



# Autistic Perspectives on Elopement: Survey Findings

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## Outline

Why do Autistic people sometimes "elope": leave suddenly, run away, or wander? Many authorities and professionals can be notified when someone elopes: teachers, parents, police, group home workers, and more. Autistic children can face particular dangers such as drownings and accidents (McIlwain & Fournier, 2017), and there can be deadly consequences for Autistic people when police are involved in crisis response (McConnaughey, 2021; ASAN, 2017). Studies also document the significant impact of elopement on caregivers (Anderson et al., 2020; Solomon et. al 2018). However, the vast majority of research on elopement has excluded the perspectives of Autistic people. While research studies have asked teachers, family members, and first responders to report on the meaning and impact of eloping, they have seldom considered the knowledge and experience of Autistic people themselves. This exploratory project was proposed by an Autistic community member and uses a participatory action research (PAR) approach to explore the meaning and impact of eloping for Autistic people. We co-designed and implemented an online survey to learn from Autistic people directly.

## Research Questions

This exploratory pilot study asked 3 central questions:

- What factors do Autistic people say have led them to elope?
- How does eloping relate to well-being?
- What do Autistic people say about other people's responses to eloping?

In this poster, we report on findings relating to the first two questions. We continue to analyze the data and will be conducting more mixed-methods research.

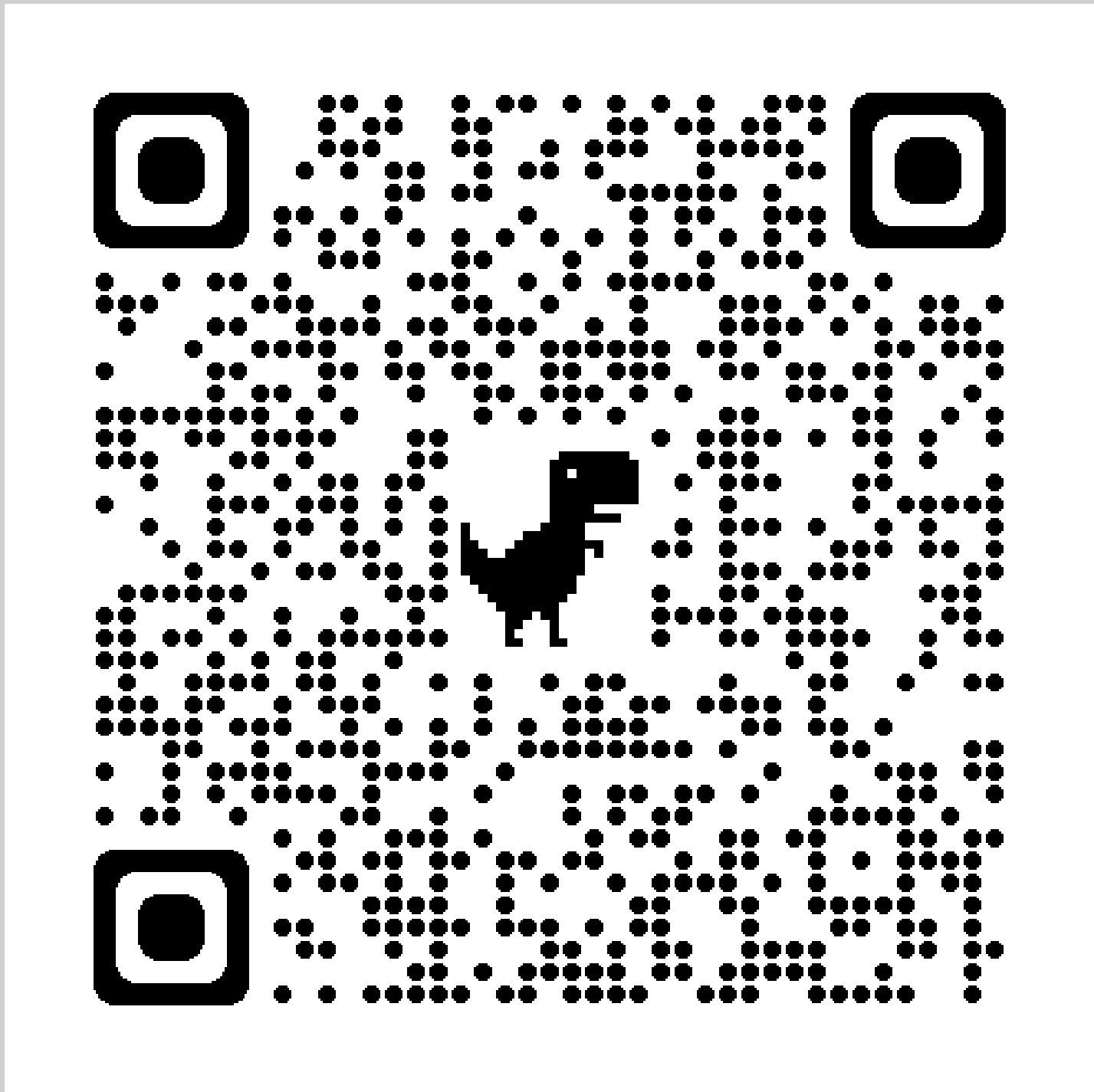
This project is supported by an Explore SSHRC grant from the University of Waterloo and an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

