

## **Public image of autism**

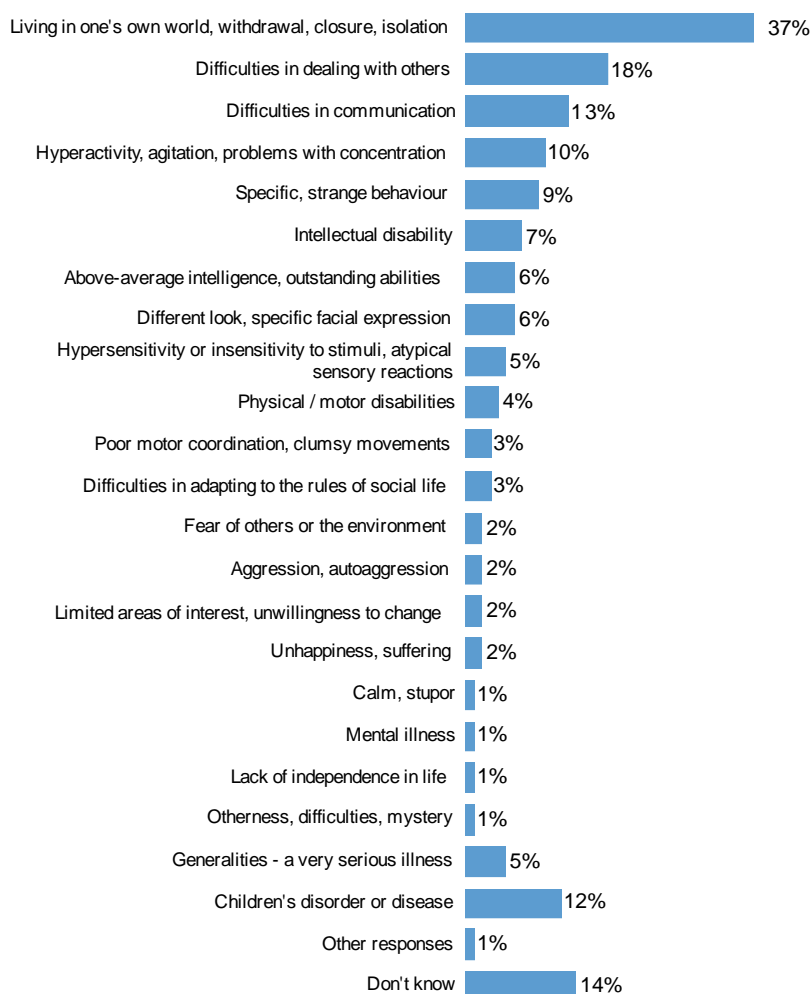
In recent years, the incidence of disorders belonging to the autistic spectrum has increased. Disorders characteristic of autism are related to three spheres: social relations, communication and regular behaviour patterns. In spite of many studies, it is still unclear how this disorder occurs and, consequently, there is no method to prevent autism.

The vast majority of adult Poles (83%) have heard about autism. Most of these people can name some behaviour related to autism, whereas only 14% are unable to give any examples, although not everyone has mentioned attributes typical for autism, confusing this disorder with other disabilities. Autism is associated primarily with living in one's own world, which is difficult for others to reach, with withdrawal, closure, isolation. People with autism are perceived as shunning people, lonely, alienated, absent, excluded. In total, this type of association was given by over a third of respondents (36%). The following association with autism, in terms of frequency of indications, is difficulty in dealing with others. Respondents spoke in this context about limited contact or lack of contact with the environment, about difficulties in building relationships with others (18%). There were also similar statements about difficulties in complying with generally accepted principles and

social norms (3%). Sometimes this separation from the world and avoidance of contacts was associated with fear of others and the environment (2%). Respondents often talked about communication problems, difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions in verbal communication, limited eye contact with others (13% in total).

A relatively large group of respondents associate autism with motor hyperactivity, with high impulsivity, and concentration problems (10%). Autism is also associated with aggression or autoaggression (2%). According to others, it is characterized by opposite traits: calmness or even stupor, low stimulation (1%). Every eleventh respondent who has some idea of autism associates this disorder with specific, strange, atypical behaviour, gestures or movements (9%). Autism is also sometimes associated with poor motor coordination, reduced manual dexterity (3%). Some people attribute physical disabilities to autism (4%), confusing it, it seems, with other diseases. As far as outward appearance is concerned, some associate autism with a particular facial expression, different look (6%). Some refer to poor cognitive and intellectual development (7%), while others think it tends to be above average, with autistic people having outstanding skills (6%). Speaking about the cognitive competence of people with autism, respondents indicated limited areas of interest, obsessive interest in one area, fixations on selected issues combined with reluctance to change (2%). There were also statements referring to atypical processing of stimuli that flow from the environment: hypersensitivity or insensitivity, e.g. to sound or touch. In this context, respondents spoke about inadequate reactions to stimuli and acute perception (5%).

**Could you describe in a few words what behaviour characterizes autism? How can you know that someone has autism?**



*Responses of people who have heard about autism (N = 903)*

People with autism were also described as: unhappy and suffering (2%) and dependent, in need of support (1%) or her, difficult, mysterious (1%). Some respondents used generalized statements describing autism is a serious disease, disability, genetic disease, lasting from birth (5%). Occasionally, autism was incorrectly referred to as mental illness (1%).

What is particularly important and interesting, relatively many respondents (12%) associated autism mainly as a childhood disorder. They mentioned various difficulties, limitations, or attributes of children.

Declarations indicate that contacts with persons with autism most often cause embarrassment (50%), compassion (34%) and helplessness (30%). Less frequently,

respondents think that people express kindness (14%), acceptance and understanding (12%), and fear or anxiety (12%). Less one-tenth of respondents believe that such contacts cause hostility (8%), pity (7%) or interest (6%). Only very few are of the opinion that contacts with people with autism do not evoke particular emotions (3%) or have no specific opinion on the subject (5%).

**What do people usually feel when they have a personal contact with someone with autism? Responses of people who have heard about autism (N = 903).**



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More information about this topic can be found in CBOS report in Polish: "Perception of Autism", March 2018. Fieldwork for national sample: March 2018, N=1092. The random address sample is representative for adult population of Poland.