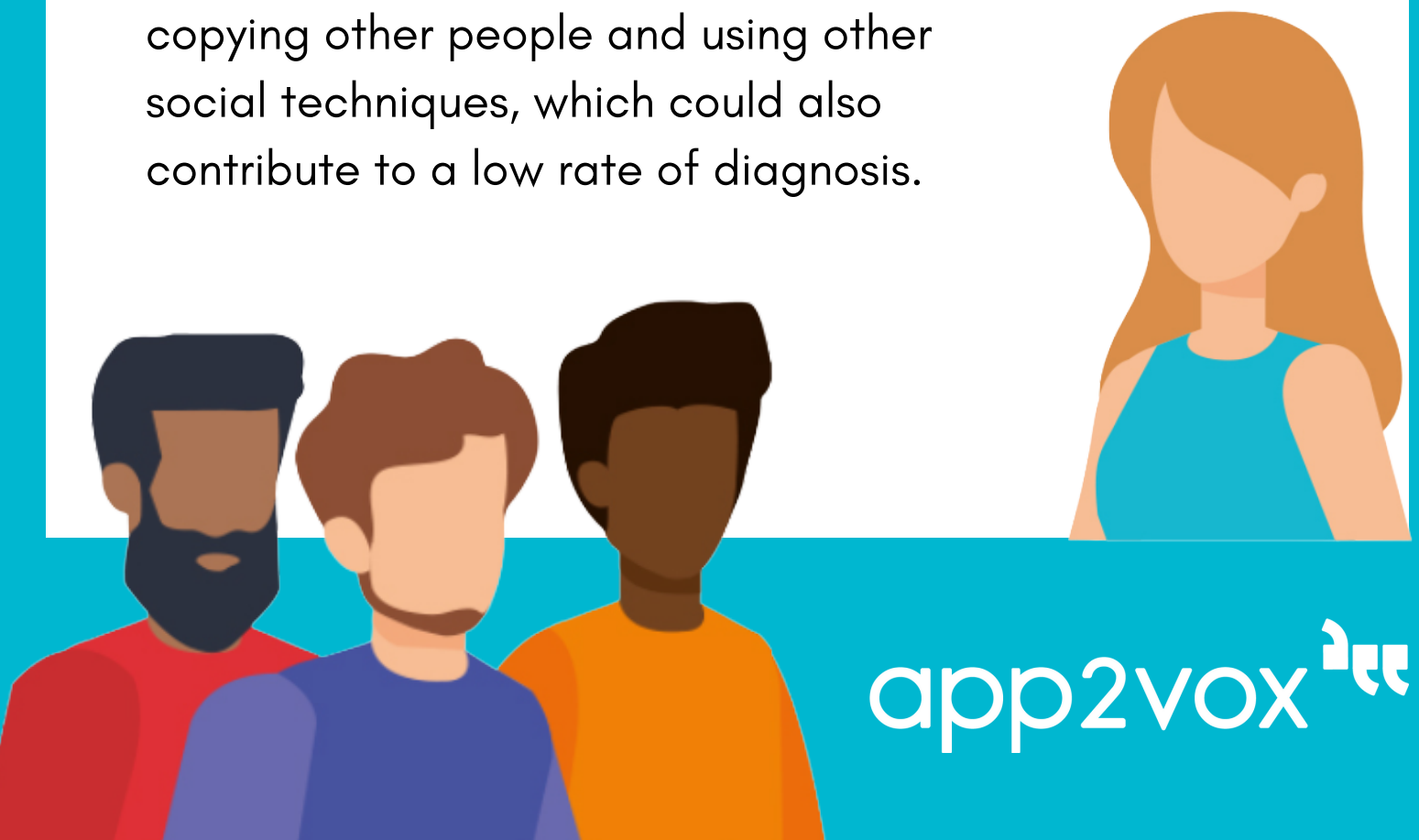


Autism in Women



There are five times more men diagnosed with autism than women. The number of men supported by adult services compared to women exceeds 3 to 1. This is not necessarily because women are less likely to be autistic. There is no definitive link between gender and autism. Perhaps because of a historically assumed link between men and autism, women are frequently misdiagnosed or go on unseen.