## Research Approach

As exploratory, mixed-methods research, this work did not start from a hypothesis. We instead started from a commitment to learning about the experiences of Autistic people, recognizing that the existing research had been fundamentally flawed in investigating and reporting on their experiences.

This project was proposed by a community member and developed in collaboration with Autistic co-researchers. Following principles of disability justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) and neurodiversity (Chapman, 2019), this project proceeds from the premise that the experiences that have been characterized by researchers and clinicians as purposeless or inevitably negative when they occur in Autistic people can have multiple meanings and purposes for Autistic people themselves. Even the existence of the term "elopement" can be seen as a pathologizing way of framing experiences. This project has therefore prioritized the knowledge and decision-making of Autistic people throughout.

Learn more about  
the project here!





## What is “Elopement”?

- When Autistic children or adults depart suddenly from supervised settings or relationships without permission or notice
- “Running away”, “wandering”, “going missing”, or “fleeing” are all terms that could be used instead by people in the community.
- Some Autistic people use the term “elopement”. Many do not.
- Elopement is framed as a “high intensity behaviour problem” (Merle et al., 2020) and discussed as a safety risk to children, a source of stress and anxiety for parents, and a disruption in classroom settings.
- Research almost exclusively explores the perspectives of affected others, including parents (e.g., Anderson et al., 2012; 2020; Solomon & Lawlor, 2013) and first responders (Calton & Hall, 2021; Chown, 2010; Gardner et al., 2019)

**What about Autistic people’s perspectives?**



## Methods

**We had 3 meetings with a team of 4 Autistic co-researchers between August 2022 and April 2023**

**The co-researchers determined the survey priorities and co-developed survey questions**

**Co-researchers are credited as authors on publications and have presented at conferences**

This study used an online survey that was co-designed with a group of 4 Autistic co-researchers to learn about Autistic respondents’ experiences of eloping. The project was informed by disability studies theory and used a Participatory Action Research approach (Hagey, 1997; van Katwyck & Ashcroft, 2016). The survey was disseminated through online networks, social media, and organizations such as the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network.

Survey design prioritized giving Autistic participant multiple choices, avoiding pathologizing language and assumptions, and leaving space for textual additions. The survey was administered using Qualtrics. Analyses have been conducted using Qualtrics, Excel, and Stata.

## Participatory Action Research

- Directly involves the people who are most affected by research (co-researchers) and centres their experiences and expertise
- Aims to support participants’ emancipation and generate research findings that contribute to meaningful social change
- Previous PAR research has been conducted with Autistic communities, including the development of responsive and accessible survey instruments (e.g. Nicolaidis et al., 2015; 2019).

