

Climate activist Greta Thunberg's even more inspiring message: Asperger's is her 'superpower'

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[Jorge L. Ortiz](#), USA TODAY Published 6:51 a.m. ET Sept. 27, 2019 | Updated 9:36 a.m. ET Sept. 27, 2019

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- 16-year-old Greta Thunberg has become internationally famous for taking on world leaders over climate change.
- The teen began by skipping school on Fridays to protest in front of the Swedish parliament, inspiring teens across the globe to do the same.
- But she's also inspiring others like her who have Asperger's, a neurological disorder characterized by difficulty with social and communication skills.

In her address at a [United Nations climate summit](#) earlier this week, 16-year-old activist [Greta Thunberg](#) said she should be back in Sweden attending school instead of chastising world leaders for their inaction on climate change.

Amanda McCarthy of Acton, Massachusetts, thinks back to when she was that age and can barely contain her amazement. That's a common reaction to watching such a precocious teenager on the world stage, but McCarthy shares a trait with Thunberg that paints a fuller picture.

They both have [Asperger's](#), a neurological disorder characterized by difficulty with social and communication skills. It's considered within the range of the [autism spectrum](#), although those with Asperger's typically have normal language development and normal-to-high IQs, so they're regarded as "high functioning."

McCarthy, now a college graduate at 24, said she was ashamed of who she was at 16 and worried about what people would think of her.

In Thunberg, who has helped organize [global climate strikes](#) – the next [ones are Friday, when she plans to protest in Montreal](#) – McCarthy and others see a role model.

"I felt really empowered by Greta Thunberg because being on the spectrum I know a lot about not being taken seriously," McCarthy said. "Now that Greta Thunberg has come forward and made such an important statement while at the same time being open about being on the spectrum, I really feel like that's inspiring."

Thunberg is so open about her diagnosis, the bio line on her [Twitter page](#) describes her as "16 year old climate and environmental activist with Asperger's."

Well, that's when she's not trolling President Donald Trump, the climate-change denier she fiercely stared at when their paths crossed at the U.N. on Monday.

[Trump seemed to be mocking](#) Thunberg's stern, impassioned lecture at the summit when he tweeted later that day, "She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!"

In response, Thunberg briefly co-opted some of those words and made them part of her Twitter profile.

She also tweeted Wednesday that opponents of her message were deriding her appearance and behavior, with Fox News guest commentator Michael Knowles referring to her as a "mentally ill Swedish child." The network later issued an apology.

"Being different is not an illness and the current, best available science is not opinions – it's facts," Thunberg said in a series of tweets that included the hashtag #aspiepower. She has referred to Asperger's as her "superpower."



[Greta Thunberg](#)
✓ [@GretaThunberg](#)

· [Sep 25, 2019](#)

Here we go again...

As you may have noticed, the haters are as active as ever - going after me, my looks, my clothes, my behaviour and my differences.

They come up with every thinkable lie and conspiracy theory. (Thread->)

[Greta Thunberg](#)
✓ [@GretaThunberg](#)

It seems they will cross every possible line to avert the focus, since they are so desperate not to talk about the climate and ecological crisis. Being different is not an illness and the current, best available science is not opinions - it's facts. ->

Thunberg's celebrity has not only inspired others with Asperger's but also prompted some who may be on the spectrum to seek help.

Dania Jekel, executive director of the [Asperger/Autism Network](#), said the nonprofit organization usually gets more calls when a well-known figure – such as musician David Byrne and actors Dan Aykroyd and Daryl Hannah – open up about their own neurological differences.

“For many of the folks, they will see somebody like Greta and they’ll say, ‘Maybe this could be me also,’” Jekel said. “So we get an uptick in the number of people, very often older people – 30, 40, 50 – who will call us and say, ‘Where do I get a diagnosis?’

“That’s why it’s so wonderful she came out and talked honestly about it, because it destigmatizes it and shows people on the spectrum can do creative, wonderful things.”

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) defines autism spectrum disorder as a developmental disability that can present considerable social, communication and behavioral difficulties. Besides learning and thinking differences, its signs may include repetitive behavior.

Studies in North America, Europe and Asia have shown ASD has a prevalence of 1% to 2% in the population, according to the CDC, and the U.S. ranks near the middle with one case for every 59 children. Boys are four times more likely to have it than girls.

Jekel pointed out that while people on the spectrum process information differently than the rest of the population, there’s a huge variability in the manifestations of ASD. Some who have it struggle to perform everyday tasks and others overcome their challenges to become doctors and professionals in other fields.

Those with Asperger’s are usually more verbal and likely to live independently but have trouble with anxiety.

In her nearly 30 years working on this field, Jekel said she has noticed people on the autism spectrum often show an interest in social causes, much like Thunberg has done with her involvement in environmental activism.

“When you grow up feeling like you’re kind of on the outside or you’re different from other people,” she said. “I think it makes you empathetic for animals or people who have differences in our society.”

McCarthy, who was diagnosed at age 4, said she distanced herself from her peers because of her difficulty picking up cues from interactions and carrying on a conversation, which caused her a great deal of anxiety, especially as a teenager in high school.

She addressed those issues through therapy and medication, and she found a more accepting environment in college at UMass-Lowell, where she majored in English with a concentration in journalism. McCarthy now works part time for Habitat for Humanity and hopes to land a copy-editing job at a website.

She also would like to assist others in overcoming their own hard times.

“I’m not really sure how I can do that,” McCarthy said, “but I would really love to help people who are marginalized become more accepted.”

She can always look up to Thunberg for motivation.