Most existing studies in which diagnoses of autism are based were almost exclusively carried out on boys, so are much more likely to identify signs of autism in males than in females. For a long-time, autism was thought by many to only occur in males. In addition, females are thought to often be better at masking or camouflaging symptoms of autism by copying other people and using other social techniques, which could also contribute to a low rate of diagnosis.



A missed diagnosis can prevent an autistic female from getting the valuable help, support, understanding and adjustments that she may need to live a happy and fulfilled life.

Symptoms of autism in women

Many of the possible symptoms of autism are the same for males and females, though there are some key differences. A large study suggests that, compared with autistic males, that autistic females may:

- find social situations more difficult
- find it harder to deal with change
- be less likely to become hyper-focused on a task
- have more trouble managing their emotions
- have more problems with language and reasoning
- be more likely to behave poorly or aggressively

Causes of autism in women

The causes of autism are not generally understood for anyone. The prevalence of autism in some families makes it seem likely that there is a genetic aspect, and environmental factors may also play a part. Autism is never the result of the actions or inactions of the parents of an autistic child.

One emerging theory which may partly explain the differences in autistic males and females is known as the “extreme male brain theory”. The idea is that autism is, in part, caused by greater than normal exposure to male hormones (such as testosterone) while in the womb.

This in turn can cause autistic brains to be stronger in areas such as logic and ordering (traditionally male strengths) and not so developed in areas concerning emotions and social interactions (generally female strengths). Of course, the impact of this exposure on male and female brains which are different to start with will lead to different outcomes.

It is important to remember too that all autistic people are individual with different strengths and weaknesses, and theories such as this are generalisations rather than applying specifically to any given autistic person.



Seeking the correct diagnosis

Getting an autism diagnosis can be difficult for anyone but can be even harder for females due to the lack of awareness and knowledge of autism in women. There are still reports of autism not being considered as a diagnosis simply because the patient is female.

The starting point for getting a diagnosis for yourself or your child is to see your GP. Before going it can be a good idea to prepare your reasoning for seeking a diagnosis, such as the characteristics that you or your child have that are known to be associated with autism. It is absolutely fine to take written notes to the appointment with you, and you should take a

companion with you too if that would help.

As explained, awareness of autism in females is still much lower than it should be, so it can be helpful to be able to explain that you have researched the subject and be able to explain why you want to pursue a diagnosis.

Whether you are male or female, it can be a long and tough process to get a diagnosis and you should be prepared to persevere, reach out for support and seek a second opinion if necessary.



Finding support as an autistic woman

A key source of support for any autistic person is other autistic people. For autistic women, it can be extremely helpful to connect with other autistic women to discuss common issues and share solutions and approaches.

One excellent resource for autistic women is the Women and Girls programme run by Scottish Autism. This provides a wide range of information and advice drawn from other autistic women and medical professionals.

The National Autistic Society also has several resources for autistic females.



How to support a female loved one with autism

One of the best things you can ever do for any autistic person is to encourage them to be their true selves, to show them that you accept them as themselves without having to pretend to be someone else, and to validate that there is nothing “wrong” with them, they are simply different in how they think and see the world.

An autistic female may have encountered many struggles due to missed or delayed diagnosis, and this, combined with the increased likelihood of females masking and camouflaging their autism, may well have contributed to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

You can support them by listening to them, offering advice where you can (but not in an uninformed or unqualified way) and helping

them access the support and help that they need. Most of all, ask them what they need in terms of support and do your best to offer that.

The low rates of diagnosis for autism in females is a cause for concern and can do serious harm in preventing autistic women from accessing needed support and identifying the issues they face. They may also be pushed further into masking and camouflaging which can do further damage to their mental health. Thankfully, things are changing, and there is support and help available.

