

**DIAGNOSIS AND  
TREATMENT FOR  
GIRLS & WOMEN  
WITH AUTISM**



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# What's the situation?

Historically, the data have shown a 1:4 ratio of girls vs. boys diagnosed with ASD

**Recently, some specialists have started to question that.**



Some data shows a ratio of 1:3 may be more accurate



Some people believe things are such a mess we really have no idea

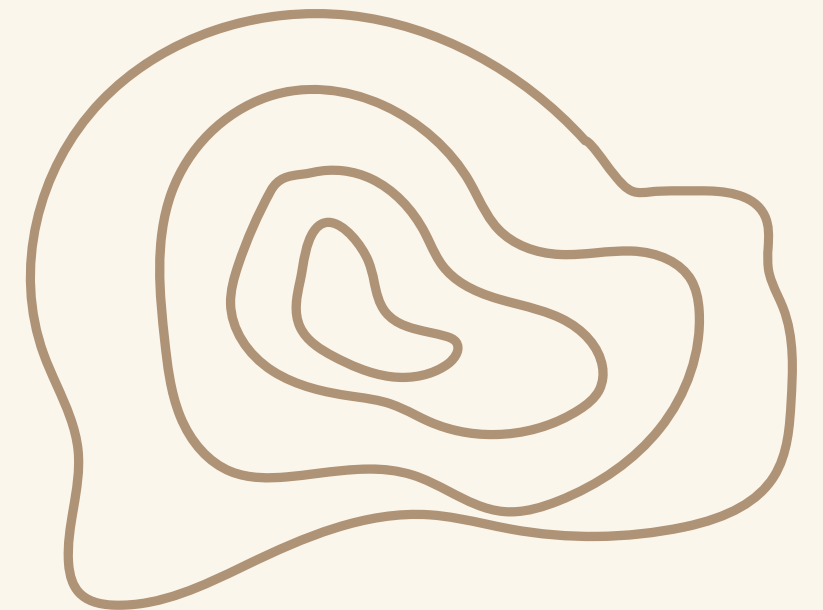


# Where's the confusion?

Is there a "female phenotype"?

If so, can diagnosing clinicians recognize it?

- Knowledge/skill
- Appropriate tools



# A case example...

\*Details have been changed or omitted to protect confidentiality

- 20 year old woman self-referred for an ASD specific evaluation
- **14** prior diagnoses
- Years of therapy and medication

|                            |                          |                           |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Bipolar</b>             | <b>Social Anxiety</b>    | <b>Borderline</b>         |
| <b>Depressive Disorder</b> | <b>ODD</b>               | <b>Sensory Processing</b> |
| <b>Generalized Anxiety</b> | <b>Learning Disorder</b> | <b>Eating Disorder</b>    |
| <b>OCD</b>                 | <b>ADHD</b>              | <b>Etc.</b>               |

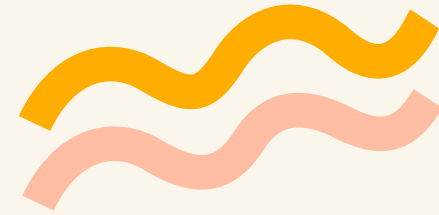
# On the other hand...

This type of diagnostic confusion is not limited to female clients

Certain presentations seem harder for clinicians, general practitioners, therapists to recognize

- Both ends of the severity spectrum
- ASD with comorbid symptoms

# What I know first hand...



Data from the Axis for Autism clinic shows:

- More boys than girls are referred (70% boys)
- But no statistical difference in rates of diagnosis once they've been referred



# Earlier diagnosis is associated with...

Toileting difficulties  
Eating difficulties  
Behavioral difficulties



**...in both sexes.**

# **Barriers to diagnosis**

## **according to parents...**

- Parent concerns
- Others' perceptions
- Lack of resources
  - Clinician bias
- Compensatory behaviors







## **Gender gap narrows over time**



It would seem that social difficulties became more pronounced in girls over time, or that compensatory mechanisms such as camouflaging are less successful, against the higher social demands of teenagers.

The most prominent research on prevalence of ASD (CDC) looks at diagnosis by 8 years old

# WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?



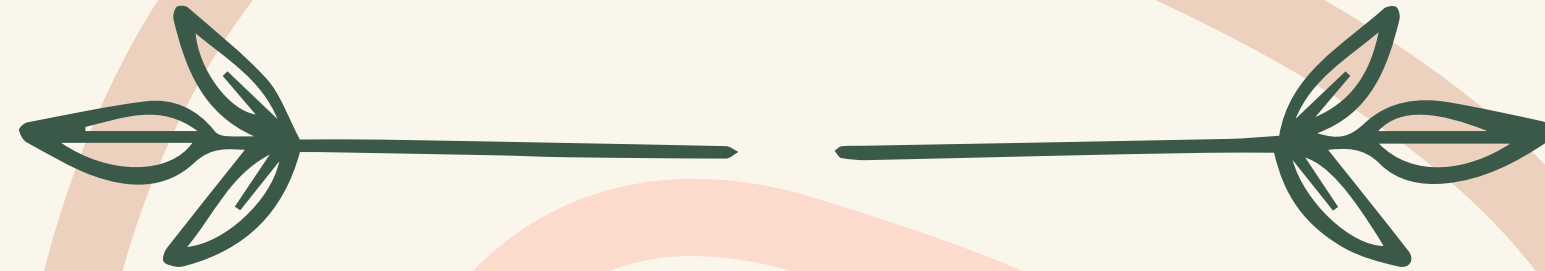
Screening  
&  
Awareness



Appropriate care  
&  
Acceptance



Awareness includes clinician continuing education and flexibility



**There is no assumption of absolute boundaries dividing any diagnoses**

AND



**There is no assumption that all individuals with a diagnosis are alike**



# Treatment

## Physical Health

- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Allergies, ailments, and illnesses

- Psychiatry

## Behavioral & CAM

- Counseling
- Speech/language
- Occupational
- ABA



Getting age appropriate sleep?

[www.sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need)

Insomnia or parasomnias?

- **Nightmares**
- **Sleep walking**

Recommendations:

- Prioritize sleep hygiene ✨ ✨
- Consult with physician about supplements and prescriptions

# Nutrition



- ✨ Work with physician or nutritionist to address nutritional deficiencies
  - Problems with absorption
  - Problems with diet
- ✨ Work with feeding therapist to address restrictive eating



# Allergies, ailments, illnesses

Can be experienced differently, possibly due to sensory processing differences

## Gastrointestinal

- Food allergies
- Stomachaches
- Constipation

## Neurological

- Sleep problems
- Seizures
- Headaches

# Counseling

## What should it involve?

- Coping skills: Mindfulness, distress tolerance (modalities such as **ACT** or **DBT**)
- Psychoeducation
- Supportive listening



# What about social skills instruction?

Depends on the individual's goals!

Lots of counseling involves some kind of "social skill" learning

- Couples counseling
- Counseling for depression, social anxiety, ADHD

# What should I ask a potential counselor or therapist?



How did you learn about autism?

What issues can you be most helpful with?

How will we know that it's working?



Looking forward to having more  
conversations and hearing questions  
during this conference