

Navigating the Holidays with Autism Spectrum Disorder

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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It is estimated that more than 5.4 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder. That according to a [recent study](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which estimated the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) among adults aged 18 years and older in 2017. The number was estimated from parent-reported data about the number of U.S. children diagnosed with ASD. Previously there was no widely reported information on the number of adults living with ASD because there is not a good way to collect historical data. That translates to more than 2% of adults with autism spectrum disorder.

Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability. For every three children diagnosed there are two who aren't. Couple that with the number of adults on the spectrum - many of whom may be undiagnosed - and chances are many families across America will be spending the holidays dealing with the challenges the diagnosis brings – both for the person on the spectrum and those around them.

Dr. Theresa Regan is a neuropsychologist with OSF HealthCare who specializes in working with adults on the spectrum. She is also the mother of a son with Autism. Dr. Regan says while the holidays presents special challenges, there are things you can do ahead of time to make things easier.

Start by giving your child or adult family member a heads up about what is going to happen. People on the spectrum often don't like surprises. You will also want to have a quiet space where they can go to calm themselves if things get too stressful.

"Another quick tip that I find helpful is giving them a specific job so sometimes if they have a role that's structured and defined they're going to feel a lot better in a social setting than if they're just asked to make small talk or mingle."

Many holiday celebrations center around food and that can be difficult for people on the spectrum as well. Dr. Regan recalls the Thanksgiving morning her son woke up wanting tacos after she had prepared a traditional Thanksgiving meal. Understanding and flexibility are important.

"Especially Thanksgiving to me is a lot about those traditional foods that we got from our moms and dads growing up and gathering around the table to eat the turkey and the stuffing. In the spectrum, a lot of people have very specific food preferences. And they really aren't going to eat a large amount of food. They like to stick to their status quo."

Dr. Regan encourages people who don't live with Autism in their family and, perhaps, don't understand it, to remember this is a time for blessing each other and helping people not be isolated during the holidays.

Learn more about interacting with someone on the Autism Spectrum [here](#).