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Martha Herbert: Autism challenges us to 'think different'

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By MARTHA HERBERT / For the Register

Autism is a spectrum of conditions. There are many ways of being autistic. Some people on the spectrum are nonverbal and aggressive. Others are accomplished scientists or artists. There is a saying, "If you've seen one person with autism, you've seen one person with autism." Each person is on the spectrum in their own way.

Models of what autism "is" are also on a spectrum. Some people consider it about behavior and psychology. Others think the behaviors come from sensory overload. Many parents reduce the severity of behaviors by addressing underlying medical irritants like food or gut problems. Some autism self-advocates don't think autism is a "disorder" at all – they describe themselves as having a "condition" that is simply a different way of being human.

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Looking at all these models, I think that each one has a piece of the truth. But not one of them does the job all by itself.

Autism challenges us to "think different." Fights between sound-byte autism theories won't take care of the disruption of lives of children and families from severe autism. They won't fix the chaotic classrooms and emergency rooms. They won't solve the huge financial drain of lifelong care for the surge of people who will never be independent.

To find solutions, we need to take a fresh look, listen to each other and cultivate tolerance and even curiosity about points of view different than our own.

This is not just about opinions. If you look at the science, the foundations of our assumptions about autism are being shaken to the core.

First, autism is not "genetic" in the way we thought it would be 10 years ago. Instead of a few genes that "cause" autism, we've found hundreds of genes, most of which make you a little more vulnerable but are hardly a slam-dunk into autism by themselves. And the few powerful genes are rare. On top of that, a fair number of kids with autism have vulnerability genes their parents didn't have. Where did they come from?

Second, while the rising costs of autism are clear, some still argue that there is no real change in the numbers except for people on the spectrum we didn't notice before. But studies now show that the truth is somewhere in between. Yes, we have increased awareness and changes in how we diagnose autism, but much of the increase in ASD numbers cannot be explained away like that and likely is real.

Third, autism is actually being reversed, both in children and in mouse models of autism. And there are lots of ways of doing this. So it's not a lifelong genetic broken brain syndrome but a way the brain acts, that can be changed.

Finally, we are getting used to the idea that our planet is in trouble, and it may well be that this has something to do with why the numbers of people with autism are going up. Think about how differently we live compared to when our grandparents were young. Few chemicals, less electricity, no pesticides, no GMOs, food that was all organic, no wifi, much less running around, no planes, no TV, more quiet.

Does this mean that if we look hard enough we will find the single smoking gun that is causing

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autism, and that if we pluck that single thing out of our lives we can go on with business as usual?

I sorely doubt it. Our bodies and brains can only take so much, and it may well be that our autistic kids are the "canaries in the coal mine" who are pushed past the limit ahead of the rest of us, like a warning sign.

Because autism is defined by specific problems with language, communication and narrow, repetitive behavior patterns, many scientists have thought that autism is a specific and unique syndrome having specific genetic causes. But that is only one way of looking at the situation.

The areas where people on the autism spectrum have the hardest time are the functions requiring the most exquisite fine-tuning of brain function. The brain requires loads of energy to fire its signals, and to coordinate them. When the brain and body are worn down by too much stress and exposures from the environment, its cells are going to have a hard time generating that energy. The most complex functions will be harder to perform. They may even be put on hold, to protect the rest of the system.

A brain with low energy is going to be challenged when the demand gets high – so finding the right words or tone, figuring out what facial expressions mean, integrating vision with sound and smell, being coordinated, paying attention or even being flexible – all of these will be hard – often too hard.

From this perspective you can see why there would be a spectrum in autism – it's because there are a million ways of getting overloaded and running out of energy. Each person has their own unique combination of genetic weak spots and exposures that pile on top of this. Each person has their own total load recipe.

It's starting to look like autism is just a more extreme and early outcome of everyday stressors. Risk for autism is increased by air pollution, low Vitamin D levels, pesticides, antimicrobial soaps, flame retardants and mothers with common metabolic problems like obesity or diabetes or high blood pressure, or stress or infection during pregnancy. Some of the new genetic mutations in autistic kids may even be caused by dads who keep their cell phones in their pants pockets, which we now know can mutate sperm genes and lower sperm count.

And when you look at the chemistry and immune system problems in autism, they are incredibly similar to the bulk of chronic illnesses on the rise in our whole population – like obesity, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, depression, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. More and more of us are overloaded, struggling with floundering brains and bodies – it's just that it starts really early in autism. We all need healthier lifestyles and less exposures and stress.

Respect for each person, no matter what their level or style of function, is a great start. Making every choice a healthy choice is another. Lighten the total load, promote health and give the brain a chance to get its energy back and produce better behavior.

So really, everyone is right about autism – but we all need to pull together because the only way anyone is wrong is thinking that theirs is the only right approach.

Martha Herbert, Ph.D., M.D., is a pediatric neurologist and neuroscientist at Harvard Medical School and author of The Autism Revolution: Whole Body Strategies for Making Life All It Can Be.

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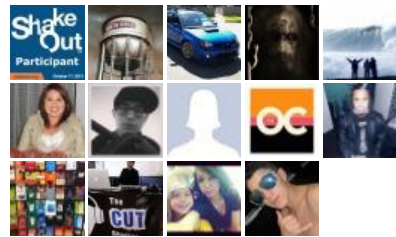
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