## Diagnosing Autism in Boys and Girls



- 1. Adaptations to autism
- 2. Screening questionnaires
- 3. Guidelines for the diagnostic assessment of autistic women
- 4. Characteristics from age 5-12 years
- 5. Teenage years

### **Gender Ratio**

- Posserud et al. (2021) Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica
- Norwegian study of 2.5 million children and adults (born before 2011)
- Male to Female ratio for autistic children 4-10 years
  4.46:1
- Male to Female ratio for autistic children 11 to 17
  3.67:1
- Male to Female ratio for autistic adults is 2.57:1
- CDC (2023) One in 36 eight years olds, ratio 3.8 to 1

### Adaptations to Autism

- The Introvert
- The Extrovert
- Camouflage
- Compensation



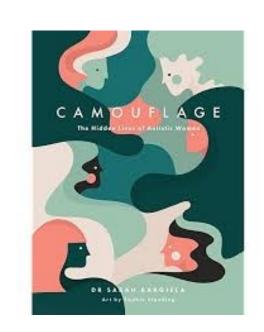
- Very aware of their difficulties reading non-verbal communication and how to make and keep friends
- Initially detached from their peers
- Keenly observe social interactions



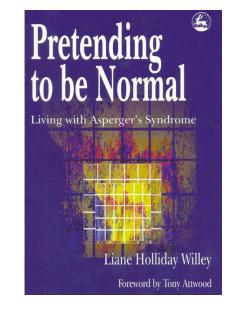
- Seek to learn the social patterns and systems to determine, interpret and abide by the social rules
- Social abilities achieved by intellectual analysis rather than intuition
- Observe, analyse and imitate, creating a social mask
- Autistic females tend to be better at camouflaging than autistic males and use this adaptation in a wider range of social situations
- 'Fly under the autism radar' delaying a diagnostic assessment
- You're too social to have autism

- Everyday should be awarded an Oscar for her social performance (Maja Toudal)
- Superficial social ability but lack of authentic social identity
- Like 'Cinderella at the Ball at midnight' can maintain the pretence for a while but then be totally drained of mental energy
- Recovery in solitude
- Ruminate about her social performance
- Creates a high level of social performance anxiety,
   contributing to an anxiety disorder, self-harm and depression

- Lack of knowledge and acceptance of the authentic self
- I don't know who I really am
- Low self-esteem and prolonged self-analysis
- Worried friendships are based on deceit and a false identity
- Increases feelings of deep inner loneliness
- If the true self is revealed, may be rejected and despised



- I try to be who they want me to be
- I have done such a great job at pretending to be normal that nobody really believes I have Asperger's
- Emily masks in public and will meltdown the second she is out of the situation.
- Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.
- I can dance. I can dance with anyone who wants to dance with me, but it is always their choreography.



Julia Cook et al (2021) autism

Discovered 38 camouflaging behaviours

4 main categories

#### 1: Masking

- Avoid or limit discussion related to oneself
- Alter or reduce hand or arm movements
- Avoid specific facts and detailed information
- Reduce body movements
- Adjust physical appearance to appear typical

### 2: Innocuous socializing

- Maintain eye contact or appearance of eye contact (looking at conversation partner's forehead)
- Mirror another person's speech (accent) and gestures and facial expressions
- Smile at others when speaking or listening
- Verbal encouragers ("oh really", "okay", "yeah")
- Guiding or maintaining the topic of conversation to the interests of the conversation partner

### 2: Innocuous socializing

- Apologises or provides excuses for perceived social errors
- Cooperative and avoids confrontation or complaints
- Small talk such as the weather
- Avoid discussion of each other's personal lives
- Avoid appearing knowledgeable
- Avoid jokes

### 3 Modelling neurotypical communication

 Increasing use of conventional gestures, body language, facial expressions and speech

### 4 Active self-preservation

- Ask questions
- Find and discuss points of commonality
- Balance between listening and talking
- Use comfortable topics and scripts

### Compensation

- Creating a lifestyle that minimizes the characteristics of autism
- Autistic girl may prefer the company of typical boys whose social dynamics are relatively simpler to decipher than peer girls
- Developing an interest and appreciated talent in the arts, sciences and computer games
- Social eccentricities are accepted and accommodated due to being valued by peers
- Interest in fictional heroes and superheroes and friendships based on shared interests such as cosplay, Comic Con

