

Understanding the Mental Health Experiences of Autistic Students in University
By Jennifer Anne Williamson

We all have worries gnawing at us inside our heads.

For you, maybe it's COVID-19.

Or racial injustice.

Or perfectionism.

We're all suffering.

But some of us have marginalized identities that increase our stress.

For me, it's my autism.

An estimated 1 in 68 Canadians are on the autism spectrum.

For me, autism brings both strengths and challenges.

But everyone on the spectrum's different.

I can't speak for them.

So I can only describe what life's like for me.

I can describe things that are too **LOUD**

Too many *crowds*

And people who think we're less, unworthy of life.

The world's not designed for autistic people.

And it's us who pay the price.

Three-quarters of autistic people have at least one mental health issue like depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts.

That's three out of four people.

And that scares me.

But more than that, it saddens me, angers me.

It makes me want *change*.

My master's project focuses on identifying the factors that predict mental health for autistic students in higher education.

I use regression analyses to see what factors best explain anxiety, stress, and depression scores – and what factors we should target when developing mental health supports for autistic people.

Do supportive campus climates decrease anxiety?

More internalized stigma = more depression?

What about gender?

I also use interviews to understand the everyday mental health experiences of autistic students and contextualize the data,

And see the humans behind the mental health statistics.

Through this work, I hope to better understand why autistic people experience elevated mental health issues, and what we can do to help.

Because we all struggle with mental health.

Because accessibility and inclusion helps us all.

Because by helping the 1 in 68 Canadians with autism, we help the other 67 Canadians as well.

