

Module 6 : Addressing Common Myths Connected with Autism

- Address several of the most common myths connected with autism spectrum disorders
- Look specifically at the theory that measles, mumps and rubella vaccines can result in children becoming autistic
- Investigate suggestions that dietary needs or deficiencies may cause autism
- Address the old theory that autism is a result of poor parenting

In this module, we will:

- Address several of the most common myths connected with autism spectrum disorder
- Look at the theory that measles, mumps and rubella vaccines can result in children becoming autistic
- Investigate suggestions that dietary needs or deficiencies may cause autism
- Address the old theory that autism is a result of poor parenting
- Review whether autism can be outgrown

6.1 Introduction

As we discussed briefly in an earlier module, there has been a considerable amount of speculation about what might cause autism. Most researchers today agree that autism is likely a neurological condition resulting from genetic factors, but it is not yet known which genes may contribute to it.

Because so much is yet to be discovered about autism, with no conclusive evidence to pinpoint the exact cause, there are a lot of theories surrounding it. Many are sound and based on quality research, while others are more speculative and not backed by quality evidence or scientific methods.

While some theories have now been thoroughly dismissed by credible doctors and researchers, unfortunately, some people still believe the myths surrounding them, and this can potentially have damaging effects on the health and wellbeing of children.

6.2 Myth: Vaccines Cause Autism

Truth:

One myth that received considerable attention is the suggestion that routine childhood vaccinations can cause autism spectrum disorder. This especially centred on the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine back in the late 1990s.

Extensive research was conducted around the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and thiomersal, a rarely used vaccination-preserving agent.

A research paper by Dr Andrew Wakefield and colleagues, written in 1998, suggested a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. This subjected autistic children to unnecessary testing as the claim was proven to be false and the paper has long since been retracted by prominent medical journal *The Lancet*, and the doctor subsequently lost his medical licence.

Most experts are satisfied that no connection exists between vaccines and the development of autism. However, studies still continue to look at the issue. In 2019, a Danish study of over 650,000 children found no increased risk of autism after the MMR vaccination (Hviid et al., 2019)

It is important for children to have all the recommended vaccinations. For most children, the benefits of getting vaccinated are far greater than the possible side effects.

The refusal to vaccinate children over fears of autism can potentially have far-reaching public health concerns. Not only can it make those children more susceptible to some illnesses, but they may also risk exposing other children to diseases that have routinely been vaccinated against for years.

6.3 Myth: Bad Parenting Causes Autism

Truth:

In the past, some people suggested that a child's upbringing can cause them to become autistic. They believed that not enough maternal warmth and closeness caused autism.

This theory has also been long since discredited. It is important to remember that autism is a condition present in early life and is not related to how a child is raised; you cannot acquire it through bad or unemotional parenting.

Many children with autism have loving, healthy and emotionally fulfilling home lives and families, and still have the condition. Alternatively, some children may not have a loving family environment or warm parenting, yet they do not have autism and grow up to have well-developed emotional intelligence and be loving parents themselves.

6.4 Myth: Autistic People Are Not Interested in Friendships

Truth:

Autistic people typically struggle with social skills, communication skills and interaction with others, which can make it difficult for them to forge connections with their peers.

They might seem shy or unfriendly, but that's because they have trouble communicating their desire for relationships in the same way as other people. They may also have anxiety stemming from their condition, which can make them feel additionally shy or withdrawn.

While some autistic people may seem unaware of the world or people around them, most people on the autism spectrum would sincerely like to have friends and would likely benefit from more interaction with other people.

Some autistic people like to spend time alone in solitary activities such as reading or focusing on their special interest. This is because of their challenges with social interactions and feelings of being overwhelmed by the world around them; however, that doesn't mean that they don't want any friends or shouldn't be approached.

6.5 Myth: Autistic People Have No Feelings or Emotions

Truth:

Autism doesn't make people unable to have feelings or emotions; they may just have trouble understanding and expressing them in ways that others can typically recognise. Some researchers have posited that people on the autism spectrum may even have more emotional feelings than their typically developing peers; they just don't know how to express them through the usual methods.

