

## Caitlyn Kiramman and Autism: A Behavioral Analysis by Daph

Foreword: I think it's quite difficult to definitively determine whether or not Caitlyn fits the DSM-5 criteria of ASD, since we don't know enough about her internal struggles, childhood and overall biography. But, based on what is presented in the show, many traits can be identified.

In case you are unfamiliar with the official diagnostic criteria for ASD:

### **A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history:**

1. **Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity**, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
2. **Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors** used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. **Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships**, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

### **B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history:**

1. **Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements**, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
2. **Insistence on sameness**, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat food every day).
3. **Highly restricted, fixated interests** that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interest).
4. **Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input** or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

Though these descriptions may sound quite complex, I will make sure to give a short explanation of each trait before discussing them respectively. Bear in mind that while this analysis focuses solely on Caitlyn's actual behavioral traits depicted explicitly in the show, this is still merely my own interpretation and may differ from others' opinions.

Note: For the sake of continuity and a smoother reading experience, I will discuss some traits outside of the official DSM-5 order.

## **A: Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts**

### **3. Deficits in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships**

This specific trait manifests as having difficulties making and keeping friends, as well as understanding the specific expectations and unspoken rules which come with different types of relationships. This struggle may present in speaking with a teacher the same way you would with a close friend, for example. Individuals may also prefer to spend time alone or focus on their interests rather than interacting with peers and may struggle with casual interaction.

We don't know much about her childhood, but she is shown to have been quite a lonely child, though she was never explicitly shown to mind her lonesomeness. In all her flashback sequences we've only seen her interact with adults, such as her parents, Grayson and Jayce. This could obviously either be traced back to her being sheltered and in a position of extreme privilege, but it may also show her disinterest in or inability to interact with peers. Feeling more comfortable interacting with adults rather than with peers at a young age is pretty common among autistic individuals, due to developmental differences. "I used to feel like an adult amongst children, and now I feel like a child amongst adults." is quite a common sentiment amongst autistic people, especially autistic women, which I find very fitting in Caitlyn's case as well.

*Caitlyn: "I'm a misfit too, I suppose." (01x02)*

This phrase alone sets the whole scene for Caitlyn's character in contrast to the high society of Piltover. Caitlyn is an incredibly introspective character, with seemingly little interest in sharing her thoughts or connecting with peers, as she very clearly prioritizes her enforcer duties and her pursuit of perceived justice over socialising.

*Enforcer: "What are you even doing here Kiramman? Don't you have a cocktail party to attend?" (01x04)*

Not only is this true to a certain extent, as Caitlyn very well could be spending her Progress Day socializing at a fancy party rather than working a job she doesn't necessarily need to be working given her status, but it is also interesting to note that during this scene she stands fairly separate from the rest of the enforcers. Instead of

joining their casual conversation, she faces away from them focused on her duty. It is only when one of the male enforcers mistakes an airship for a blimp that she deems it necessary to turn around in order to correct him. She doesn't participate in social events unless coerced by her family and isn't shown to actively seek out relationships within her social circle.

This ties back to Caitlyn being shown to have difficulties adjusting her behavior to suit various social contexts throughout multiple points in the show:

When talking to Grayson after winning the shooting competition, the way in which she interacts with her may be seen as snarky or rude, even. Saying

*Caitlyn: "Did my parents pay you to let me win? [...] You held your shot. I saw you. [...] You haven't answered my question." (01x05)*

is very straight-forward and wouldn't usually be how a teenager speaks to their known superior or elder. Caitlyn does not adjust her communication to suit different social contexts, almost as if she is unaware of or simply ignoring social hierarchy and expectations, as well as the unspoken rules which come with them.

Caitlyn's continuous formal demeanor, even in casual or otherwise informal settings, is a clear testament to that.

She often struggles to engage in playful or casual interactions, which is especially highlighted by many of her interactions with Vi for example, who contrasts her greatly in that regard. Caitlyn is highly task-oriented and doesn't seem to put much value into casual interactions or banter.

*Caitlyn: "Aren't you going to question him?"*

*Vi: "On what? The food?"*

*Caitlyn: "Silco! His connections!" (01x05)*

*Caitlyn: "[Ambessa] will burn Piltover to the ground for my betrayal."*

*Maddie: "You can't blame yourself."*

*Caitlyn: "I don't need consolation. I need a plan." (02x08)*

## **2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction**

This trait can manifest in multiple ways. Individuals may experience difficulties communicating nonverbally as well as interpreting nonverbal communicative behaviors of others. This includes abnormalities in body language, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. (e.g., speaking monotonously when talking about something exciting or not realizing someone is sad based on their expression).