## Compensation

- Studying psychology
- Reading books on body language and friendship
- Part time employment and schooling
- A career that does not require much social engagement such as a wildlife ranger



## Screening Questionnaires



## Modified-Questionnaire for Autism Spectrum Conditions (M-Q-ASC)

## Simcoe et al. (2022) Journal of Autism Dev. Disorders

### 323 children **5-12 years:**

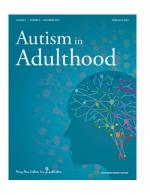
- 111 Autistic, no language or IQ impairment
- 212 not autistic
- www.tonyattwood.com.au

## **36-item** modified version including 7 sub-scales:

- 1. Imitation
- 2. Social masking
- 3. Imagination
- 4. Friendship and play
- 5. Sensory sensitivity
- 6. Gendered behaviour
- 7. Compliant behaviour

### M-Q-ASC – Autistic Women

Brown, Attwood, Garnett & Stokes (2020), Autism in Adulthood, 2(3), 216-226.



- Completed by 350 autistic women and 322 non-autistic women
- Age 18-71 years old
- A cut-off of 56

attwood & garnett

- correctly identified 80% of autistic women (sensitivity, few false positives)

Conclusion: A new 22-item screening tool with a good discriminative capacity between autistic and non-autistic women

Download from: www.tonyattwood.com.au

### The Autism Spectrum Scale for Females (ASSF)

Being developed and evaluated by Ahmad and Jones (New Zealand)

47 autistic women and 47 NT women

### 144 yes/no questions

Examples of questions:

- I often do not notice when someone is talking to me
- Others find me unaffectionate
- I have sometimes been described as non-emotional or cold or detached

## The Autism Spectrum Scale for Females (ASSF)

#### **Examples of questions:**

- I mostly feel confused about whether to hug someone or not
- If I were to lead a team, I would feel stressed
- I prefer to work on my own
- I often feel different
- I have been in compromised sexual situations
- I would prefer to work with animals rather than to work with people
- I have lots of rules that only I seem to adhere to

## The Autism Spectrum Scale for Females (ASSF)

#### **Examples of questions:**

- I started having romantic relationships much later than my friends did
- I have been seriously deceived more than five times
- I am uncomfortable with direct eye contact



# The Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q)

Hull, L, Mandy, W, Baron-Cohen, S et al. JADD 2019 49 pp 819-833

The Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire (CAT-Q) was developed from autistic adults' experiences of camouflaging

Exploratory factor analysis suggested three factors, with the questionnaire comprising **25 items** in total.

#### 3 subscales

- 1. Compensation
- 2. Masking
- 3. Assimilation



Clarke et al (2021) Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders

- GABS is a coding system to identify non-traditional autism phenotypes using the ADOS Modules 3 and 4
- Age 9-15 years
- Observation and questions on:

### A: Social Adaptation

- Camouflaging (masking)
- Camouflaging (compensation) Copying or imitating others so as not to appear different from peers
- **Self-reflection on social behaviour** Awareness of the impact of their behaviour and differences between self and others

- Reported Friendships Reports one or more friendships
- Understanding of friendships
- Quality of reported friendships Evidence of mutual support and affection via shared interests, regular contact (not a list of names)

### **B: Social Relationships**

- Age of friends not markedly older or younger
- Nature of friendships Mixture of friendships, one or two intense friendships, being an 'outsider'

- Responding to conversational cues Spontaneous inquiries into the examiners thoughts, feelings and experiences
- Social interest Actively seeks and enjoys social activities

### **C:** Managing Emotions

- Internalizing difficulties Evidence of depressive or anxious symptoms
- Externalising difficulties Evidence of aggressive or hyperactive symptoms
- Describes various emotional states in detail and without difficulty or discomfort

- Communicating about emotions Discomfort while discussing emotions with the examiner
- Influence of social acceptance or rejection of emotions being emotionally impacted by one or more instances of social acceptance or rejection
- Violations of sameness or rigidness

### D: Interests and hobbies

- Reported interests (frequency/intensity) coding appropriate expressions of interest in topics and hobbies
- Types of interest (quality/nature) social or non-social

