

A STIGMA: IS AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD), A DISABILITY OR MERELY A DIFFERENT ABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Social media frequently misrepresents autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a disability. The shift in mentality is necessary for creating a more tolerant and understanding atmosphere. Dispelling the idea that our diverse abilities preclude us from performing particular activities is critical. By emphasizing persons with autism's unique abilities as accomplishments, the idea that autism is a "different ability" shifts the emphasis from flaws to strengths. They contribute and improve to our communities and develop various fields with their exceptional cognitive abilities, great attention, originality, honesty, passion, and reliability. Fostering a more accepting and understanding environment requires this change of attitude. Additionally, autism is not a disability to be fixed, but a different ability that should be embraced. Recognizing the strengths and potential of individuals with autism can foster a more inclusive and supportive society. By celebrating their unique abilities, we can uplift them and appreciate their unique perspectives, helping to build a world where everyone can thrive. Finally, from the Islamic perspectives, autism is viewed as a different ability bestowed by Allah, not a disability. By embracing and supporting individuals with autism, we fulfill our duty to show compassion, respect, and understanding to all of Allah's creations.

Keywords: *autism spectrum disorder (ASD), social awareness, disability, special ability, neurodiversity*

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is often misunderstood and misrepresented in society. While it is commonly labelled as a disability, many advocates and individuals with autism prefer to view it as a different ability. This perspective shift is crucial in fostering a more inclusive and understanding world. We need to break the stigma, that there are things we cannot do just because of our diverse abilities. Viewing autism as a 'different ability' shifts the focus from deficits to strengths, highlighting the unique abilities and contributions of individuals with autism. Their exceptional cognitive abilities, intense focus, creativity, honesty, passion, and reliability enrich our communities and drive progress in numerous fields. ASD also includes conditions that were historically treated as separate disorders. For example, someone with Asperger syndrome, autistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder would all fall on the autism spectrum (Jakab, 2024). How to comprehend the nature of AUTISM? Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by social interaction, communication, and behaviour. These differences can manifest in a variety of ways, making each individual's experience with autism unique, refer Figure 1 and Figure 2. Some may have

exceptional skills in areas such as mathematics, music, or art, while others might excel in logical thinking and problem-solving (Assistant, 2024).



Figure 1 : Taken from <https://www.livingholistichealth.com/natural-medicine-news/autism-from-a-nautopathic-perspective>

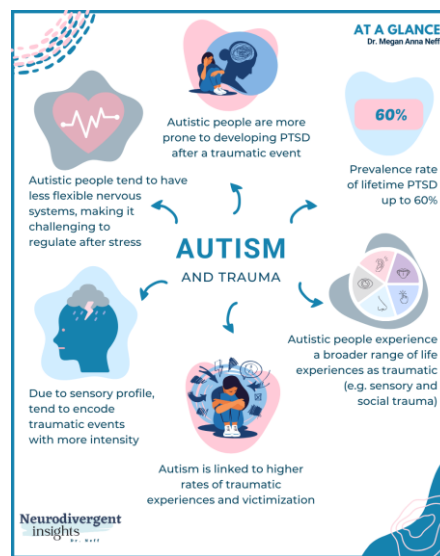


Figure 2: Taken from <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/autism-infographics/autismandtrauma>

The Strength of Autism

Among the strengths of autistic people are (Assistant, 2024):

- i. Attention to Detail:** Many individuals with autism have an extraordinary ability to notice details that others might overlook. This skill can be particularly valuable in fields such as data analysis, quality control, and research.
- ii. Honesty and Integrity:** People with autism often exhibit a high level of honesty and integrity. They tend to be straightforward and transparent, which can be a refreshing and valuable trait in personal and professional relationships.

iii. Unique Perspectives: The different ways in which individuals with autism perceive the world can lead to innovative solutions and creative ideas. Their unique perspectives can drive progress and inspire new ways of thinking.

iv. Specialized Interests: Many individuals with autism develop deep, specialized interests in specific subjects. This passion can lead to expertise and significant contributions in their chosen fields.

v. Challenges and Misconceptions

While it is important to recognize the strengths associated with autism, it is also crucial to acknowledge the challenges. Social interactions and communication can be difficult, and sensory sensitivities can be overwhelming. However, these challenges do not diminish the value and potential of individuals with autism. Misconceptions about autism often stem from a lack of understanding. Educating ourselves and others can break down stereotypes and promote acceptance. It is essential to listen to the voices of those with autism and to respect their experiences and perspectives.

vi. Embracing Neurodiversity

The concept of neurodiversity celebrates the variety of human brains and minds. It recognizes that neurological differences, including autism, are natural variations of human experience. Embracing neurodiversity means valuing and supporting individuals with autism, not despite their differences, but because of them.