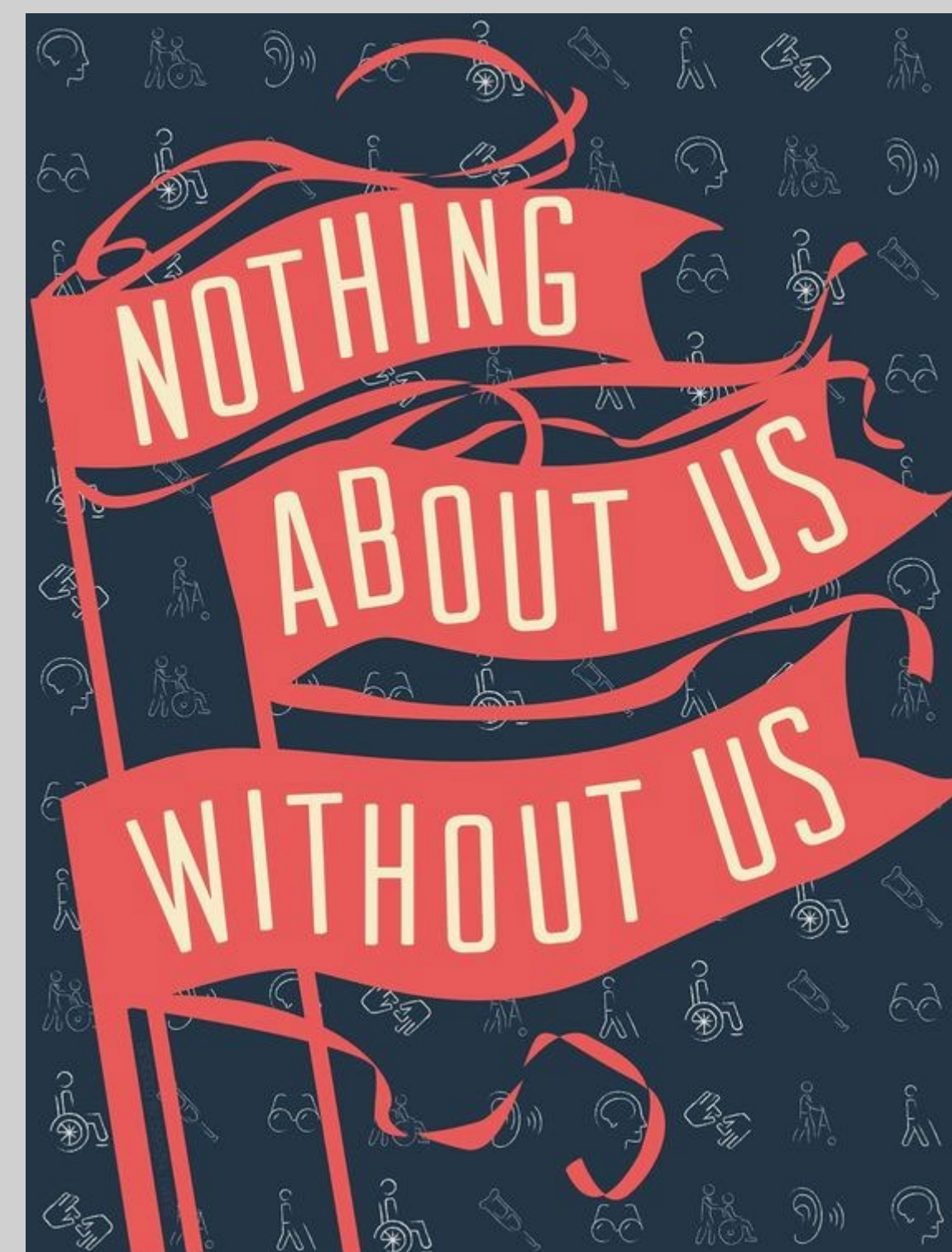


Image created by Crystal Evans





# Autistic Perspectives on Elopement: Survey Findings



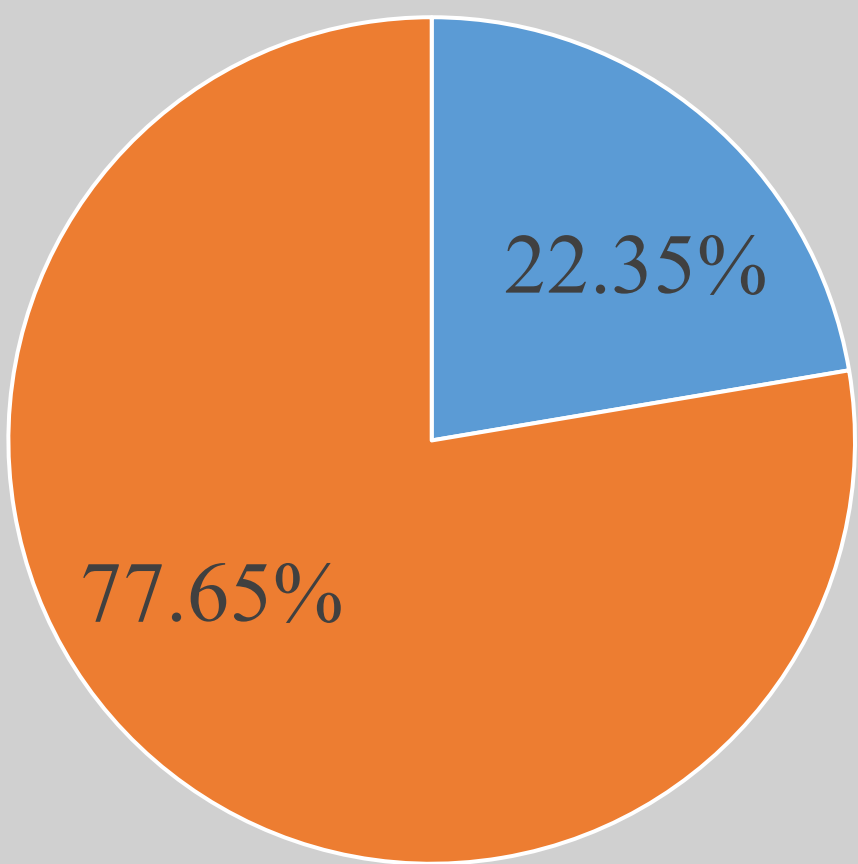
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## Survey Sample

Eligible respondents needed to be at least 13 years old, identify as Autistic/ having Autism Spectrum Disorder, and have experienced eloping.

We received surveys from 195 eligible individuals, ranging from 13-78 years old. A majority (78%) were white. Gender identities were diverse; of those who endorsed binary genders (100 individuals), 74% identified as women and 26% as men. A substantial minority (44%) of respondents indicated that they could not always communicate through spoken language.

