

What is Autism? By Ken Thomas

I first learned about autism from Greta Thunberg. Prior to hearing Greta Thunberg's speech and hearing her say she was autistic, I thought autism was a totally debilitating mental disease. Seeing Greta give her speech conflicted that understanding, prompting an interest in exactly what autism really is. As I researched via YouTube videos, TED Talks, documentaries, books, websites, autism meetups, forums and more, I started to better understand autism. The more I learned, the more my life struggles started becoming clear; revealing the mysteries of my self-loathing, fear of people, smothering fear of eyes, why the world seemed foreign, why I have always been looked down upon and so much more. I realized that I am autistic. And... that I am not alone. It was a profound revelation.

I decided to write this to share what I have learned as I feel it is very important. I feel sad how autism is so generally misunderstood. I have learned that autism is not a disease or something one can catch or something that has gone wrong. Autism is natural, it is genetic, it starts at conception, and it is not a flaw.

The label, autism, is a collection of traits of individuals. Every person has traits that are unique to that person, however, everyone also has traits that are similar to some others. Everyone has talent in some areas and weaknesses in others. Autistic's are simply people with some similar traits that are listed under the term autism. Autism is not by degree, it is a spectrum.

Autism is primarily a perception difference from the majority of the population. How a person perceives their world is their basis of understanding and their framework for their imagination and their reality. How you perceive anything is dictated by the physical neural framework of you mind.

Two people viewing the same thing, but each viewing from a different angle will result in different perceptions between the two. Both perceptions are correct, but different. Neither can understand, or believe the others perception because they cannot see the other angle. Unfortunately, society is configured *exclusively* by the non-autistic AKA **NeuroTypical** (NT) majority's perception. This leaves the autistic born into an insanely, foreign society, making them feel they do not belong. If things were reversed, where autistics were the majority, NT's would likewise feel very out of place with great distress and debilitating anxiety.

The perception difference of autistic's is labeled as a disorder. However, I believe "disorder" is a misnomer. Indeed, autism inflicts suffering and difficulties, making the disorder label seem fitting. However, the sufferings are the difficulties of interfacing with the NT society. Autistic's rarely suffer on their own. I feel it is very sad when parents consider an autism diagnosis of their child as a tragedy. It is only a tragedy if the parents are ignorant about what autism really is. Mental health professionals only know lists of traits, but do not understand what autism is for the autistic. (Unless the mental health professional is also autistic.)

Note that a fish in a human environment cannot survive. That does not mean the fish is "wrong" or has a disorder. The fish is simply in an incompatible environment. That is how autistic's feel having to interface with the NT configured society.

Sensitivities:

If an observer sees someone reacting or behaving somehow different from what is expected, then the perception of what the person is experiencing is mentally edited to fit the observers mental framework. This is natural and unavoidable, but means that a true understanding is essentially impossible. Autistic sensitivities are never experienced by NT

people. Thus, NT people cannot comprehend what that sensitivity is like (and vice versa). It can be explained in explicit detail, but since they have never experienced anything like that, they are not able to imagine it. Like trying to describe to a person that is totally blind from birth what the color blue looks like.

If an autistic child is seen hunched over in a corner with his/her hands pressed tightly against their ears and banging their head against the wall; it is thought that the child suffers a deep mental disorder with very limited intelligence and comprehension. In reality; probably not. The reality is that the observer of the child has no idea nor neural framework to imagine why the child is doing that. They cannot imagine the nature of the torture the child is suffering from the sounds, lights, etc. An NT person (even a mental health professional) never experiences anything like that so they cannot understand or imagine it. The NT person does not have any of those sensitivities to invoke such torture. The same sounds, lighting, etc. is completely benign, if even noticeable, to the NT person. Note that astronomical science has discovered the existence of dark energy and dark matter. Neither of these can be seen or directly detected thus understood. The existence is only hypothesized by the effects seen on visible, detectable matter and energy. Like the autistic child hunched over in a corner with his/her hands pressed tightly against their ears and banging their head against the wall, an observing mental health professional might understand there is something going on there, but cannot comprehend the actual internal feelings of the child. It should be understood that not understanding does not mean it is invalid. It should never be assumed that they suffer from a disorder to be corrected. It is not considered a disorder for an NT person to experience sensory torture if their toes were being pounded with a hammer. Yes, that experience is physically real, but so is the experience of the autistic's torture of whatever their

sensitivity is. The brain is a physical organ. Excess anxiety can cause permanent, traumatic damage (PTSD). The difference, however, between ones toes and ones brain is that the brain is much closer to home.