- Significant gender differences on several individual items and the Managing Emotions Subscale
- Females more likely to report internalizing symptoms and emotional impact due to social acceptance and rejection
- Females have more relational interests (people and animals)
- Females demonstrate higher scores on the GABS

GABS picks up behaviours not otherwise captured in the ADOS

Cumin, Pelaez and Mottron (2021) Autism

- Interviewed 20 experienced clinicians from 7 countries (including Tony)
- Autism is best reliably identified by experienced clinicians who take into account qualitative aspects of autism
- Standardised assessment tools are not equipped to detect autism in adult women of typical intelligence
- The ADOS was largely seen as inducing false negatives, particularly in girls and women of normal range IQ
- Created a list of clinical guidelines to improve diagnostic specificity and sensitivity

### Factors affecting the diagnostic assessment

### **Self-diagnosis**

Information on autism increasingly available online

Self-diagnosis often correct

Describing their life history, behaviour and abilities through the lens of the research they had done

Asking for **specific personal examples** can help confirm that difficulties are based on lived experience rather than personal research, avoiding 'textbook answers'

### Previous life experiences and diagnoses

Many women seeking a diagnostic assessment have **complex psychiatric and life histories** and adverse life events

Most women seeking a diagnostic assessment have experienced **trauma** in some form

The **chronology** of difficulties associated with autism is extremely important when making a differential diagnosis such as PTSD

Value of an external informant, especially for information on childhood abilities and behaviour

Exploration of the amount of mental energy consumed preparing for, during and subsequently **analysing social performance** (intuitive or intellectual)

Autistic women have often not reached the level of professional/personal achievement expected considering their intellectual ability

Autistic women are often able to apply their special interests and use them as social currency e.g., fashion

- History of relationships (delayed romantic experiences and vulnerable)
- Gender may be expressed less conventionally (non-binary) or femininity expertly expressed
- The experienced clinician uses a thorough and reliable assessment combined with a "feeling in the room"

### Autistic Women's Experiences and Well-Being During and After Diagnosis

Harmens, Sedgewick and Hobson (2021) Autism in Adulthood

- Data collected from 20 blogsites
- Positive and negative effects on well-being after diagnosis
- Positive:
- Being kinder to themselves
- Understanding their needs
- Making sense of the past
- Connection with a community
- Improved relationships

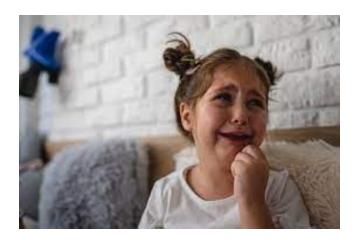
## Autistic Women's Experiences and Well-Being During and After Diagnosis

- Negative
- After diagnosis facing male stereotypes of autism
- Facing a lack of acceptance from others could impact on women's self-acceptance
- Need guidance in how to manage being told they do not appear autistic
- Or fit people's expectations of autism
- Psychiatry uses a deficit-based model and 'disordering' can be harmful to an individual's self-esteem

## Characteristics from age 5-12 Years

#### **Affection and Emotions**

- Indiscriminate and excessive with affection or extremely shy or defensive against affection
- From infancy, extremely intense, inconsolable despair that lasts a long time and cannot be distracted



## Characteristics from age 5-12 Years

## Fascination with Symmetry and Order

"The fun came from setting up and arranging things. Maybe this desire to organize things rather than play with things is the reason I never had any great interest in my peers."



## Characteristics from age 5-12 Years

### Social Play

We create our own world in which to do our own thing

Because the other kids didn't like to play the same way I did, and because they would dare to touch my things, I didn't want to play/engage with them

Playing an **imaginary solitary game** close to, but not engaging with, peers

# Characteristics from age 5-12 Years Social Play

- "Her self-focus often gets in the way, as others can feel she doesn't really care about them and their needs/feelings"
- "She enjoys her friends' company, but does not think of them when they are not around"
- I don't have friends because they don't like to sit in a corner and read. They would rather run around like **demented rabbits**
- 8-year-old autistic girl who enjoys reading novels by Charles Dickens

• Social play of girls is relatively simple to grade 4, easy to copy

# Characteristics from age 5-12 Years Identify with boys

- Many stereotypical girls' activities were stupid, boring and inexplicable.
- Girls were more **complicated, and unkind** in ways I didn't understand.
- Boys are more logical, and accepting, you can see what to do

It was easier to identify with boys because they just wanted to have fun. Girls had more social rules to follow or blunder. They had more gossip and didn't like to get dirty. The guys were fun and I could almost be myself around them.

