



Neurodiversity and Autism Acceptance

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When children are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, families typically feel overwhelmed by concerns: “Will these difficulties last forever?” “How will we handle all these therapies?” “Are any of our hopes for our child still achievable?” The view of the future is suddenly blocked out by millions of question marks.

Fundraisers and public service announcements have often stoked parents’ worst fears in order to create a sense of urgency. Ads have claimed that autism will “rob you of your children and dreams”¹ or “make sure [your child] will not be able to care for himself or interact socially as long as he lives.”² Such messages put great pressure on parents, giving a frightening “either/or” message: “I do all the right things and my child is rescued,” or “I don’t do enough and my child is doomed.”

In recent years, autistic adults have sought a hopeful alternative to the fear-based messages. Groups such as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) value *neurodiversity*.³ This term refers to the many different kinds of brains that humans can have, suggesting that diversity of neurology is as natural and valuable as racial and cultural diversity.⁴ An important tenet of the neurodiversity movement is that with adequate personal support and professional services, all people can have happy and meaningful lives, regardless of whether they meet conventional expectations.⁵ While the neurodiversity movement advocates for supports and therapies, they encourage an imaginative view of what success may look like rather than assuming that appearing more “normal” will necessarily lead to the best outcomes.⁶

The neurodiversity movement has been very important in both my professional and personal journeys. I am Dr. Natasha Lewis Harrington, Psy.D., a postdoctoral trainee here at the UW Autism Center. I am autistic. Some people might see me as “recovered” due to my professional and social achievements. However, like many accomplished autistic people, I never actually stopped being autistic, and keeping up a false front was exhausting.⁷ New research suggests that having a positive autistic identity and feeling accepted as an autistic person are important for mental health.^{8,9} By



taking pride in where I'm at, I have been able to surround myself with people who respect or even relate to my differences.

Highly independent people with ASD need autism acceptance, so that we can be valued for who we are instead of who we're pretending to be. People with ASD who rely on constant caregivers also need autism acceptance, so that their gifts and successes aren't overlooked. Parents of individuals with ASD need autism acceptance, so they can know that their efforts are enough and their children can live good lives regardless of the challenges that may remain.

Autism acceptance does not mean liking everything about how autism affects us. It doesn't mean giving up on learning new skills or otherwise improving our lives. It means looking at us as whole people, autism and all, and choosing to focus on the possibilities that are present right now.

Suggested Reading

- "Don't Mourn For Us" essay by Jim Sinclair: <https://tinyurl.com/dontmourn>
- *Autism Acceptance 101*: <https://tinyurl.com/autismacceptance101>
- *Autistic Self-Advocacy Network Position Statements*: <https://tinyurl.com/asanpositions>

References

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