Real-Life Examples

There are many real-life examples of excellent Autistic people who have made significant contributions and shared their experiences. Among the Muslims autistic amazing figures are:

- i. *Iqra Babar:*** Iqra Babar is an autistic woman, artist, and comic book creator. She uses her art to explore her identity as an autistic woman of colour and a Muslim. Iqra's work challenges stereotypes and promotes understanding of autism within the Muslim and broader communities (Babar, 2024).
- ii. *Kathryn Irrgang and her daughter Zainab:*** Kathryn Irrgang is a devoted mother who has adapted her Islamic lifestyle to support her autistic daughter, Zainab. Kathryn shares their experiences of celebrating Eid and other Islamic practices in ways that accommodate Zainab's needs, advocating for autistic-friendly spaces in mosques (Anjum, 2023).
- iii. *Brinda Jegatheesa:*** Educational anthropologist Brinda Jegatheesan conducted a study observing South Asian immigrant families with young boys with autism. These families are practising Muslims, and the research highlights how they navigate their faith and community interactions while supporting their autistic children (Hughes, 2010).

- iv. **Personal Story on Beliefnet:** An article on Beliefnet shares the story of a Muslim family who found that having an autistic child reinvigorated their faith. They view their autistic child as a gift and have integrated their faith more deeply into their lives as a result (Beliefnet, 2024).

Other famous Autistic role-models are (Assistant, 2024):

- i. **Temple Grandin:** Temple Grandin is a renowned animal behaviour expert and professor of animal science at Colorado State University. Diagnosed with autism at a young age, she has used her unique perspective to revolutionize the livestock industry. Her designs for humane livestock handling facilities are used worldwide, and she has authored several books on autism and animal behaviour (Grandin & Barron, 2024).
- ii. **Satoshi Tajiri:** Satoshi Tajiri, the creator of the globally popular Pokémon franchise, is another inspiring example. His intense focus and passion for collecting insects as a child, a common interest among individuals with autism, led to the creation of Pokémon. His ability to think differently and his attention to detail have made Pokémon a beloved and enduring phenomenon (Tajiri, S., n.d.)
- iii. **Greta Thunberg:** Greta Thunberg, the Swedish environmental activist, has been open about her autism diagnosis. She describes it as her “superpower” that helps her see the climate crisis clearly and speak out with unwavering conviction. Her activism has sparked a global movement, inspiring millions to take action against climate change.
- iv. **Daniel Tammet:** Daniel Tammet is a British author and savant with extraordinary mathematical and linguistic abilities. He has memorized and recited pi to 22,514 decimal places and learned Icelandic in just one week. Tammet’s unique brain wiring allows him to visualize numbers as shapes and colours, which he describes in his book “Born on a Blue Day.”
- v. **Stephen Wiltshire:** Stephen Wiltshire is an artist known for his detailed cityscape drawings, often created from memory after a single viewing. Diagnosed with autism at the age of three, Wiltshire’s exceptional memory and artistic talent have earned him international acclaim. His works are displayed in galleries and collections around the world.

These examples illustrate the diverse experiences of men/women with autism and how they navigate their faith and daily lives.

Promoting Autism Acceptance

Promoting autism acceptance involves a combination of education, advocacy, and creating inclusive environments. Here are some effective strategies (Assistant, 2024):

1. Education and Awareness

Public Campaigns: Launch public awareness campaigns to educate people about autism, its characteristics, and the strengths of individuals with autism.

School Programs: Implement educational programs in schools to teach students about neurodiversity and the importance of inclusion.

Workshops and Training: Offer workshops and training sessions for employers, educators, and community members to better understand and support individuals with autism.

2. Advocacy and Representation

Support Advocacy Groups: Support organizations and advocacy groups that work towards autism acceptance and provide resources for individuals with autism and their families.

Promote Self-Advocacy: Encourage and support individuals with autism to share their experiences and advocate for themselves.

