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Diversity and uniqueness in ASD

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Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are neurodevelopmental conditions that are more common than accepted. They challenge the way individuals interact with others and the world around them, and the core symptoms involve difficulties for complex social communication; sharing empathy and coping with unexpected changes. These persons tend to focus on narrow personal interests and often have sensorial dysfunctions. This condition is a mixture of strengths and limitations, and is often comorbid with diverse psychiatric disorders. In recent years, the diversity present in the spectrum has been acknowledged; with people located in the neurodiversity arena, and others frankly entering a disability situation. This calls for careful consideration of both, symptoms and their generated - or not - negative impact, in terms of health, education, employment, social inclusion and self-determination. In other words, symptoms alone do not define a disorder; and a negative impact on the person has to be established, meriting then diagnosis and intervention.

This combination of respecting diversity and supporting those in need can be difficult for many clinicians. We do know many key aspects about comorbid conditions and about the strategies that promote a good quality of life in many of these citizens, but uniqueness is an essential characteristic in ASD. Personalization thus is mandatory, and although we have significant knowledge and practice in identifying, diagnosing and treating those with the more classic autism, we are missing information, experience and resources to support those who do not fit in our restricted schema. Therefore, child and adolescent psychiatry and allied professions have great opportunities to develop our field and to improve our communities.