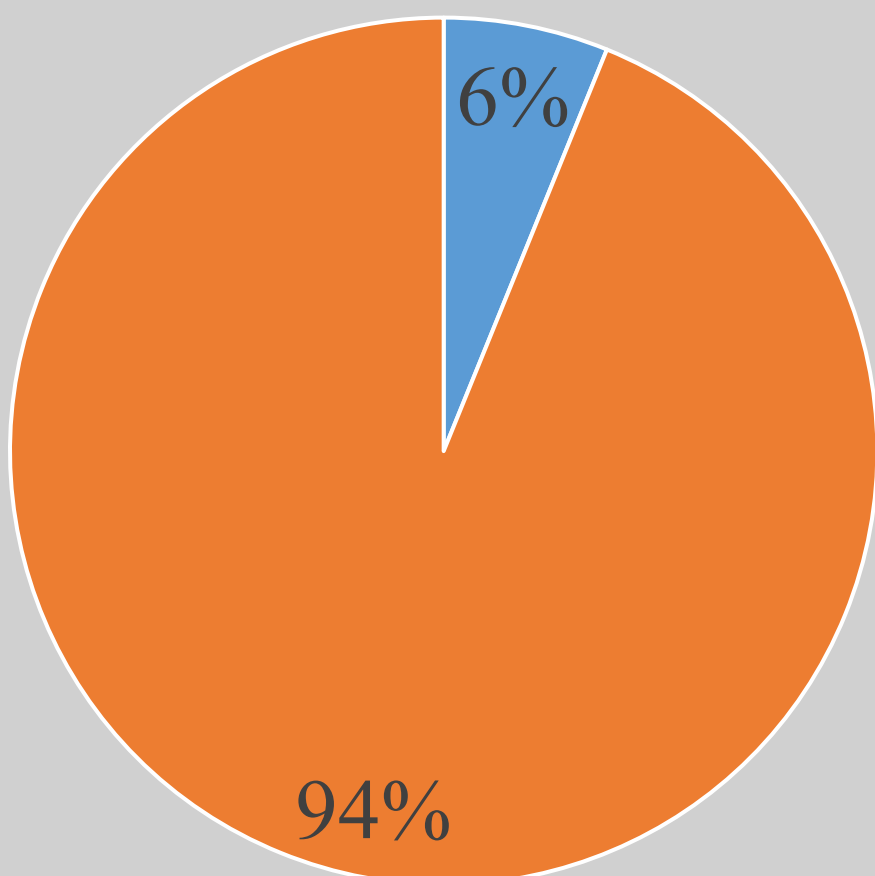
### Racial Identities



■ Racialized ■ White

Racial Identity	Count	Percentage
East Asian	1	0.56%
Middle Eastern	1	0.56%
Other	1	0.56%
West Asian	1	0.56%
First Nations, Inuit, or Metis	2	1.12%
Black	4	2.24%
South Asian	5	2.79%
Mixed	25	13.97%
White	139	77.65%

