

## ADHD and Autism: what's the difference?

Both conditions are lifelong neurodevelopmental disabilities, which affect the way a person interacts with the world around them. There are also a substantial number of people who are diagnosed with both ADHD and Autism. I am one of those people.

It is estimated that **30 to 80% of autistic people meet the criteria for ADHD**, and many professionals argue that [autism always includes traits of ADHD](#), namely executive dysfunction and all that it causes. Additionally, around **20 to 50% of people with ADHD also meet the criteria for autism**. However, whereas autism usually includes traits of ADHD, ADHD often exists without traits of autism.

At their core, the two conditions are different:

**ADHD is a condition of altered executive function.** This includes changes in motivation, organization, activity levels, impulsivity, attention, emotional regulation, and decision making. People with ADHD often pursue things they're interested in, fidget, and engage in exciting activities in order to increase the level of dopamine in their brains, which helps them stay focused. People with ADHD are also known to be exceptionally creative and original thinkers.

**Autism is a condition of altered sensory, emotional, and social processing.** It affects every aspect of the way a person perceives and interacts with the world. Signs of autism include delayed or precocious speech, sensory sensitivity, sensory integration challenges, difficulty with social interaction, insistence on sameness and routine, stimming, delayed/altered fine and gross motor skills, executive dysfunction, difficulty with emotional regulation, and many more traits.

**Up until 2013, dual diagnosis of autism and ADHD wasn't possible under the DSM.**

Therefore, many autistic people who were evaluated before 2013 may have been given an ADHD diagnosis instead of an autism diagnosis. This is due to many reasons, one of which is that doctors often see ADHD as an "easier" diagnosis for parents to accept. Many of the academic and social accommodations people with ADHD use are also useful to autistic people, so in many doctors' eyes, a diagnosis of ADHD gives the person access to necessary supports without the added "stigma" of the autism label.

This is still true today. **Psychologists might be more willing to diagnose someone with ADHD than with autism, because ADHD is often viewed as more "treatable" and "manageable."** This is *especially* true for AFAB people, and highly verbal autistic people with high masking ability. Doctors may have warped perceptions of what constitutes "being autistic," and therefore not even consider autism as a possibility for certain people.

Let's look at three hypothetical people's diagnoses:

**Person A:** Generalized Anxiety Disorder, ADHD

**Person B:** ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder

**Person C:** Autism (automatically includes Sensory Processing Disorder), ADHD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

When I look at these three people's diagnoses, something stands out to me about Person B. They are diagnosed with four things that, when put together, create a picture that looks more like autism than anything else. Autistic kids are often labeled with ADHD and SPD (and sometimes ODD as well, particularly if they're a person of color), instead of being given an autism diagnosis.

Here's the thing: ADHD by itself doesn't usually cause sensory processing differences, since it's a condition of altered executive function- not sensory processing. However, **autism by itself causes both sensory processing differences and traits of ADHD**. So when I see that someone has been diagnosed with both ADHD and SPD, I wonder if the person/people who diagnosed them were aware of the possibility that they could be autistic.

*This is not to say that people with just ADHD and SPD don't exist. They do.* But I remember my own diagnosis story, and wonder what could have happened if my parents hadn't kept pushing for an autism evaluation.

When I was around 7 years old, I was diagnosed with Sensory Processing Disorder. That was my first official diagnosis. Then, when I started Occupational Therapy, my mom and I started thinking that I might also have ADHD. We talked about it with my therapist, who agreed that I should have a neuropsych evaluation.

But it still didn't feel like we were seeing the full picture. Luckily, I had several autistic friends at school who presented similarly to me, and my parents talked to their parents. I also suspected that I was autistic, so I bugged my parents about it and they agreed that I needed to be evaluated for autism specifically. **And we were right.** I received my official autism diagnosis between ages 8 and 9.

I want you to notice something about this story, though. Because I'm AFAB, and because I had precocious speech, **my first diagnosis wasn't autism**. My first diagnosis was SPD. Then, my second (informal) diagnosis was ADHD. I was autistic the whole time. But it took a great deal of pushing and questioning to actually receive my diagnosis.

I was finally officially diagnosed with ADHD in 2018, after the DSM revision allowed for dual diagnosis. So yes, as it turns out, I actually *do* have ADHD. But the reason I have ADHD, just like the reason I have Sensory Processing Disorder, is *because* I'm autistic.

According to a 2015 [study](#) of autistic children, those who were diagnosed with ADHD before they were diagnosed with autism received their autism diagnosis “an average of 3 years later than those who got the autism diagnosis first — and were **30 times more likely to get the autism diagnosis when they were 6 years old or older.**” ([1](#))

It's not that those autistic kids were misdiagnosed. They did have ADHD. **It's just that their doctors excused their autistic traits as traits of ADHD, which ultimately led to a poor understanding of the full picture and a lack of adequate supports and services.**

So to all of the people who DM us saying that you have ADHD and SPD but not an official autism diagnosis, and yet you really, really relate to all of the things we post, even the things that are autism specific... you might be autistic too. After all, as I mentioned at the beginning, up to 50% of people with ADHD are also autistic.

We have two previous posts about questions to ask yourself if you think you might be autistic, and how to bring up the possibility of being evaluated to your parent/s, caregiver/s, or doctor. I will DM those two posts to anyone who requests them at our Instagram (@the.autisticats).

Remember that regardless of whether you're diagnosed with ADHD, Autism, or both, you're neurodivergent. **And the autistic community will always be able to relate to you, because most of us have ADHD (or ADHD traits) too.**

~Eden 🐸