• I don't know how to do girl things.

#### Characteristics from age 5-12 Years

#### **Gender Specific Toys**

- I loved playing with **Lego** for years and had many thousands as a child. I also loved cardboard boxes, and **drawing/writing**. I always ignored the dolls I was given.
- Are model aircraft considered 'toys'? Is there a gender attached to them? I preferred **nature or animals to toys**.

## Characteristics from age 5-12 Years

#### Friendships

- Single friend who provides guidance and security.
- Friend a 'teacher aid' in the classroom and playground for friendship
- Animals as friends





## Characteristics from age 5-12 Years School

- Less disruptive and so less likely to be noticed
- We think that if we are very, very good, people will like us and all will be well
- Learn that if you are good, you are left alone
- Learn if you are quiet no one sees you
- I learned that to fit in and have someone to play with, you have to pretend to be happy

# Pathways to a Diagnosis for a Teenage Autistic Girl

- Anxiety (all expressions)
- Depression
- Eating disorder
- Situational mutism
- Self-harm
- Borderline Personality Disorder
- Gender Dysphoria



#### Teenage Years

#### Ultra-feminine or anti-social conventions

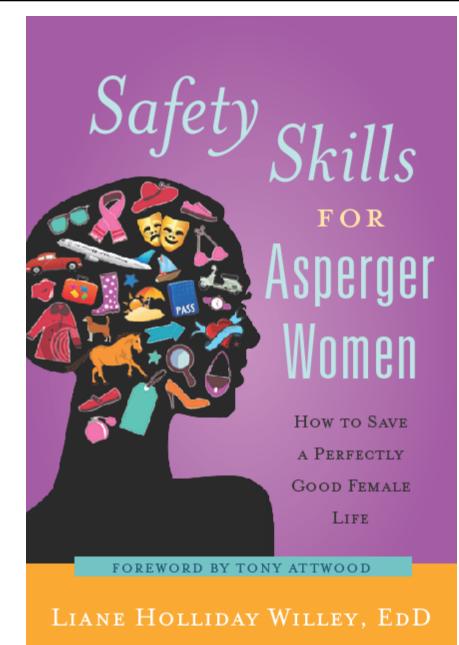
- Try to fit in during Primary School by being ultra-feminine (pink and frilly)
- In the adolescent years, recognise girls' interests in fashion and make-up, developing expertise in these areas to be included
- When imitation is not working, the pendulum can swing the other way
- Despise femininity and defy social and gender conventions
- I much prefer men's clothes. They are far better made, and they are comfortable, smarter and practical.

# Social Experiences of Adolescent Autistic Girls

- **Groups:** 'too many opinions' and disagreement and conflict between peers
- Feeling they needed to act as peacemakers when conflict arose
- May be more sensitive to conflict between friends
- Aware peer girls changed their style of dress and interests to focus more on boys
- These were not interests they shared or saw as positive

#### Teenage Years

- Difficulty understanding vindictive behaviour and gossip
- Gullible, easily fooled
- Tendency to overshare and disclose intimate details
- Feels she is on stage and being watched
- Takes criticism to heart
- Fear of being judged
- Young-sounding voice
- Writes or draws to relieve anxiety
- Vulnerability





Aspie Girl's
Guide
to Being Safe
with Men

The Unwritten Safety Rules No-one is Telling You

#### DEBI BROWN

Foreword by Sarah Attwood

#### Teenage Years

- Power of the peer group for self-esteem
- In high school, girls treated me like I was something else, not boy, not girl, just an **it**
- Even though I had support, I felt very alienated inside. Counsellors chalked this up to teenage angst.
- It drains me mentally and physically. I am exhausted after having spent a lot of time with others and I need to recover in solitude.
- Cinderella at the ball at midnight
- "I couldn't send you to your room, because that's where you always wanted to be anyway!"

### Pathways to a Diagnosis for Women

- Problems with employment or relationships lead to a search for an explanation for being different
- Having an autistic child
- A friend, employer recognises autistic characteristics
- Media, magazines and documentaries
- Literature

