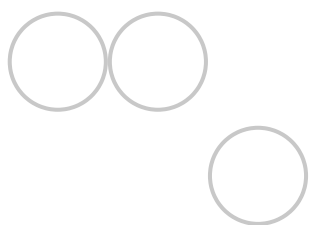


**Felicity House**

# Inside a New York City social club for women with autism

Tucked onto a quiet Manhattan street is a non-clinical social program for women with autism that's founded by a woman who is on the spectrum

BY BRIGIT KATZ 08.17.17



A SOFA INSIDE FELICITY HOUSE, A COMMUNITY SPACE IN NEW YORK CITY FOR ADULT WOMEN WITH AUTISM. (BRIGIT KATZ)

Lauren, a 22-year-old woman with autism, used to spend a lot of her time at home, by herself. She is looking for a job, but the process has been discouraging — employers, she says, just won't give her a chance. When she moved from New Jersey to New York City, Lauren had few friends with whom to share her unoccupied hours. But she has found a way to alleviate the sense of loneliness. She found Felicity House.

Tucked onto a quiet street in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood, [Felicity House](#) is a non-clinical social program for women on the autism spectrum. On a weekly basis, the organization hosts activities and events, carefully selected to appeal to a range of interests and abilities. There are movie nights and cupcake decorating classes, board game sessions and Zumba workouts, poetry performances and lectures by local entrepreneurs. To celebrate Harry Potter's "birthday" (the boy wizard was born on July 31, according to J.K. Rowling's beloved books), Felicity House threw a celebration complete with Butterbeer, Bertie Bott's Beans, and a screening of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

While autism, formally known as [autism spectrum disorder](#) (ASD), is a complex neurobiological condition that can cause a vast range of symptoms, it is often characterized by challenges with social skills and communication. Felicity House seeks to mitigate those difficulties by providing a relaxed, supportive environment where women with autism can form meaningful connections with one another.

"I don't want to be cheesy or anything, but [Felicity House has given me] almost a sense of purpose," Lauren said during a recent interview with Women in the World. "[Previously] I just stayed at home and I was kind of a little bit depressed, because I just was feeling very lonely. Most of my friends were my parents' friends, and my parents' friends' kids. It's nice to have your own friends."



A woman at Felicity House is seen coloring. At the request of Felicity House, Women in the World is protecting the identities of the women profiled in this story. (Brigit Katz)

---

It was a warm spring day, and sun poured through the wide windows of Felicity House's art room, where Lauren was joined by three other women: Emma, Jessica, and Allison. They were taking advantage of the program's open hours, when patrons are free to enjoy the space as they choose.

"Some people do karaoke or dance stuff," explained Emma, a 32-year-old non-fiction writer, as she shaped a lump of white modeling clay into delicate pieces of rice—props for the dolls she likes to collect. "I make miniatures most of the time, or I'll do card games." Sometimes, she added, people congregate around the "puzzle of doom," a 1,000 piece jigsaw that had been confounding the group for several weeks.

As they bent over their art projects—a birthday card, an adult coloring book, a Parler bead design — the women chatted about whether Amy Schumer's latest movie was worth seeing (verdict: no, it was not). Two staff members were on hand to make sure things ran smoothly, but they did not steer the conversation or provide instruction.

"I think what's unique about us is we're non-clinical, we're non-directive, we're non-time limited," Beth Finkelstein, executive director of Felicity House, explained. "If you think about the friendships that you have, and the networks that you have, they're not developed through a course, or overnight, or with a specific set of skills. It's just a way for people to connect with one another and find joy and shared experiences. And that's what we do."

For Emma, the program's relaxed atmosphere was a big selling point. She didn't utilize many autism services before coming to Felicity House, because she didn't feel that she needed the type of support other facilities were offering. But when Emma heard about a place where women like her could "just hang out and do stuff," she thought, "Sounds good."

To be eligible to participate in Felicity House's programming, women need to be older than 18 and possess "a certain level of independence," Finkelstein said. But the women who frequent Felicity House are otherwise diverse, and the organization's staff takes care to offer a range of events that will appeal to women with varied experiences and needs.

"Our women are so different," Finkelstein explained. "We have women that are in graduate school and live on their own, and we have women that live with mom and dad and have a lot of support at home when it comes to self-care and stuff like that."

The space itself plays an important role in the Felicity House's mission. When visitors enter the building, they climb a winding staircase up to a lounge, where pillowy blue sofas surround a large television and the unfinished "puzzle of doom" is splayed out over a coffee table. The art room is well stocked with markers, paint, yarn and other crafty goodies. There are also designated quiet rooms where women can take a moment to cool down if their senses become overwhelmed. It is a beautiful and serene space, designed to meet the needs of a unique clientele.

Felicity House is particularly well-positioned to serve women on the spectrum because its founder is also a woman with autism. Launched in 2015, Felicity House is the brainchild of a young philanthropist who, due to privacy concerns, does not release her name to the public. She established the organization in the hopes of addressing issues she had encountered as a woman with autism — particularly the “inherent sexism in the co-ed system,” according to Finkelstein.

