

# A Need to Redefine Autism

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## Abstract

Currently, one in 59 children (1.7%) are being diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD). During the 1960s, one in 250 (0.4%) were diagnosed with autism. This apparent 420% increase in reported cases is largely due to misdiagnoses occasioned by changing criteria. Phenotype diagnosing has been abandoned in favor of ticking off symptoms on a checklist with minimal understanding of cause and effect. Dissimilar conditions are now being included under a broad ASD umbrella category. This study explains the unique neurophysiological cause of autism, redefines autism in terms of this unique cause, and provides differential diagnostic criteria plus a litmus test that enables you to know for certain if someone suspected of being autistic has been correctly diagnosed.

**Keywords:** Autism • Autism spectrum disorder • Hyperfocus • Neurophysiological

## Introduction

It is generally accepted that one in 59 children (1.7%) are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The oft-quoted figure during the 1960s was one in 250 (0.4%). A 420% increase suggests that autism may have reached epidemic proportions. Alternatively, there may have been an epidemic in false diagnoses of autism. My research suggests that the latter hypothesis may be the valid one.

In 1964, I was misdiagnosed as having a personality disorder, by a psychiatrist at the University of Toronto. The correct diagnosis should have been asperger syndrome (high functioning autism). Since then, the virtual pendulum has swung far into the opposite direction. False diagnoses of autism could now be at an all-time high.

## Literature Review

A 10-year Swedish study in 2015 concluded that although the prevalence of the autism phenotype has remained stable, clinically diagnosed autism spectrum disorder has increased substantially [1]. A 2016 study reported that many children originally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder were later found not to be autistic [2]. A comprehensive 2019 study in JAMA Psychiatry indicates that autism is being significantly overdiagnosed [3]. Dr. Laurent Mottron, co-author of this most recent study, has expressed these concerns: "The autism category has considerably overextended ...most neurogenetic and child psychiatry disorders that have only a loose resemblance with autism can now be labeled autistic ... you could not have ADHD and autism before 2013; now you can" [4]. Doctors now tend to label as autistic anyone who simply has ADHD (or OCD) and poor socialization.

If autism is being significantly overdiagnosed, then studies relating to the genetic cause of autism may be questionable because the correlations found could be to conditions other than autism [5-9]. Overdiagnosing also

means that many are being denied treatments for whichever conditions they actually have.

## The Misleading Spectrum

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association merged the following four disorders under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): autism disorder, asperger syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and Pervasive Development Disorder not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Autism now includes a spectrum of conditions of uncertain similarity. Professionals diagnose by ticking off symptoms on a checklist, without questioning the possible causes of said symptoms.

The American Psychological Association defines autism spectrum disorder as "a neurodevelopment disorder that is characterized by difficulties with social communication and social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns in behaviors, interests, and activities" [4]

The spectrum idea implies that there can be different kinds of autism and varying shades of autism. My research strongly suggests that this is not so. Autism is 100%. Either one is autistic, or s/he is not.

Autism is simply a neurophysiological idiosyncrasy. The only thing different about an autistic brain is the specialized way in which it processes information. As such, autism does not fit the medical definition of disorder, i.e., a pathological or diseased condition of mind or body. Michelangelo, Mozart, Darwin, Jefferson, Edison, Tesla, and Einstein were most probably autistic and can in no way be considered to have been suffering from any mental pathology.

## Autistic Traits have a Common Cause

From intimate knowledge of how my own autistic brain operates, and from studying the behaviors of three autistic family members and seven other autistic people, I have compiled a list of 44 traits that all 11 of us have in common. These autistic characteristics appear to have a single cause: hyperfocus, the perpetual and unrelenting state of intense single-minded concentration fixated on one thing at a time, to the exclusion of everything else. Hyperfocus thus appears to be the unique and defining causal state of autism that creates its observed characteristics [10,11].

Hyperfocus keeps a person trapped in the mental/intellectual part of his mind with no ability to divide his attention between two thoughts (or stimuli), with the consequence that he never gets to feel his emotions. He can only process his emotions intellectually, after the fact. Without the ability to feel emotion, it is impossible to be spontaneous, to be emotionally available, to feel connected to others, or to be aware of how one is perceived. Anthony Hopkins spoke for every autistic person when he is reputed to have said, "My whole life I have felt like an outsider".

Hyperfocus prevents a person from running two mental programs simultaneously. One takes everything you say literally because he cannot also be questioning how you use words. Similarly, an autistic person cannot also be picking up on subtleties or social cues. She cannot lie spontaneously because that would require dividing attention between the truth and a falsehood.

Hyperfocus can be so intense that any sudden interruption (e.g., a door opening, an unexpected question, accidentally dropping something) shatters the thought pattern and can be experienced as anywhere from annoying to devastating. Loud noises instantly switch hyperfocus to the noise, which is then experienced with far more intensity than does someone with a neurotypical brain.

Meditation is impossible for someone trapped in hyperfocus, because meditation requires letting go of focus. It is also doubtful that an autistic person can be hypnotized. Twice I tried but was unable to divide my attention between the instructions and the experience I was supposed to be having.