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# WHEN A DISORDER IS NOT A PUNISHMENT

CRISTINA LOPEZ

The beauty of the brain lies in its complexity. No two human brains are wired the same way, nor should they be. Our unconscious human judgment focuses on weaknesses rather than strengths especially when discussing the attributes of individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and other neurodevelopmental delays. In the grand scheme of things, does the wiring of our brains really have more value than our overall contribution to society?

About 1 in 68 children are on the autism spectrum according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Autism is a particularly difficult topic to discuss because its neurological basis largely remains a mysterious combination of genetic and environmental factors. People still believe that there is a link between childhood vaccinations and autism. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion about the vaccination debate, and discussing this issue is not my primary purpose. However, stating that vaccinations could possibly cause autism despite plenty of evidence against it contributes to the greater public perception of autism as a negative side effect or a preventable disease. Therefore, a shift in the way we perceive neurodevelopmental differences is necessary. A raise in awareness begins here.

Back in elementary school, we learn that some of our peers are better at sports while others are better at art. An outgoing student receives more attention than a quiet, socially awkward one, possibly resulting in a lower sense of self-esteem. As a society, we need to reconsider what we value and remember that children, adolescents, and adults with autism are functional human beings with their own intelligence and virtue. In fact, over 40% of those diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder are said to have above average intellectual abilities (CDC). For many, understanding the gist of a conversation or getting the punch line of a joke may be difficult, but oftentimes their music or art skills are impeccable.

Trouble with social interaction is common among people with ASD. Nonetheless, we must remember that just because somebody cannot communicate effectively does not mean that they are not having plenty of thoughts. *The Reason I Jump* is a book by a nonverbal thirteen-year old boy named Naoki Higashida, who is considered to have a severe case of autism. Through the use of an alphabet grid, he heartwarmingly forms words and sentences to respond to questions about autism that he assumes people want answered. In doing this, Naoki proves that the language his caregivers and loved ones use around him indeed affects him. Temple Grandin, another famous author on the autism spectrum, takes pride in the idea that she sees the world in pictures. These minds have a unique way of seeing the world and these senses should not go unnoticed.

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In recent years, there has been a rise in the amount of autism cases. ASD currently affects over 3 million people here in the United States alone (CDC). Professionals attribute this surge in autism to better methods of diagnosis. What most people do not consider, however, is that many of the most brilliant figures in history may have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder if they had lived with today's modern technology. Albert Einstein was said to have difficulty in social situations and exhibit hyperactive senses, which are both common ASD behaviors. Similarly, Wolfgang Mozart was said to have extreme sensitivity to loud noises despite his composition of many influential classical pieces. The world would be quite monotonous if there was nobody like Einstein or Mozart and everyone had the same skill set.

All brains are equally important in contributing to the greater good of society, and this is the kind of thinking that promotes acceptance for those whose brains are wired differently than our own. Let us strive to think inclusively rather than citing autism as a negative side effect. Although difficult to navigate at times, autism is not a punishment. Individuals on the spectrum may suffer from physical health complications, but it is our job to ensure a supportive community to foster the minds of all kinds of thinkers. Their minds are far from shut down, so we must not shut them out.