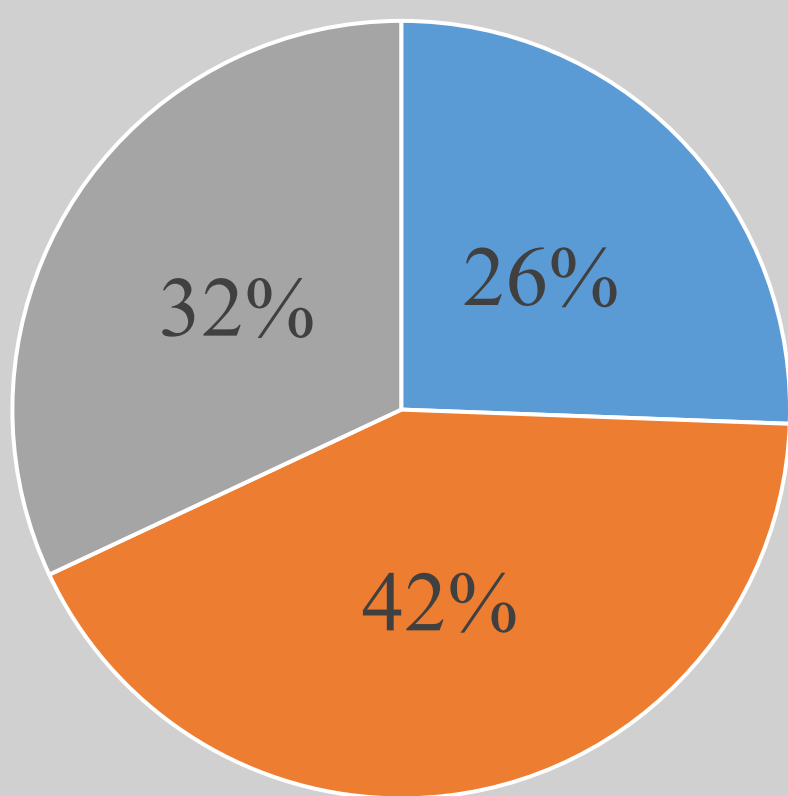
### Disability Identities



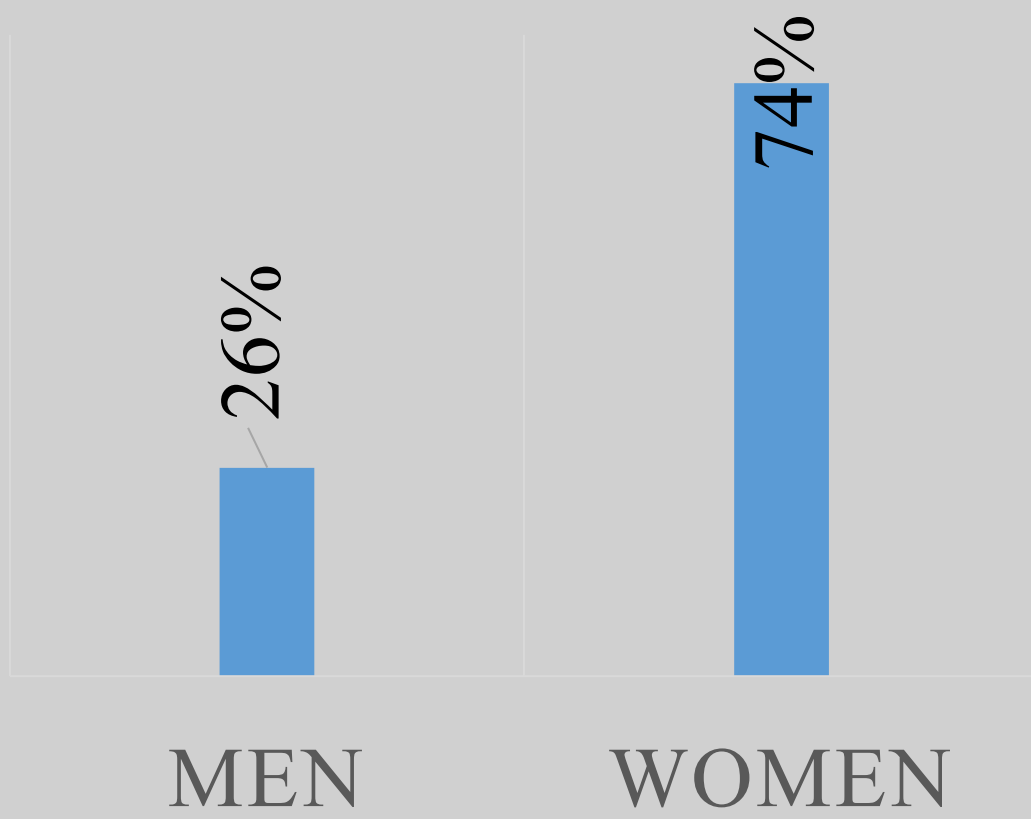
■ Autistic/neurodivergent only ■ Multiple disability identities

Disability Identity	Count	Percentage
Mental health/Mad	111	62.01%
Learning	47	26.26%
ADHD	84	46.93%
Sensory processing	93	51.96%
Chronic illness	62	34.64%
Other	22	12.29%

### Gender



■ Cis folks ■ Gender diverse folks ■ Unspecified



### Access to Language

Relationship to spoken language	Count	Percentage
Always speaking	99	56.25%
Not always speaking	77	43.75%