In recent years, medical researchers have become increasingly interested in the manifestation of autism in women and girls. And as scientific understanding of ASD’s gendered nuances has deepened, it has become clear that females on the spectrum are often misunderstood, misdiagnosed, and under-served. Maria Szalavitz of *Scientific American* reports that the diagnostic criteria for autism are derived “almost entirely” from studies of young boys. But recent research has revealed that many of the hallmark signs of ASD — repetitive behaviors, highly-focused interests, difficulty socializing — can look very different in females.

According to William Mandy, a senior lecturer in clinical psychology at the University College London who specializes in autism research, one of the key distinctions is that women and girls with autism tend to be more interested in socializing than their male counterparts. Their focused interests are often social in nature — “I’ve met girls who are very into compiling lists on social hierarchies in their school,” Mandy says — whereas males often fixate on things like train schedules and subway lines. Females are also better at masking their autistic tendencies and copying their neurotypical peers — a behavior known as “camouflaging.”

“Many, many autistic people don’t feel they have a choice about camouflaging,” Mandy explained. “But it also seems clear that it’s women who camouflage more than men ... It’s early days for this type of research, but one hunch that I have is that there’s greater societal pressure to camouflage. People are almost a bit less tolerant of deviation

from 'good enough' social performance in females than they are in males."



Felicity House was founded in 2017 by a woman who is on the spectrum. (Brigit Katz)

---

Mandy and other researchers have theorized that because the “female autism profile” does not always align with official diagnostic criteria — and because females are better at cloaking their symptoms — women and girls on the spectrum are often under-diagnosed. The disorder does affect males more than females, but the ratios might not be quite as lopsided as it once seemed. “Much of the literature says it’s a four to one ratio,” says Marisela Huerta, senior adviser at Felicity House and a senior psychologist at the Weill Cornell Center for Autism and the Developing Brain. “I think some recent work has established that it’s probably closer to three to one.”

Still, a gender gap exists. As a result, services that cater specifically to women on the spectrum are relatively scant and co-ed programs are often overwhelmed by men. “When you’re outnumbered to that effect, your perspectives and needs and interests aren’t necessarily reflected, even though it’s technically a co-ed experience,” Finkelstein explained.



It was for this reason that Allison, 25, was “really excited” when she first heard about Felicity House. She is studying English literature at a university in New York and often attends a campus program for students on the autism spectrum. But that program, she says, is “so full of guys.”

“Guys with autism can be a little exhausting,” she added. “I know it’s not necessarily their fault, but they talk about themselves a lot. It’s just kind of grating.”

Lauren has also had uncomfortable experiences while trying to utilize male-dominated services. “A few years ago, I did a social group, which was pretty much all guys, and it was extremely awkward,” she said. “A lot of the guys would kind of try to hit on you.”

At Felicity House, women can socialize without having to worry about fielding unwanted flirtations and advances. Hanging out with other women on the spectrum also alleviates the immense pressure that can come with socializing in larger peer groups. Camouflaging autistic behaviors helps women with autism fit in, but the constant pretending can be wearisome. At Felicity House, women can set aside the performative armor they carry while they navigate the outside world. As Allison put it, “If you make, like, a social *faux pas*, it doesn’t really matter, because everyone understands that interacting isn’t always the easiest thing.”

You know that there are people who have the same feelings as you,” Jessica, a 28-year-old office worker, chimed in.

While Felicity House helps fill a gaping void in the adult services system, it is not the only way that women with autism are finding one another. Across the globe, women on the spectrum congregate in [support groups](#), [informal meetups](#), and [online forums](#), seeking out company and comfort.

“At the end of the day, everyone does better when you have a peer group, when you have a place that you belong to,” says Huerta, the

senior adviser at Felicity House. “I think connectedness is very important for anyone—whether they have autism or not.”

As the open hours at Felicity House wound down, conversation in the art room turned to stereotypes about people on the spectrum. “There’s a whole *savant* aspect of like, ‘You’re autistic, you must be really good at math. You must know everything about whatever,’” Allison said. “The whole idea of being obsessive.”

“Oh, you mean like Sheldon?” Emma asked, referencing an eccentric character on *The Big Bang Theory*.

“Yes!” Allison cried. “Exactly ... Everybody thinks you’re a big science nerd.”

Women like Emma, Allison, Jessica, and Lauren share a diagnosis, but their commonalities do not stop at autism. At Felicity House, they partake in the same fun activities, they are creative together, they have conversations about goofy sitcoms with friends who understand their worldview.

“It’s nice,” Jessica said, “because you know that you’re not alone.”

## **Related**

[Schoolgirls with autism author new book — featuring a teen like them as its narrator](#)

[Gender stereotypes may prevent young girls with autism from being diagnosed, experts say](#)