Media Representation: Promote accurate and positive representation of individuals with autism in media, including movies, TV shows, and books.

3. Inclusive Environments

Accessible Spaces: Design public spaces, workplaces, and schools to be accessible and accommodating for individuals with autism, considering sensory sensitivities and communication needs.

Inclusive Policies: Implement policies that promote inclusion and prevent discrimination in schools, workplaces, and communities.

Supportive Services: Provide access to supportive services such as therapy, counselling, and social skills training to help individuals with autism thrive.

4. Community Engagement

Community Events: Organize community events that celebrate neurodiversity and provide opportunities for individuals with autism to connect and share their talents.

Peer Support Groups: Establish peer support groups where individuals with autism and their families can share experiences and offer mutual support.

Volunteer Opportunities: Encourage community members to volunteer with organizations that support individuals with autism.

5. Personal Actions

Listen and Learn: Take the time to listen to individuals with autism and learn from their experiences.

Respect their perspectives and preferences.

Challenge Stereotypes: Actively challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about autism whenever you encounter them.

Be an Ally: Stand up for the rights and inclusion of individuals with autism in your community and advocate for their acceptance.

Promoting autism acceptance is a collective effort that requires education, advocacy, and the creation of inclusive environments. By taking these steps, we can build a society that values and supports individuals with autism, recognizing their unique abilities and contributions. Let's work together to foster understanding, acceptance, and inclusion for all.

Islamic Views on Autism As A Different

In Islam, every individual is seen as a unique creation of Allah, endowed with their own strengths and abilities. Autism, like other neurodiverse conditions, is viewed through this lens of divine wisdom and purpose (Assistant, 2024).

i. Dignity and Respect for All

Islam emphasizes the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. The Qur'an states, "We have certainly created man in the best of stature" (Qur'an 95:4). This verse underscores that all individuals, regardless of their abilities, are created perfectly by Allah. Autism is not seen as a flaw but as a different way of experiencing and interacting with the world.

ii. Embracing Diversity

The Qur'an acknowledges the diversity of human creation: "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colours. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge" (Qur'an 30:22). This diversity includes neurological differences, which are part of Allah's grand design. Embracing neurodiversity means recognizing and valuing the unique contributions of individuals with autism.

iii. Compassion and Support

Islam teaches compassion and support for those who face challenges. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) showed great kindness and understanding towards individuals with disabilities. For example, he appointed a blind man, Abdullah ibn Umm Maktum, as the muezzin (caller to prayer) of Medina, highlighting that physical or cognitive differences do not diminish a person's value or capabilities.

iv. Special Abilities and Talents

Undoubtedly, many individuals with autism possess exceptional talents and abilities. Islam encourages the recognition and nurturing of these gifts. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “Allah does not look at your appearance or your wealth but looks at your hearts and your deeds” (Sahih Muslim). This hadith emphasizes that what truly matters are one’s intentions and actions, not their outward characteristics.

v. Patience and Gratitude

Families and individuals dealing with autism are encouraged to practice patience and gratitude. The Qur’an states, “And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits but give good tidings to the patient” (Qur’an 2:155). Patience in the face of challenges is highly valued, and gratitude for the unique abilities and perspectives that autism brings is encouraged.

vi. Seeking Knowledge and Understanding

Islam places a high value on seeking knowledge. Understanding autism and educating others about it can help reduce stigma and promote acceptance. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim” (Sunan Ibn Majah). This includes knowledge about neurodiversity and how to support individuals with autism.

CONCLUSION

Autism is not a disability to be fixed but a different ability to be embraced. By shifting our perspective and recognizing the strengths and potential of individuals with autism, we can create a more inclusive and supportive society. Let us celebrate our unique abilities. These examples highlight the incredible abilities and contributions of individuals with autism. By recognizing and celebrating these different abilities, we can foster a more inclusive and supportive society. Let us continue to support and uplift those with autism, appreciating the unique perspectives and talents they bring to our world. that autism brings and works together to build a world where everyone can thrive. Furthermore, in Islam, autism is viewed as a different ability bestowed by Allah, not a disability. It is a reminder of the diversity and complexity of Allah’s creation. By embracing and supporting individuals with autism, we fulfil our duty to show compassion, respect, and understanding to all of Allah’s creations.

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