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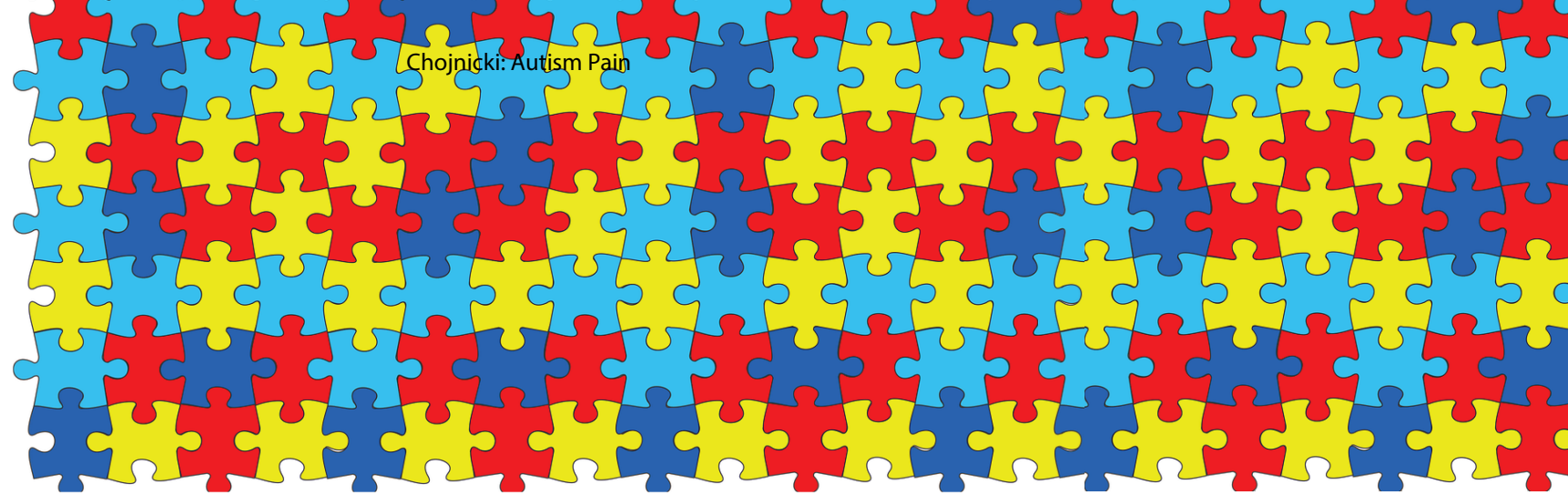
Autism Pain

Johanna Chojnicki

Although I may be in Pain
I live my life every day
I persevere
Regardless of what I feel
Pain taught me many things
Empathy towards others
Never judge
Until I walk a mile in the other person's shoes
Pain takes on many forms
Physical and emotional
Both hidden and in plain sight
Although I may be in Pain
I live my life every day
I persevere

Pain takes on so many forms during a person's life. It can be temporary. It comes and goes like the tides of the ocean or the waxing and waning of the moon. It can be permanent until the day a person dies. Pain is described as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, according to Merriam-Webster, pain is described as:

1. "a localized or generalized unpleasant bodily sensation or complex of sensations that cause mild to severe physical discomfort and emotional distress and typically results from bodily disorder (such as injury or disease)."



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2. "a basic bodily sensation that is induced by a noxious stimulus, is received by naked nerve endings, is associated with actual or potential tissue damage, is characterized by physical discomfort (such as pricking, throbbing, or aching), and typically leads to evasive action."

3. "mental or emotional distress or suffering."

4. "one that irks or annoys or is otherwise troublesome."

5. "trouble, care, or effort taken to accomplish something."

6. "the throes of childbirth."

As a verb, it is described as:

1. "to make suffer or cause distress to."

2. "to put (oneself) to trouble or exertion."

3. "to give or have a sensation of pain."

These definitions describe a word with many connotations. People understand the concept of pain through personal experience and through empathy for others. Empathy is "the ability to form an embodied representation of another's emotional state, while at the same time being aware of the causal mechanism that induced the emotional state in the other" (Hadjikhani et al.). For me, though, pain is the price I pay as a high-functioning Autistic. For about a decade, I have lived with a constant headache that no amount of medication could ever cure.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is classified as a lack of communication skills, social behaviors, and eye contact on a spectrum of severity. As the disorder's prevalence increased, so has research, highlighting its impact on people's lives. We know now, for example, that vaccines are not the cause of Autism. In fact, the condition is largely due to a combination of genetic and environmental factors. In one study, for example, researchers found that the "heritability of the disease was more than 80%, ranging from 50.9% (Finland) to 86.8% (Israel). The team says the findings

provide the strongest evidence to date that the majority of risk for Autism is from genetic factors, not environmental factors" (Knowridge). That same study also supports the fact that a mother being emotionally distant to her child is not a contributor to Autism as was once widely believed: "On the other hand, maternal factors only contributed to 1% of autism. This shows that the role of maternal factors was nonexistent or minimal" (Knowridge). Research has helped to provide answers for parents, patients, doctors, and others.

