

Autism Awareness Month: Five Conditions That Mimic Autism

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The month of April is National Autism Awareness Month, a month to raise awareness about this pervasive disorder that results in abnormal social interactions, poor communication skills and restricted, repetitive behaviors, interests and activities. [Eating disorders](#) are prevalent amongst those with autism. Studies have shown that 20 -30% of those with autism also have an [eating disorder](#) due to autism's relation to routines and rigid thinking and emotional regulation.

Autism is diagnosed in childhood and carried on through adulthood. Parents of children with autism report unusual responses to environmental stimuli, including extreme reaction or a surprising lack of response to sensory input. The most recent numbers from the Centers for Disease Control indicate that one in 59 children has autism. A 2018 study in the [Journal of Pediatrics](#) found that one in 40 children in the United States has the condition. These numbers are not on the rise, but instead, more children are now being diagnosed because of the widespread awareness, education and tools designated to autism. In past decades, children still had this disorder, but were not being correctly diagnosed.

Conditions That Mimic Autism

Autism is categorized by the following groups of symptoms and can often be mistaken for other mental health and behavioral disorders that share similar characteristics, such as social interaction and communication problems or a difficulty relating to people, things and events.

1. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

The symptoms of OCD, such as compulsive hand washing, cleaning or touching items like doorknobs, can resemble the repetitive motions of autism. The key difference is that individuals with OCD often feel uncomfortable, bothered or tormented by their compulsions, while repetitive or intrusive thoughts don't always bother people with autism. The impulses can even be a source of comfort to those with autism.

2. Antisocial personality disorder

Often called, sociopathy, this personality disorder is characterized by the pattern of disregarding or violating the rights of others. Individuals with an antisocial personality disorder will act against the social norms and break the rules and law resulting in reckless disregard for others. These individuals often lack empathy and are always in trouble with the law. They will lie and even practice physical violence against others. They have an underlying ulterior motive or agenda and often have experienced abuse, neglect or trauma in childhood. Individuals with autism may act against social norms; however, they do not carry an agenda or ulterior motive and do not have a history of childhood abuse or trauma.

3. Schizophrenia

This [serious mental illness](#) is characterized by incoherent or illogical thoughts, bizarre behavior and speech and delusions or hallucinations, such as hearing voices. Both schizophrenia and autism involve cognitive and sensory-processing problems, both seem to run in families and both include atypical brain development. However, individuals with autism do not have delusions or hallucinations, which are critical components of schizophrenia. Also, schizophrenia is usually diagnosed in adulthood where autism is diagnosed in childhood.

4. Learning disorders

Learning disorders are a spectrum of disabilities that interfere with the three “R”s, reading, writing and arithmetic. While kids with autism will also struggle with learning, they are capable of intense focus and comprehension on a topic that interests them. Autism is a disorder of development that mainly involves social understanding, communication and repetitive routines or behaviors, including narrow and obsessive interests.

5. Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)

There can be overlap in the symptoms of autism and ADHD, difficulty focusing, hyperactivity and impulsivity. But while children with ADHD will resist order and repetition, these things can be comforting for a child with autism. A child with autism may be reluctant to speak or engage with others unless they are talking about a topic that interests them. With ADHD, a child will impulsively speak, often and interrupt others.

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