

Greta Thunberg is far from the only neurodivergent climate activist

October 24 2023, by Louise Taylor



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Amid her calls for governments to act on climate change, Swedish activist Greta Thunberg has spoken openly about her Asperger's syndrome and obsessive-compulsive disorder. She is not the only

environmental campaigner to speak about being neurodivergent (having a neurological condition or disability)—something Thunberg describes as her ["superpower."](#)

In the UK, naturalists [Chris Packham](#) and [Dara McAnulty](#) have both discussed their autism. Packham has said that it has been ["enormously beneficial"](#) to his career.

In my [doctoral research](#), I interviewed 23 youth activists, conservation workers and environmentalists to examine the link between nature experiences and mental health in an era of climate breakdown. My findings shed light on the motivations and intentions of neurodivergent people who work in the environmental and conservation sector, as well as those who are drawn to climate activism.

Many of my participants had been diagnosed with mental health, psychiatric and neurological conditions including autism, ADHD and bipolar disorder. They reported finding community and a sense of purpose in the environmental activism movement and through a [connection with nature](#).

Autistic traits and activism

In a recent [BBC documentary](#) about his life with autism, Packham said that some of the campaigners he works with "either are [autistic] or they have traits of autism, with an aggravated sense of injustice and a deep-rooted desire to tell the absolute truth."

This, he said, can be an asset during turbulent times: "Autistic people have an enormous amount to offer in times of crisis—sometimes clear thinking, clear speaking, can be enormously beneficial."

Links between [autistic traits](#) and environmentalism are still being

studied. [Some research](#) has suggested that mental health conditions may present barriers to pro-environmental action, for example because of high costs or difficulty in sustaining lifestyle changes.

But for many neurodivergent people, their condition can encourage their activism. As a neurodivergent therapist and researcher, I have found that many of the people I work with are sensitive to external events and situations. People with autism or ADHD often report experiencing the world more intensely than those who are considered [neurotypical](#). Some say this heightened sensitivity applies to pain, suffering and injustices—making them likely to take action to manage the discomfort they experience. As one of the young activists I interviewed said, "I suffer from depression and have [mental health](#) issues, and some of that is caused by the climate ... I just really want to get this solved ... as the days go on I feel more and more, I don't know, hopeless at times. But I still want to go on strike."

Certain types of autism involve [hyperfixations](#)—specialized areas of knowledge and interest that border on obsession. Many neurodivergent people have a thirst for knowledge and desire to learn everything on a subject. When this is applied to science and climate, it can drive a passion for activism.

Challenging the status quo

Autistic people often struggle to adhere to or understand social and cultural norms. This can put them at greater risk of social ridicule, or being described as [rude or antisocial](#). Along with this is often an inability to comprehend or respect hierarchy and authority. These traits may also be a strength in activism, where directly criticizing and challenging powerful people and political systems can be a daunting prospect.

Many neurodivergent people believe strongly in [equality and fairness](#),

and reject systems where people are not all treated equally.

People on the spectrum may experience extreme psychological and emotional distress when demands are placed upon them that they do not understand or agree with. In schools, neurodivergent children need special assistance to adhere to the requirements of the [education system](#).

Many people on the [autism spectrum](#) have heightened levels of empathy and compassion for those who are [suffering or in danger](#). Similarly, many environmentalists have an unshakeable belief and desire to live a good life and believe in equality and fairness. For both of these groups, a strong sense of justice can be a motivator for how they live and behave.

Combating climate anxiety

As awareness of neurodivergence increases, more people, and notably children, are being diagnosed with conditions such as [autism and ADHD](#). In Northern Ireland, where I conducted my research, the rates of [autism](#) diagnoses among [school-aged children](#) increased [from 1.2% in 2009 to 4.5 % in 2021](#).

Neurodivergent people are often more vulnerable and susceptible to [experiencing mental illnesses](#). This can include social anxiety, depression as well as climate anxiety.

The people I spoke to in my research indicated that [activism](#) can be an antidote to feelings of distress, discomfort and hopelessness. Activism and pro-environmental actions were essential coping techniques for those who cared for the environment and non-human world. It helped people feel less helpless, giving them a sense of purpose and hope for the future.

As Thunberg has said of herself, [activism is a way to stay well](#) in a time

of climate and ecological breakdown.

Thunberg has achieved international recognition and acclaim for her work. Like her, many other neurodivergent [climate](#) activists are acting not out of desire for fame, but because they have a strong sense of justice and they believe it is the right thing to do. We can all learn from the many young neurodivergent people who, in spite of their conditions (or perhaps because of them), are striving to make the world a better place.

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