

COMPLEX,  
DISCONCERTING,  
ALMOST INVISIBLE,  
FASCINATING AND...  
NOT WELL UNDERSTOOD

# THAT'S AUTISM

Here is a breakdown of what many families who live with autism have always wanted to tell you, without ever having been given the opportunity.



Autisme Genève is an association founded by parents in 2007. It brings together more than 600 members (autistic persons, families and professionals) and aims to promote a more inclusive world which is welcoming to people who are different and which can cater to the needs of those who are more vulnerable.

Our mission is to:

- Make every effort to help our society become more inclusive;
- Raise public awareness of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) specificities;
- Listen to autistic people and their families, inform them about autism and defend their rights;
- Offer training to professionals to guarantee support which is tailored to the specificities of each autistic person;
- Provide families with all the information and tools that will allow them to fully understand and provide the best support to their child.

For further information you may contact us at: [secretariat@autisme-ge.ch](mailto:secretariat@autisme-ge.ch)



Einstein, Bill Gates, Glenn Gould... there are many examples of celebrities suspected of being autistic. However, at the other end of the spectrum we glimpse a child confined by his silence, pacing up and down behind a wall. But between the brilliance and the closed door, there is a whole world of differences, all within the spectrum of autism. A world where autistic people are inconspicuous, seemingly ordinary. Your somewhat introvert colleague, or your neighbour who does not readily say hello, may be on the autism spectrum, and so may your child's boisterous classmate.

**Approximately one in 100 children worldwide is born autistic.** To be precise, we are talking about the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), but for the sake of simplicity, we will use the term "autism" here.

## So what do these people have in common?

They all have in common:

- difficulties in understanding and internalizing the social skills that are necessary for life in society;
- particular sensitivity to movement, touch, noise, light or taste;
- specific sensory or intellectual interests;
- a strong need for routines and predictability;
- in many cases, they have great difficulty regulating their emotions, as well as understanding and adapting to the unpredictability and often illogical ways of the “neurotypicals” (people without autism).





## Autistic people are not sick and, even better, they are not contagious!

If you thought autism is a disease, you should think again. A child is born autistic and will remain so all lifelong. Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder with genetic components that cause atypical brain development.

In the majority of cases a diagnosis, preferably an early one, and specific support can enable autistic persons to develop their potential and to find their place in society. It is up to us to welcome them and make the world more autism-friendly and inclusive.

## When the sound of a hair dryer becomes torture

If you see a child covering their ears in a noisy place, you should realise that they may really be experiencing a harmless sound like a hair dryer as a physically painful assault. This type of sensory disorder is common among autistic persons and explains certain unexpected behaviours.

Hypersensitivity to noise can make ordinary sounds unbearable, or the touch of a T-shirt on the skin feel like sandpaper. All of these sensory stimuli can become very stressful and exhausting for autistic people. At the other extreme, hyposensitivity can create sensory needs that may lead to self-stimulatory behaviour sometimes to the point of self-harm.





## A lot of autistic people do speak and they have things to tell you

We often mistakenly think that autistic persons cannot speak. The majority of them learn to speak. Some children need support to learn to speak and they will acquire language later than expected. The intonations will vary. Errors in the construction of sentences or the use of uncommon words will sometimes give the impression that the person is not speaking their mother tongue. It should be noted that people who have minimal verbal language skills do not necessarily have an intellectual disability.



## Enough is enough

If you are thinking that this kid having a tantrum on the supermarket floor because his mother refuses to buy chocolates is badly behaved and spoiled, think again: he or she may be autistic. Try to put yourself in the child's shoes: his/her perception of things may be that he/she is being unfairly punished and will never be allowed chocolates again. A situation that seems insignificant to us may not at all be so for that child. The hyper stimulating environment of the supermarket, plenty of lights and sounds, and people, may further amplify the reaction.



## Understanding and taking into account the emotions of others

Even for so-called “neurotypical” (non-autistic) people, reading, interpreting and managing emotions is not always easy. For someone who is autistic it is even harder. The way we express our emotions may seem quite irrational to them. An autistic child may feel sad when seeing their mother crying with laughter and yet may show no empathy when seeing their schoolmate sobbing. In addition, autistic people can be affected by the worries of their loved ones, but not know how to show solidarity.





## When social conventions are baffling

Some people with autism may show little interest in those around them, while others can be very social. But even the latter can have great difficulty in understanding and internalizing social codes. How far should you stand from your interlocutor during a conversation? Why should you hold the door for the person coming behind you? When someone says “how are you?” should you just reply “fine, thanks, and you?” or should you provide a full health report? These social norms, which come almost naturally to “neurotypicals”, require a long learning process for autistic persons.

## How about simply sticking to plans?

Autistic people often find routines reassuring. They like to know the schedule of the day and have time markers. Even a small change in routine can be very stressful and require enormous efforts to understand and plan again. Information presented in visual form (pictograms or written information) helps to reduce this stress.





## Consuming passion for surprising topics

Regardless of where the person stands on the autism spectrum, specific interests are very important and can become overwhelming. The specialized brains of autistic people enjoy learning in great detail about the subjects they love. They also often like a certain degree of repetitiveness. An autistic person may know all about dinosaurs (and cannot help correcting someone heard saying something wrong on the subject), another will enjoy listening to a song 1000 times without getting bored. You may like to think twice before starting a discussion on their favourite subject with an autistic person who is passionate about 17th century Japan; he/she may well talk to you enthusiastically about it for hours without noticing you are getting kind of tired.

# There are as many autisms as there are autistic people

Each human being is unique. An autistic person cannot be defined by his or her neuronal specificity. Each person has their own personality, interests, joys and sorrows. Autism encompasses a wide range of people who might need different levels of support (mild, moderate or substantial). In any case, recognising autism enables us to better understand the peculiarities of the autistic persons' behaviour thus helping us give them the keys to our ever so confusing neurotypical world.






**Autistic people see things differently, they shed new light on our existence and open our eyes to human diversity.**

Humans tend to choose the easy option of rejecting what is different whereas difference often enriches our lives. We invite you to discover and welcome neurodiversity!

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