to maintain eye contact while listening to what the other person was telling them. Thus, it is not because an autistic person does not look into the speaker's eyes that he/she is not listening. Finally, nonverbal communication was also examined. Several autistic people had difficulty understanding the emotional information conveyed by the eyes. Therefore, autistic people can look into someone's eyes, but do not do it systematically, contrary to neurotypical people.

In conclusion, several myths about autism are conveyed within our society in different areas such as emotions, exceptional skills, friendship, career interests and eye contact. All these myths can have a real impact on the way people perceive autism and interact with autistic people. For example, if people believe that autistic people have no interest in making friends, this may lead neurotypical people to offer them fewer opportunities to develop new social relationships or to consider that their friendly relationships are not « true » friendly relationships. Similarly, believing that all autistic people want to have a job in computer sciences can make it such that companies promoting autistic people's employment may exclusively offer job opportunities in that field. Therefore, although we hear more and more about autism in our society, it is still important to continue fighting the stigmatization associated with this condition through education and by raising awareness about autism! 🌸