However, please note that “abnormal” is not synonymous with “lacking”, as individuals may also exhibit exaggerated nonverbal communicative behaviors.

This trait specifically is quite complex to assess, as the vast majority of situations we see Caitlyn in during the course of the show are quite emotionally charged, which makes it difficult to estimate her nonverbal communicative behaviors during calmer, everyday scenarios. Though from what we are shown in the show, there are a few things worth pointing out.

Caitlyn is shown to struggle with “reading the room”, as a result of her inability to adjust her behavior to social situations and her difficulty understanding nonverbal cues. This is especially obvious during her interactions with Vi, in which she struggles to interpret Vi’s sarcastic or teasing tone and body language and often replies in a very serious and straightforward manner. This inability to read the room is shown on multiple other occasions:

*Caitlyn: “Airship, actually. An airship has a rigid metal hull.. It’s not a blimp.”*

*Enforcer: “Pardon us if we aren’t quite so refined as you, m’lady.” (01x04)*

Though this interjection isn’t inherently harmful or malicious, it reflects her difficulty in adapting to social contexts. Her co-workers never asked to be informed on this subject, nor do they seem like the types of people who would greatly appreciate being educated by someone like her, who they deem an inexperienced privileged rich girl. While she meant her comment in a purely informative manner, she never considered the chance of possibly sounding arrogant or nitpicky. Also:

*Caitlyn: “What, you don’t have parents?” (01x05)*

*Caitlyn: “This place surely does look like it has bodies buried in the basement.”*

*Vi: “You don’t know anything.” (01x05)*

The latter “joke” could be interpreted as Caitlyn’s attempt at trying to match Vi’s playful tone, which obviously did not work out the way she wanted it to. Yet even after Vi becomes visibly angry and walks away in response to the inappropriately timed joke, Caitlyn’s bewildered facial expression at 18:50 indicates that she is genuinely confused at Vi’s reaction. This, again, is a clear example of her difficulty with understanding nonverbal social cues.

By examining Caitlyn’s behavior throughout Arcane, it becomes quite evident that eye contact is a very important tool which she utilizes to connect with the people around her. Throughout both seasons she is shown to keep continuous eye contact with her conversational partners if she wants to connect with them emotionally or understand them, in the way you may metaphorically say someone’s eyes are the window to their soul. Examples of this can be spotted throughout the majority of the first season as well as her interactions with Vi and Singed, among others, in the second season.

In addition to this, I believe it fitting to add that approximately 78% of autistic people experience hyper-empathy, which would definitely make sense in the case of Caitlyn. In the first season, during her conversations with the people in Zaun, the genuine hurt and compassion she feels is visible in her eyes, as if she is mirroring their feelings. That is presumably why eye contact is so incredibly important to her and hence why she often avoids eye contact during the first half of the second season as a means of emotionally shutting herself off.

The sole fact that she was almost immediately willing to stand up so passionately for Zaunites after only spending a singular day there and after having her entire world view flipped on its head just goes to show how strongly she experiences empathy.

## 1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity

This trait may manifest in a difficulty of engaging in back and forth conversation, the reduced sharing of interests and emotions, as well as the failure to initiate or respond to social interactions. This could mean not knowing how to start or keep a two-sided conversation going, as well as the struggle to identify a person's disinterest in the conversation. Individuals may also have a limited interest to tell others about their recent life events or feelings and may have underwhelming reactions when others share their own.

Assessing this trait is quite difficult, as the characters in Arcane rarely engage in traditional day-to-day conversation or small talk as we know it. But as we've already discussed both her extensive immersion in her work and how it isolates her, either willingly or unwillingly, from her peers, as well as her unusual social approach, there are a few other important characteristics to be discussed.

Caitlyn exhibits literal thinking on multiple occasions in the course of the show.

*Vi: "What is it? [Looks at the hextech crystal.]"*

*Cait: "It's a gemstone." (01x07)*

*Vi: "What the hell is that?"*

*Cait: "The sign?"*

*Vi: "Nevermind. [...]" (01x06)*

In these instances, Caitlyn fails to infer the implied meaning of Vi's questions. Vi wasn't literally asking if the hextech crystal is a gemstone, nor if they were looking at a sign, but Caitlyn answered literally, unaware of the questions' subtext. Her literal thinking may also explain why Vi drunkenly complains to Loris about Caitlyn having "no sense of humor" (02x01).

