



# Autism in Women and Girls: Benefits and Challenges for Women or Parents of Girls Navigating Autism Spectrum Disorder

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## ABSTRACT

This brochure explores benefits and challenges for women or parents of girls exploring Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). It provides information about what Autism Spectrum Disorders are and the difference between internal vs external presentations of the disorders. Additionally, the brochure dives into some benefits of a diagnosis and why women and girls experience higher rates of misdiagnosis/undiagnosis.

Access a high quality version of the brochure: [Autism in Women and Girls](#)



## About the Author



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Mikayla is a third-year student at the University of Missouri studying public health, political science, and leadership & public service. She loves the outdoors, hiking, climbing, and also loves to cook and bake for her friends and family. She is currently interning in the state capital and will be spending her summer interning in our nation's capital. She is interested in the intersection between public health and policy and is planning to pursue a career in health policy.

### WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are behavioral disorders. Those with ASD often experience repetitive behaviors and movements, barriers/differences in social interaction and communication, as well as a host of other symptoms.

Every autist experiences a **different combination and severity** of symptoms. Some include repetitive movements, sensory sensitivities, misunderstanding social cues, and focused hobbies or interests. This list is not exhaustive, just a few common symptoms.

Additionally, research suggests that autism may present **differently in women** than it does in men, even from a young age.<sup>2,3,5,6</sup>

### REFERENCES

1. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/about.html](#)

2. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/about.html](#)

3. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/about.html](#)

4. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/about.html](#)

5. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/about.html](#)

6. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/about.html](#)

### WHAT IS THE BENEFIT OF A DIAGNOSIS?

For many women, having a diagnosis comes with a sense of **freedom or relief**. In a recent study, many women expressed feeling as though they now understood why they were different and that they were **not alone**.<sup>4</sup>

Having a diagnosis may also help **reduce negative internal beliefs** about oneself. ASD has been shown to have high rates of co-occurrence with mental health conditions such as anxiety, OCD, and depression.<sup>1,5,4</sup> Reducing negative internal beliefs may reduce the burden of the comorbid conditions.

Additionally, receiving a clinical diagnosis may allow you or your daughter access to **more support and resources** in learning or professional settings.

### AUTISM IN WOMEN & GIRLS

Benefits and challenges for women or parents of girls navigating Autism Spectrum Disorder

### HOW IS ASD DIFFERENT FOR WOMEN & GIRLS?

Research has found that the difference in ASD between men and women is often an internal vs external presentation. Women experience much higher rates of **internal presentation**.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

While it is hard to list the exact differences between internal vs external, some comparison can be made. For instance, shutdowns are internal whereas meltdowns are external. Many women may feel the **social pressure** to not appear "emotional" or "crazy" and may opt for an internal **shutdown** when overwhelmed. **Anxiety** and **sensory sensitivities** also present internally, especially if the autist is adept at masking the symptoms by creating structure and routine. An internal presentation of ASD may also have **smaller stimming motions**, such as tapping a pen as opposed to hand flapping.

Rates of masking, or camouflaging ASD symptoms, are also found to be much higher in women.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

### WHAT IS MASKING?

Masking is something that all humans learn at an early age. It is the act of **hiding** or **tailoring** certain parts of yourself to **fit** in socially.

This could mean not using swear words during a corporate meeting, or it could go deeper into hiding parts of yourself. For those with ASD, whose social norms are often different than those around them, masking can take up a lot of energy and make them feel more **discomfort** in a world that already presents several barriers.

Women may mask at higher rates because of the historic differences in the way women have been expected to act in society. Women and girls learn early in life what is "**acceptable**" and how to "**fit in**", which leads to masking, **even at young ages**.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

Recent rates of diagnoses have been **1 woman for every 4-5 men**.<sup>2</sup>

Higher rates of masking in women could be a **contributing factor**.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

### BARRIERS TO DIAGNOSIS

- 01 Masking**  
Many studies have shown that masking is a significant barrier to receiving an accurate diagnosis for women.<sup>2,3,4</sup>
- 02 Internal Presentation**  
Current "gold standard" testing tools have been shown to not assess for some internal symptoms of ASD that women experience at higher rates than men.<sup>2</sup>
- 03 Early Developmental Differences**  
One study found that not showing early developmental differences was the strongest predictor to not screening positive for ASD using one "gold standard" diagnostic tool.<sup>2</sup> Women who experience internal symptoms may not present with ASD until later in life.

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