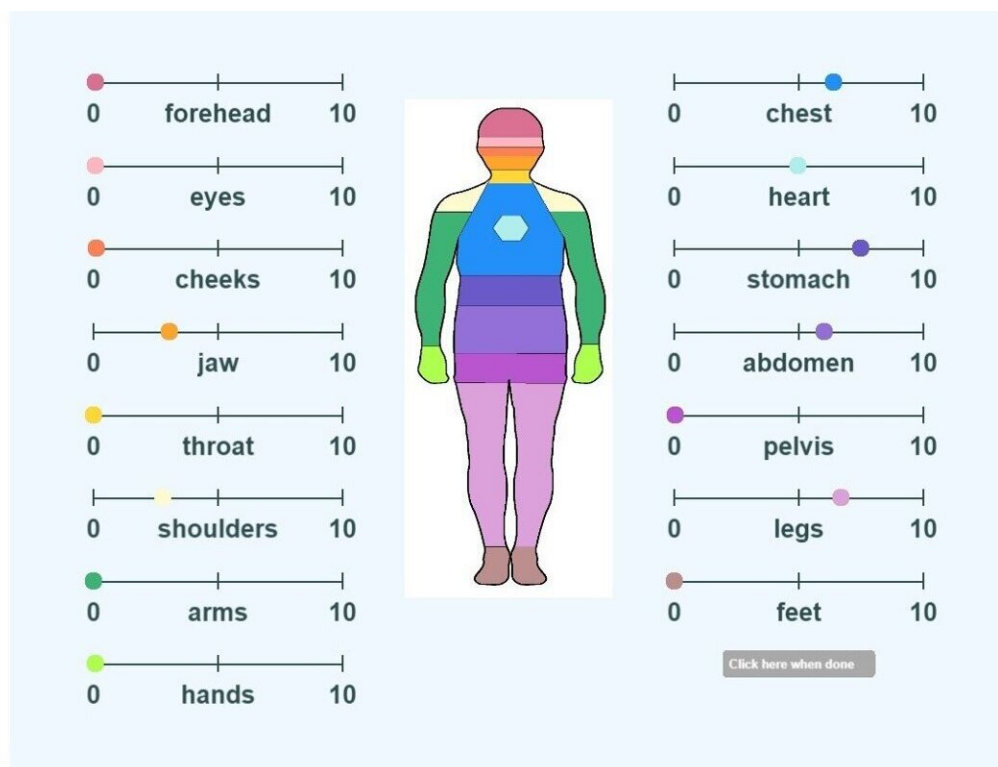


# Autistic people's feelings mostly misread—empathy works both ways, research reveals

May 17 2024, by Hayley Jarvis



Note. After watching each video clip, participants were asked to identify on the body map where they felt sensation and at what

Credit: Brunel University

The idea that autistic people lack empathy is simply short-sighted and non-autistic people may find it just as hard to put themselves in someone

else's shoes, a study suggests.

A paper in the journal, *Autism* flips the script on the often-said stereotype that autistic people have difficulty imagining how others feel.

