BPS CELEBRATES AUTISM AWARENESS AND ACCEPTANCE MONTH

Photos taken from the Adult Transition Program

"ABOUT AUTISM" FROM THE AUTISTIC SELF-ADVOCACY NETWORK

Autism is a developmental disability that affects how we experience the world around us. Autistic people are an important part of the world. Autism is a normal part of life, and makes us who we are.

Autism has always existed. Autistic people are born autistic and we will be autistic our whole lives. Autism can be diagnosed by a doctor, but you can be autistic even if you don't have a formal diagnosis. Because of myths about autism, it can be harder for autistic adults, autistic girls, and autistic people of color to get a diagnosis. But anyone can be autistic, regardless of race, gender, or age.

Autistic people are in every community, and we always have been. Autistic people are people of color. Autistic people are immigrants. Autistic people are a part of every religion, every income level, and every age group. Autistic people are women. Autistic people are queer, and autistic people are trans. Autistic people are often many of these things at once. The communities we are a part of and the ways we are treated shape what autism is like for us.

There is no one way to be autistic. Some autistic people can speak, and some autistic people need to communicate in other ways. Some autistic people also have intellectual disabilities, and some autistic people don't. Some autistic people need a lot of help in their day-to-day lives, and some autistic people only need a little help. All of these people are autistic, because there is no right or wrong way to be autistic. All of us experience autism differently, but we all contribute to the world in meaningful ways. We all deserve understanding and acceptance.

Every autistic person experiences autism differently, but there are some things that many of us have in common.

- ***We think differently.*** We may have very strong interests in things other people don't understand or seem to care about. We might be great problem-solvers, or pay close attention to detail. It might take us longer to think about things. We might have trouble with executive functioning, like figuring out how to start and finish a task, moving on to a new task, or making decisions.

- ***Routines are important for many autistic people***. It can be hard for us to deal with surprises or unexpected changes. When we get overwhelmed, we might not be able to process our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings, which can make us lose control of our body.

- ***We process our senses differently.*** We might be extra sensitive to things like bright lights or loud sounds. We might have trouble understanding what we hear or what our senses tell us. We might not notice if we are in pain or hungry. We might do the same movement over and over again. This is called "stimming," and it helps us regulate our senses. For example, we might rock back and forth, play with our hands, or hum.

- ***We move differently.*** We might have trouble with fine motor skills or coordination. It can feel like our minds and bodies are disconnected. It can be hard for us to start or stop moving. Speech can be extra hard because it requires a lot of coordination. We might not be able to control how loud our voices are, or we might not be able to speak at all–even though we can understand what other people say.

- ***We communicate differently.*** We might talk using echolalia (repeating things we have heard before), or by scripting out what we want to say. Some autistic people use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) to communicate. For example, we may communicate by typing on a computer, spelling on a letter board, or pointing to pictures on an iPad. Some people may also communicate with behavior or the way we act. Not every autistic person can talk, but we all have important things to say.

- ***We socialize differently.*** Some of us might not understand or follow social rules that non-autistic people made up. We might be more direct than other people. Eye contact might make us uncomfortable. We might have a hard time controlling our body language or facial expressions, which can confuse non-autistic people or make it hard to socialize. Some of us might not be able to guess how people feel. This doesn't mean we don't care how people feel! We just need people to tell us how they feel so we don't have to guess. Some autistic people are extra sensitive to other people's feelings.

- ***We might need help with daily living.*** It can take a lot of energy to live in a society built for non-autistic people. We may not have the energy to do some things in our daily lives. Or, parts of being autistic can make doing those things too hard. We may need help with things like cooking, doing our jobs, or going out. We might be able to do things on our own sometimes, but need help other times. We might need to take more breaks so we can recover our energy.

Not every autistic person will relate to all of these things. There are lots of different ways to be autistic. That is okay!

Autism affects how we think, how we communicate, and how we interact with the world. Autistic people are different than non-autistic people, and that's okay.