

Survey finds autism acceptance varies across countries

March 20 2024



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Societal acceptance of autism varies considerably across different countries, with lowest levels of acceptance found in Japan and Belgium, new research shows.

A survey of 306 [autistic individuals](#) from eight countries revealed that around three-quarters of respondents do not feel accepted, or only sometimes feel accepted, as an autistic person. Among these countries, participants in Japan and Belgium reported the lowest levels of acceptance, while those in Canada, the UK, and South Africa reported comparatively higher levels.

The study, published in *PLOS ONE*, is the first to compare levels of, and explore the relationships between, autism acceptance, camouflaging, and [mental health issues](#) in a cross-cultural sample of autistic individuals. Those participating in the research came from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK and the U.S.

Experiencing a lack of acceptance by society—defined as the general public—was linked to higher levels of depression, while camouflaging one's autistic traits was linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress.

Lead author, Dr. Connor Keating, of University of Birmingham's School of Psychology, said, "These findings underscore the crucial need to combat the stigma surrounding autism and reduce the pressure on autistic individuals to conceal their identity."

In terms of camouflaging, Japanese people were most likely to conceal their autistic traits. The researchers suggest this may be connected to Japanese "collectivist culture," in which individuals are more accustomed to adapting other parts of their identity to fit with group norms.

One region where the researchers identified particularly high levels of mental health difficulties for autistic individuals was in South Africa. The team suggests that this could be due to barriers in accessing support. In the U.S., 47% of adults with a [mental illness](#) accessed [mental health](#)

[services](#) in the past year, compared to just 26% in South Africa.

Dr. Keating noted that "By determining the most vulnerable regions, we have identified priority areas for anti-stigma interventions, and highlighted countries where greater support for mental health difficulties is needed."

The team also identified that non-binary people experienced the lowest levels of acceptance, compared to male and female survey participants, with this group also most likely to camouflage their autistic traits and experience higher levels of stress.

More information: Connor Tom Keating et al, Cross-cultural variation in experiences of acceptance, camouflaging and mental health difficulties in autism: A registered report, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/gmdxu](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/gmdxu)

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Survey finds autism acceptance varies across countries (2024, March 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-03-survey-autism-varies-countries.html>

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