

Autism and happiness: from neurodiversity to neuroharmony

Peter Vermeulen, PhD, Autisme Centraal, Belgium

With more than 10 scientific articles per day, autism (as synonym for autism spectrum disorder) is just about the most studied condition in the world. We need all this research to increase our understanding of a condition that suffers like no other from myths and misconceptions. However, all the research and all the information about how different, specific and unique autism is, has made us forget that people with autism are not only different, but that they share more than we think with all the other people, especially when it comes to basic needs such as happiness. Accepting neurodiversity is fine, but it emphasizes the differences between people. While it is a big step towards more acceptance of autism as one of the many ways a brain can operate, it is only the first step in our commitment to a better world and more well-being for people with autism. We should also focus on what connects people with autism with the rest of the human species: the pursuit of happiness.

Happiness has received little attention in the field of autism spectrum disorders. Outcome and effect studies, for instance, rarely take emotional well-being as a desired outcome. And when the focus is on well-being, it is often from a negative perspective, namely the lack of well-being and quality of life in autism. It is time to take a U-turn in our approach and change from an exclusive focus on what makes autism so different and from a negative, clinical and medical approach of happiness in people with autism (lack of distress) towards a shared and positive focus (we all want to be happy). In other words: let's move from neurodiversity to neuroharmony.