Other than that, it is important to note that Caitlyn rarely opens up about her emotions, preferring to focus on her duties and her pursuit for justice itself. She more so expresses herself through actions, which make her decisions of betraying Ambessa, freeing Jinx and giving up her seat on the council in the later part of the series so meaningful.

But due to her not being very open about her thoughts, she often seems to forget to mention fairly important details. Autistic individuals may have difficulty looking outside of their own perspective, which sometimes results in not sharing important information, as they may assume that the people around them already possess the same knowledge they themselves have, which is often not the case.

*Caitlyn: "[The hextech crystal] was stolen during the attack. By your sister."*

*Vi: "You just forgot to mention that?" (01x07)*

*[Sneaking into Caitlyn's room]*

*Vi: "Who lives here? Another councillor friend of yours?" (01x07)*

*(Implying that Caitlyn didn't even think to tell Vi where they were sneaking into)*

## **B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities**

### **1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements**

This trait refers to behaviors that involve repeated specific movements, most commonly known as "stimming" (*self-stimulatory behavior*). Some examples may be rocking, spinning, hand-flapping or otherwise self-soothing behaviors.

Though there aren't many explicit examples of Caitlyn engaging in these behaviors in the show, there are a few instances, some of which might be easy to miss:

The first explicit "stim" can be seen in 01x04 at 33:08, which is her spinning her gun around her finger.

Another one, while possibly a little far-fetched, can be identified a few seconds later in 01x04 at 33:17-33:18 and 33:42-33:45, with her flapping around the photograph in her hand.

Lastly, there is a specific repetitive self-stimulatory behavior which she is shown to have had since childhood, which can be spotted when looking at her right thumb specifically during 01x04 at 36:14 while in the prison's elevator, and very briefly in the flashback in 01x05 at 01:35 while she's sitting on the stairs after the shooting competition with Grayson.

Of course it's important to note that self-soothing behaviors can also be exhibited by non-autistic individuals as a means of self-soothing during stressful situations,

though I still find it relevant to acknowledge them as a possible autistic trait of Caitlyn's, especially when combined with her other possible traits.

## 2. Insistence on sameness

This trait refers to the strong need for routines, structure and predictability. This need can mainly manifest in a resistance to change, repetitive patterns of behavior and rigid thinking patterns.

Though we truly don't know anything about Caitlyn's behavior in her casual everyday life, as well as her internal struggles when it comes to change, there is definitely enough to be said about her rigid thinking patterns.

Although Caitlyn is an incredibly morally gray character, it's important to note how this intersects with her rigid thinking patterns. Her tendency to view the world in black-and-white terms often leaves her unable to comfortably navigate ambiguity or compromise. This is especially evident when she faces moral conflicts, where her desire for clear-cut solutions clashes with the complexity of the situation.

While Caitlyn might intellectually acknowledge the existence of moral grayness, her rigid thinking compels her to seek out definitive answers, making it difficult for her to reconcile the nuances of right and wrong.

*Ekko: "If your people had it your way [our tree] would be rubble and ash."*

*Caitlyn: "It's a misunderstanding. They think you work for Silco."*

*Ekko: "Your people hunt us like animals. Silco pays them to do it."*

*Caitlyn: "That's not possible. You're wrong."*

*Ekko: "Say that one more time-"*

*Vi: "Ekko, she believes what she's saying, okay?" (S1EP7)*

Once she has set her mind on something, it is quite difficult to make her reconsider her position. One of the very reasons Ambessa states as to why she chooses to appoint her as general in 02x03 is because she is someone "whose conviction never wavers", which is quite telling.

Autistic people are often described to have a strong sense of justice, due to this aforementioned black-and-white thinking they often tend to engage in.

This strong sense of justice is also likely the very reason why she felt so strongly about helping Zaunites in the first place. This quality of hers may have also been one of the reasons why she has stated to have argued with her mother quite frequently.

*Caitlyn: "You know what else reflects on the council? It's citizens living on the streets. Having to choose between a kingpin who wants to exploit them and a*

*government who doesn't give a shit!"*

*Cassandra: "Caitlyn!" (01x08)*

The belief in a strict dichotomy between right and wrong, or just and unjust, is not only unrealistic but also extremely difficult to break free from. This means that Caitlyn, as a character who tends to view the world in black-and-white terms despite her morally complex nature, will struggle to navigate morally challenging situations

Her whole life, Caitlyn was convinced that being an enforcer was morally right. That she was helping people and protecting the city. But that wishful world view was quickly shattered after being faced with the brutal reality of Piltover's treatment of Zaun and its people. Then, after deciding to stand up for Zaunites, not only does her mother get killed at the hands of a Zaunite, but Zaunites decide to crash the memorial, as a perceived act of ultimate disrespect.

