



MENTAL HEALTH

►► Montserrat Mases and Carolina Pastor at the Jim Foundation event in Poland.



The importance of diagnosis

Autism. Communication and social interaction problems are at the core of the symptoms of autism, but there are more

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Tomorrow is World Autism Day. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is demonstrated by two core characteristics: on the one hand the communication and interaction problems that patients suffer within society and on the other very rigid behaviors and thoughts. These two symptoms are the core of autism, but there are more.

The neuropsychologist of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Association in Andorra, AUTEA, Montse Mases, explains that autism is defined as a condition because «it actually incapacitates you in many situations such as social integration, but on the other hand, they have very good conditions such as focusing on details and can specialize in a subject that interests them a lot. The latter is called «restricted interest».

Mases explains that autism in women is very different from that of men since they use what is called masking, a technique that consists of copying the interaction they see in the people around them in order to integrate into society. «By adopting a role to fit in, they feel exhausted and at the end of the day they need time to isolate themselves socially in order to rest», points out Carolina Pastor, AUTEA's technical director and neuropsychologist.

One of the members of the association is Martina (fictitious name), she is 18 years old and has autism. She recognizes that she does masking «although I try not to do it, but sometimes it's unavoidable, since you imitate other people's behavior from a young age and then you make this behavior automatic, as if it were part of your personality, but it exhausts a lot». In fact Mases declares that this social camouflage is perhaps the cau-

It is difficult for autistic people not to «mask», because they have been doing it since childhood

AUTEA is attended by women aged 30 or 40 who have recently been diagnosed

se of other mental disorders such as anxiety and depression.

Diagnosis

In the case of women, they are often not diagnosed in childhood or adolescence, in fact «currently autistic women come to AUTEA who have been diagnosed in their 30s or 40s who have spent their whole lives camouflaging themselves and suffering all life this anxiety», explains Mases. In addition, the neuropsychologist believes that «it is essential that a person who thinks they have ASD get diagnosed, either by going to the GP, the Mental Health Service or AUTEA itself», in order to be able to treat the symptoms as soon as possible and the person's quality of life.

In fact, AUTEA has created the Women's Mutual Aid Group, for those «who have been diagnosed late and have been suffering for a long time, and now they finally feel understood». Martina even assures that for the first time in her life

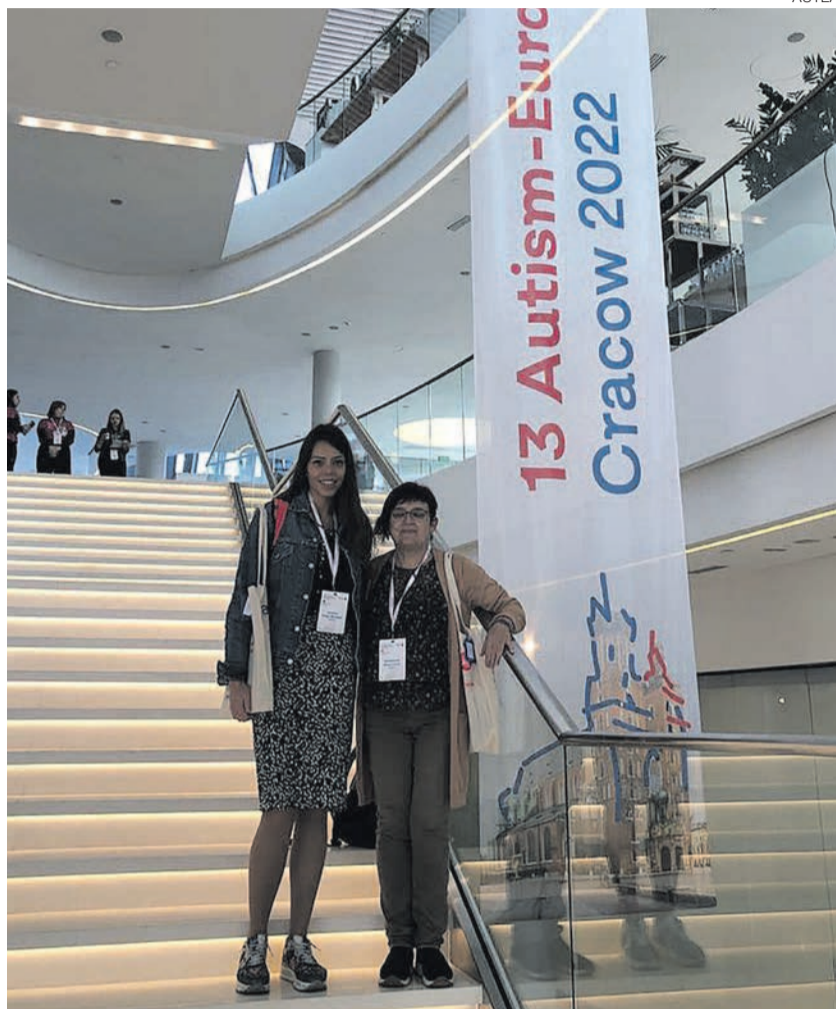
«I am in a group of women who understand me and know what I have been through».

Most of these women have suffered bullying in childhood and adolescence which has left them with serious consequences such as anxiety and depression. In Martina's case, adolescence was also complicated: «I was always pushed aside, they told me I was the odd one out and I felt I didn't fit in anywhere. Even the family told me that I am the special one».

Characteristics

Autism is a lifelong disorder, it cannot be cured, but the most disabling symptoms can be treated. Pastor also says that in the case of female autism it can be the other way around and there can be hyper-specialization and too intense social communication, a part unknown to many people.

Relatives of autistic people often say that «they are in their own world and not connected», infor-



►► Montserrat Mases and Carolina Pastor, at the 13th Autism-Euro Cracow 2022.

Martina feels that she has never fit into society. Even her family says she's special

In female autism there can be hypersocialization, i.e. «autism goes in reverse»

Many autistic people have a high sensory load, which other people do not have

mation confirmed by Pastor who assures that «they have a huge emotional and internal world and the treatment they receive from their peers can have a very big impact in his life».

It should be noted that the good prognosis of autistic people is related to the quality of the treatment they receive. Pastor points out that if a person is in the life of another autistic person, it will have an important impact on their life.

Autoregulation and hypersensitivity

Autistic people also tend to have a high sensory sensitivity. This is reflected in situations such as light discomfort, discomfort with some textures or hearing some noises louder than others. «This sensory overload can lead them to become very nervous, have anxiety problems, and in many cases to develop disjunctive behaviors, problems of defiance, get nervous, etc» explains Mases.

Their way of self-regulating this overload and anxiety is to enjoy their restricted interests. In the case of Martina, history, especially the military, is one of them. «I can also spend hours and even days researching Korean culture, listening to K-pop and watching K-dra-

mas».

But in addition, autistic people do what is called *stimming*, which are those repetitive movements such as flapping, moving the feet or different objects. In addition, there are also other internal movements, such as repeating things in the mind or counting. Martina explains that she uses *stimming* in situations such as «swaying a lot, or opening and closing the lid of the lip balm».

curiosities

- 1** Most autistic women are diagnosed as adults, since the existing tools are for diagnosing men.
- 2** Autistic women *mask*, copying attitudes in order to integrate socially.
- 3** Some autistics have sensory hypersensitivity, and can even hear noises like electricity.
- 4** Autistics regulate themselves through repetitive movements (*stimming*), such as flapping or moving their feet

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