

First impressions of adults with autism improve with diagnostic disclosure and increased autism knowledge of peers

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A practical consideration for many adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is whether to disclose their diagnostic status or try to mask their autistic characteristics to avoid discrimination. In the current study, we assessed whether first impressions of adults with ASD made by unfamiliar typically-developing (TD) young adults differ when their diagnostic status is withheld compared to when it is accurately or inaccurately provided. Although first impressions were less favorable for ASD participants compared to TD comparison participants, they improved when an accurate diagnostic label was provided relative to when no label was provided or when they were mislabeled as being TD. Even with this improvement, however, first impressions of adults with ASD remained significantly lower than those of TD comparison participants. This suggests that disclosure lessens, but by no means eliminates, negative first impressions for adults with ASD, and emphasizes that regardless of diagnostic disclosure people with ASD face biases that can reduce the quantity and quality of their social experiences with non-autistic people. Importantly, however, we also found that higher autism knowledge on the part of TD observers was associated with more positive first impressions of ASD participants, suggesting that social outcomes for adults with ASD may benefit from increasing understanding and acceptance of autism among non-autistic peers. Collectively, these findings indicate that social evaluation of adults with ASD by unfamiliar TD young adults is more favorable when their clinical status is known and when those making the evaluations have higher levels of knowledge about autism.