Her morality is constantly being put into question and she cannot deal with this ambiguity of not having a specific right and wrong to believe in. This likely creates an incredible sense of insecurity and instability. This may presumably be why we see this sudden, militaristic switch in her behavior from 02x02 onward.

*Caitlyn: "I am a decorated officer. Address me with respect, or keep your mouth shut." (02x02)*

*Caitlyn: "This is it then. Cuff him."*

*Zaunite: "Hey! I told you everything I know!"*

*Caitlyn: "You're a confessed criminal. You'll spend your retirement in a cell." (02x03)*

For autistic people rules and systems are comforting because they provide a certain structure and predictability. Caitlyn may have been trying to compensate for the instability in her moral compass, which she typically relies on so heavily, by adhering strictly to the definitive rules of the law, seeing them as a concrete framework in an otherwise uncertain situation.

Rigid thinking and the strong pattern recognition, which is also common in autistic people, may also be quite helpful in regards to her detective work, as seen in her private investigatory work:

*Caitlyn: "I think whoever organized the attack on the square is our suspect. The same symbols showed up at the botched smuggling operation at the Hexgates. [...] All this time they've kept their dealings localized to the Undercity. [...] The attack on the square changes things. They've overstepped." (01x04)*



### 3. Highly restricted, fixated interests

This trait refers to intense and highly focused fascinations with specific topics that dominate an individual's thoughts and time. These may vary in time and intensity but are deeply meaningful to the individual nonetheless.

I believe it would be appropriate to classify her interest in rifles and sharpshooting as a special interest, which she has had throughout most of her life, as seen by her holding a rifle in the Kiramman family portrait in 01x02 and the flashback to the shooting competition in 01x05. She is shown to have excelled at sharpshooting since she was very young, which could be traced back to either natural inclination and talent or an intense dedication to perfecting her skill.

It's important to note that not every autistic individual has a specific skill they are incredibly skilled at, despite how media often portrays it. Contrary to popular belief only an approximation of 0.5-10% of autistic individuals exhibit a savant skill, which they are exceedingly well at. Still, I believe that it would be fair to say that Caitlyn is exceptionally skilled at detective work, to the point where you may go as far as calling it a savant skill.

This is specifically highlighted in 01x04 and 02x04, during the scenes in which she enters the respective crime scenes and immediately envisions what has gone down solely by glancing at indicators such as at stray bullets or markings on the walls.

Additionally, the intensity with which she approaches criminal cases strongly resembles that of hyperfixations. She immerses herself in them completely and goes to extreme lengths in order to get new leads and information. The very fact that traveled to Stillwater prison and illegally released a prisoner to help guide her through Zaun just to progress on Silco's case is a testament to how intensely she experiences such topics of interest.

*[Looking at Caitlyn's collection of evidence on the floor]*

*Vi: "You did all this yourself? [...] And I thought Powder could get obsessed." (01x08)*

### 4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input

This trait refers to either reduced or heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli in one's environment, such as sounds, lights, smells, etc.

This is the only trait which is not explicitly shown to be portrayed by Caitlyn during the course of the show. You could argue that her exceeding skill at sharpshooting implies that she may be quite sensitive to changes in the environment, though that is in no way explicitly said or hinted at in the show itself.

You could also suggest that she may have some extent of hyporeactivity to pain, considering her ability to fight Ambessa in 02x09 despite all her injuries. Though that could be easily disproved by her obvious pain after suffering her injury on the Bridge of Progress in 01x07, for example.

### **Sidenote:**

A common critique is that she exhibits most of her autistic traits during the first season, which may be an indicator for her behavior being a mere product of her sheltered upbringing. While I agree that her upbringing plays a significant role in shaping her behavior, I don't believe it fully accounts for her autistic traits. Though her situation is unique and can't be directly compared to others, here are several examples of individuals from Piltover with similar status, none of whom display traits like hers—at least not to the same degree. This suggests that it can't be merely her upbringing. It is simply infinitely more difficult to properly evaluate her autistic traits in season 2, as she emotionally shuts down for most of the season,

And while Caitlyn does meet many of the criteria for ASD outlined in the DSM-5, as mentioned earlier, it's impossible to make a definitive assessment of whether she is truly autistic, given that we lack the necessary insight into her internal struggles and biography. However, I find her character and story highly relatable to many autistic individuals, including myself. She represents someone born into a society that she cannot conform to, desperately attempting to navigate a life that remains unpredictable and out of her control.