Feelings and emotions in autistic people can be displayed in different ways, such as with repetitive behaviours, crying, hand flapping, head banging or self-talk to cope with stress or change.

6.6 Myth: Autistic People are Non-Verbal

Truth:

While some people on the autism spectrum may be pre- or non-verbal, or have limited speech abilities, language skills can often be developed.

Language skills can be improved, and non-verbal people can be taught to communicate in other ways, such as through visual cues or sign language.

However, many people on the autism spectrum possess rich vocabularies and are extremely verbal.

6.7 Myth: Autistic People have an Intellectual Disability

Truth:

Although autism can cause delays and challenges in certain areas, people on the autism spectrum typically have average to above average intelligence.

While they may struggle in some areas, they can also possess significant strengths and gifts in their areas of special interest, and topics such as maths and music. It is important to remember that autistic people are individuals with their own gifts and challenges, just like everyone else, and autism does not equate with a lack of intelligence.

6.8 Myth: All Autistic People Have Savant Abilities

Truth:

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that people who receive a diagnosis can have a wide range of traits, challenges, conditions, and gifts.

While some may have savant abilities, this is not the case for most people on the autism spectrum.

Autistic savants display extraordinary skills most people do not possess, however, only an estimated

10% of autistic people are thought to have savant abilities (verywellhealth.com). Amongst the non-autistic population, and an estimated 1% have savant abilities.

6.9 Myth: Children Can Grow out of Autism

Truth:

Children on the autism spectrum can experience tremendous personal growth when they have the right support. As they develop and mature, they can often learn new strategies to cope; sometimes leading people to believe that they have 'grown out of it'.

However, it is important to remember that autism isn't just a phase that children go through and it is a lifelong condition.

6.10 Myth: Treatments for Autism are Universal

Truth:

As autism is a spectrum disorder, it has wide ranging symptoms, variations and traits, so the treatment and support for autism will vary considerably from person to person. Autism spectrum

disorder should not be treated as an illness or disease.

There are many highly effective support structures in place to help improve the lives of autistic people. These can include specialised behavioural and educational therapy, teaching aids during school, structured extracurricular activities, motor skills therapy, and treatment of other, related medical conditions like epilepsy or anxiety.

What might be beneficial for one person may be stressful or ineffective for another, so it is important to identify the individual's specific needs and customise their support plan and strategies.

6.11 Myth: Autism is Becoming More Common

Truth:

While the rates of individuals diagnosed with autism have increased in the last several decades, this may not be because more people are being born with autism.

Instead, it is more likely that as awareness of the condition increases, and with a better understanding of it, more people are receiving an accurate diagnosis.

This is particularly true for girls, who can exhibit different characteristics on the autism spectrum than boys and can mask some of their symptoms. As previously discussed, it has been suggested by leading researchers that the methods of assessing and diagnosing autism may not be as effective for girls as they are for boys, resulting in fewer diagnoses.

Addressing these common myths and identifying the solid research that's been used to debunk them can be very helpful in further understanding autism. When people are misinformed, unnecessary treatments and medicines could be given, and additional stress can be placed on both autistic people and their families.

However, it is important to keep in mind that some myths likely came about or continue to be perpetuated due to good, if somewhat misguided, intentions. Because the autism spectrum is so vast and complex, it is easy to search for answers in a variety of different places. Furthermore, parents of autistic children may seek out alternative treatments because they want to try anything in their power to help their children.

Take a Quick Recap Test

[viralQuiz id=94]

6.12 What We've Learned

In this module, we have addressed some of the common myths associated with autism, including potential causes of autism, assumptions about the social and emotional status of autistic people, and presumptions about what autism is and is not.

We also learned why some of these myths continue to be perpetuated, despite the fact that they have been disproven. With this information, we can develop a clearer picture of autism spectrum disorder.

Summary

After completing this module, you should have a much better understanding of the essential facts surrounding autism myths.

Being aware of the myths and facts will enable you to highlight the truths of this multi-faceted neurological condition and dismiss the unproven or disproved tales.

In the next module, we will investigate the recognised approaches to autism, including how to prepare for social inclusion, meet individual needs, and take a person-centred approach.

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