For me, however, Autism has many complicated aspects, some good and some bad. The good is that I can see certain things with clarity such as scientific facts. I can help educate others about Autism and make beautiful artwork. I have also become a research participant. The bad side of Autism for me is finicky eating, high sensory issues, and headaches that have lasted for about a decade.

When I was younger, I was not as high functioning. I exhibited the more classic behaviors of Autism, such as flapping my arms, poor eye contact, sensory issues, frustration and self-mutilation. As I entered puberty, my Autism

started to change. My outwardly Autistic behaviors started to diminish over the years as I became capable of communicating my needs and using tools that I had learned from my teachers until I became a higher-functioning Autistic. I am now at the point where I do not even need the label anymore.

As my Autistic behaviors diminished, they were replaced with psychosomatic headaches that no amount of medications could cure. As I delved in for answers, I found that scientists were already researching the aspects of Autism concerning pain in a study that looked at high-functioning Autistics and their interpretation of pain. It noted that “high-functioning adults with ASD present with heightened behavioral and neural responses to pain anticipation” (Gu et al.). When Autistics are facing the anticipation of the pain, their anxiety levels increase, leading to behavioral problems. For example, when I was younger, I would act out every time I had to get a vaccination shot. My mother and I came up with a technique for me to cope with my fear of getting a shot and the resulting pain in my arm. She would give me a super tight hug while singing in my ear and make me look away as the doctor gave me the shot. The hug and singing helped to distract me and made the pain go away. I still need a hug whenever I get a shot.

In another journal article where the researchers examine the anxiety levels in participants during the pain process, they state:

In conclusion, the present study found that for individuals with ASD, their pain response was greater as the symptom severity increased. Furthermore, the relationship between autism severity and the pain was mediated by the mood factors of anxiety and depression. These findings expand pre-

vious research and provide a potential explanation for the differences between self-report of pain and pain behavior in the real world, which has suggested reduced pain response in ASD, and the procedural pain observations and experimental pain models may be a result of differences in the anxiety provoked during these activities. These findings also suggest that managing negative mood may be differences between self-report of pain and pain behavior in the real world, which has suggested reduced pain response in ASD, and the procedural pain observations and experimental pain models may be a result of differences in the anxiety provoked during these activities. These findings also suggest that managing negative mood may be important during medical procedures in ASD. (Garcia-Villamizar et al.)

Mood is also a significant factor in Autism, even though people on the Autism spectrum have trouble understanding it. They nevertheless feel emotions and have moods. When I am in a stressful environment, it affects my mood, which then in turn, affects the pain level of my headaches. Since I’m immune to pain medi-



Layout by Berri Wilmore. Illustration by Johanna Chojnicki.

ation, I find ways to reduce my pain. I draw, write, listen to music, and watch television to reduce my stress, which reduces my pain.

Another aspect of Autism is behavior:

The here presented dissociation between vicarious social and physical pain in ASD on the neural systems level seems particularly valuable, since, to the best of our knowledge, it provides the first neural evidence for long-hypothesized differential strategies in dealing with complex social situations in ASD: while HCs rely on intuitively embodying others’ affect, the hippocampal involvement suggests that ASD patients access explicit memory representations of socially appropriate behavior to surpass interoceptive routes. (Krach et al.)

The article explains that Autistics learn body language to compensate for their diminished capability of understanding of social situations. High-functioning Autistics, however, have highly developed problem-solving skills and creativity—skills that employers are looking for in an employee—which compensate for diminished social interaction. In a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Maitane Sardon writes about how Microsoft had made changes to the interviewing process to hire employees with Autism because of their exceptional programming and computer code writing skills (Sardon). There is hope for people with Autism. They need to understand how they function and get the help that they need to deal with social interactions. Autistics offer society a well of creativity (e.g., Albert Einstein for example was thought to be on the Autism spectrum).

Autism has many downfalls, but it also has many advantages. My downfall is that I will always be in pain, but my greatest advantage is

to understand and empathize with people who are suffering.

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