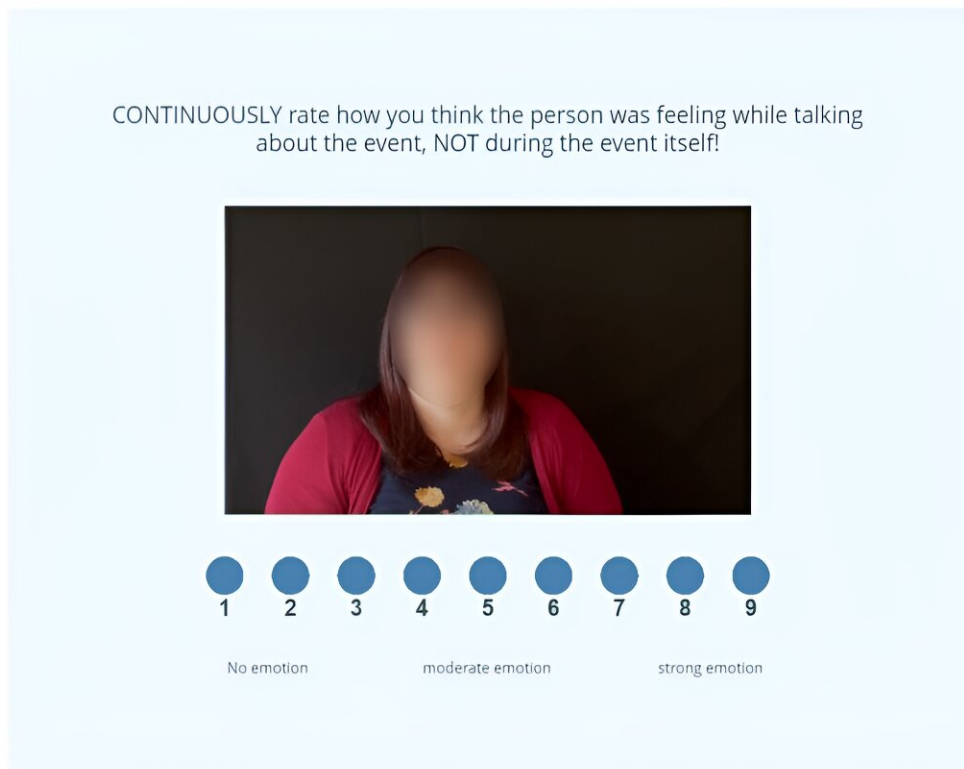
Participants shown video clips featuring autistic and non-autistic people retelling emotional events revealed people without autism find it significantly harder to track Autistic people's emotions.

It also revealed people felt the emotions more intensely in the body at seeing clips of autistic people compared with non-autistic people. This was magnified when they talked about anger and fear.

It has strong implications for social and therapeutic relationships with autistic people, said autistic researcher Rachael Cheang at Brunel University London's Centre for Cognitive Neuroscience.

**Figure 1**

*Example of Continuous Rating During the Empathic Accuracy Task*



*Note.* Participants were asked to rate on a 9 point scale how emotional they thought the narrator was feeling whilst recounting an autobiographical event. 0 indicated no emotion, 9 indicated strong emotion.

Credit: Brunel University

"There's always this feeling that autistic people lack empathy. That's usually what you hear, but these results are quite shocking because they're contrary to how we normally think of it."

This is the first experimental evidence to show that non-autistic people struggle to empathize with the emotions of autistic people just as much

as the reverse and rather than lacking empathy, autistic people instead see the world differently. Called 'The double empathy problem' this theory by Dr. Damian Milton emerged in the early 2010s. An idea many autistic people agreed with, but until now hasn't been shown by science.

"This impacts how autistic people are viewed," said Mrs. Cheang. If they're feeling happy about something and nobody's recognizing that, people won't celebrate the joy with them. And if they're feeling sad about something, it's not recognized that that person might be upset or sad about something. So, then they'll be lacking support or commiseration from people around them."

Autistic people are at a higher risk of suicide than non-autistic people. Between 11 and 66% of autistic adults think about suicide during their lifetime, and up to 35% plan or attempt it according to figures from 2020. Mrs. Cheang says, "Obviously, I'm wondering now, if part of that is being driven by the fact that nobody's understanding them, empathizing with them, you know, feeling what they're feeling."

"The implications are wide," said research group leader, Dr. Ignazio Puzzo. "It's important for caregivers, people working in education, therapists, doctors, hospital staff, doctors to be aware of these differences and focus on improving understanding or noticing how an autistic person is feeling to help alleviate their struggles and improve their well-being."

**More information:** Rachael TS Cheang et al, Do you feel me? Autism, empathic accuracy and the double empathy problem, *Autism* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/13623613241252320](https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241252320)

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