Autism is also a benefit:

The autistic brain's analytical section of the cerebrum is larger than average. It is a genetically natural occurrence in a percentage of the population of human, and likely other, species. It helps to broaden the species overall perception of the universe beyond what can be understood by the majority. For example, many of our famous inventors and scientists are autistic, including Albert Einstein, Issac Newton, Amadeus Mozart, Nikola Tesla, Carl Sagan, Charles Darwin, Barbara McClintock, Thomas Jefferson, Elon Musk plus many, many more. Autism was a major benefit in my career as an electronics design engineer. My crippling social anxiety stifled college; thus, no degrees. Instead, my autistic perspective was an advantage in engineering solutions and innovative designs. And most of all, my autistic obsession with studying electronics theory and physics escalated my career in spite of no degrees.

Disconnected:

Expressions, tone, mannerisms and body language are ninety percent of communications for NT's. In Autistic's; expressions, tone, mannerisms and body language are neurologically disconnected (or poorly connected) causing internal feelings to not be accurately reflected. An NT reads the autistic's expressions, tone, etc., which are not in sync with what they are saying or feeling. This results in frustrating misunderstandings. Most autistics eventually learn how to make facial expressions, tone and mannerisms that go with the particular situation. However, that is a blind, complex multitasking effort and is never perfectly executed. It is not automatic, there is no feedback and requires exhausting effort. That effort is called "masking". Likewise,

most autistic's are unable to explain their feelings or sources of their anxiety. It is only learned by association. Likewise, most autistic's are very poor at reading another persons emotions by their expressions and mannerisms. That is called "face blindness". This makes an autistic person feel apprehension before speaking because it is so unlikely that what they intend to say will be interpreted correctly. Autistic people are often perceived to be confused and walk strangely. This is part of the mannerism disconnect. The disconnected expression of feelings results in the common belief that autistics have no empathy or compassion. However, nothing can be further from the truth. Many autistic's experience greater empathy than the general public, but the social communication disconnect hides their feelings of empathy.

Mental Mix:

Autistic's have a very high mental "Noise Floor". On average, at rest, an autistic's brain is 41% more active than an NT. The activity is generally a mix of current senses and thoughts mixed with past senses and experiences. Everything is in the foreground making it hard to separate past experiences with current ones.

Treatment, How to Help:

The best treatment for autistic people is to *simply understand*.

- To understand that they perceive the environment differently than yourself.
- To understand that their perception is real and valid.
- To understand that they are not suffering from a deformity or mental illness. They are just reacting to an ill-fitting society.
- To understand that their autism is a part of who they are.
- To understand that they do not need a pill or a treatment. They do not need to be fixed. They just need understanding and respect.

- To understand that their expressions, tone and body language may be communicating the wrong emotion to their message. If they appear to be arguing or disagreeing, understand that they are probably not.
- To understand that the best treatment is to simply remove whatever is the source of their anxiety as much as possible. Example: if you are suffering the pain of being burned by a hot poker, the proper action is not to find a treatment to reduce the pain; the proper action is to remove the hot poker. This is why I feel it is cruel to dismiss autistic anxieties as a disorder because it is different from the NT's view of normal.
- It is also important for autistic's to understand that NT's perception is different. Autistic's mentality is extremely literal. Autistic's have a very hard time understanding figurative phrase metaphors, such as, "You are my sunshine". Thus, autistic's are deeply distressed by all the illogical communications, actions and mentality in the society we have to share. Autistic's need to understand that is because the NT society is based on a different perception of the world.

This writing is a brief, over-simplified introduction to autism.

Below are some helpful TED talks that I recommend:

Note: links are case sensitive.

Tashi Baiguerra: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8j1fcQiyBU>

Elisabeth Wiklander: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qvvrme5WlwA>

Jac den Houting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1AUdaH-EPM>