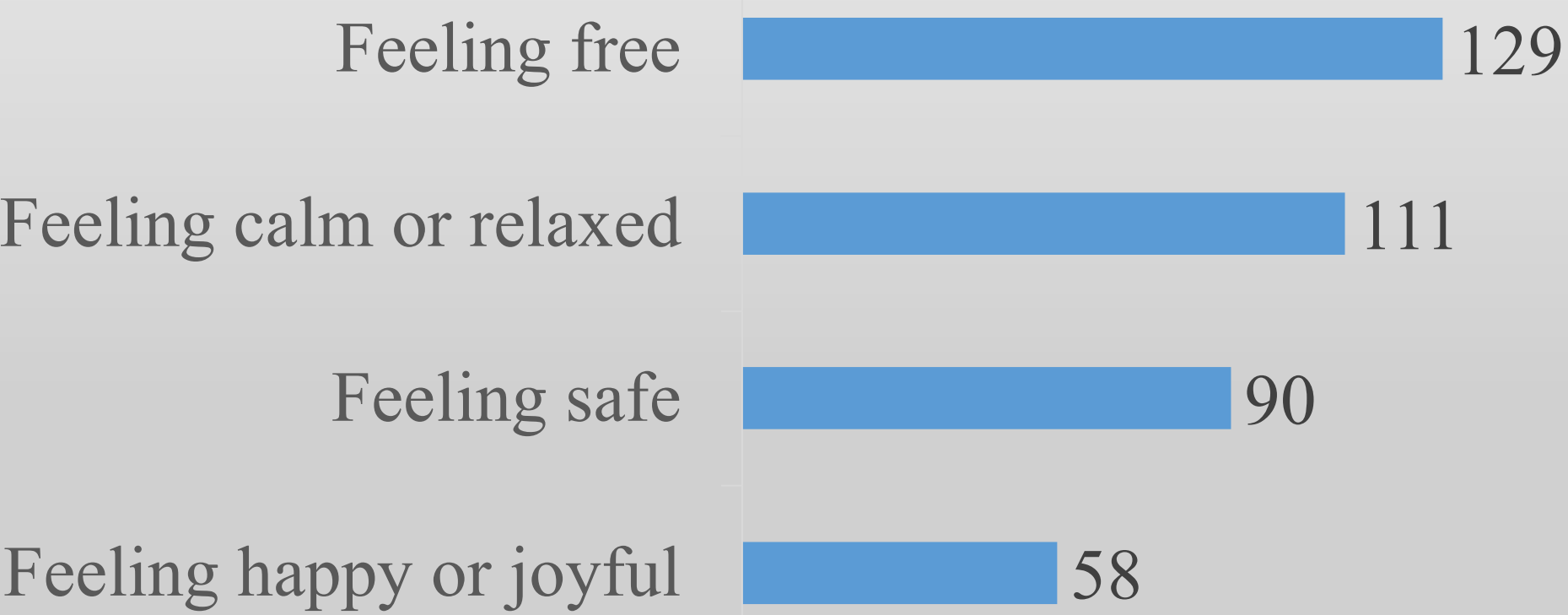


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## Positive Emotions Associated with Elopement



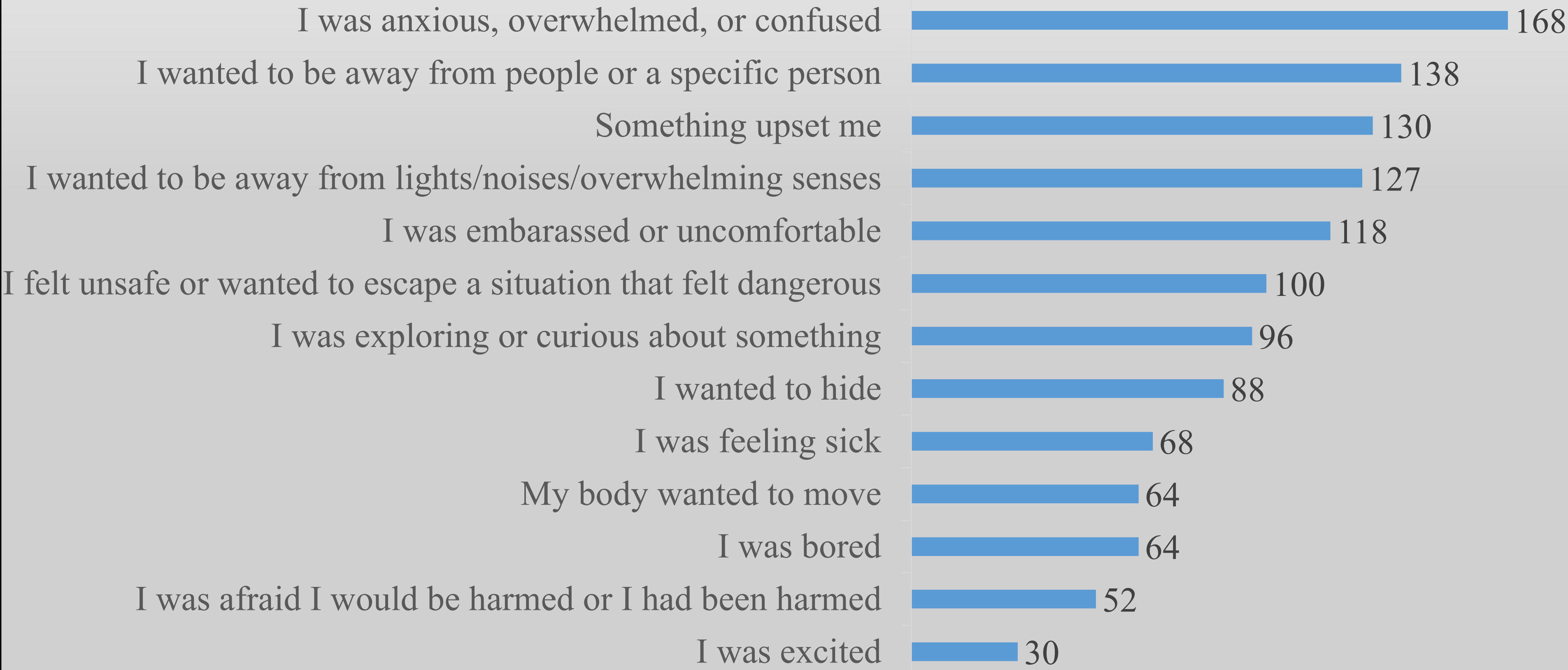
## Negative Emotions Associated With Elopment



Eloping could be associated with positive, negative, and neutral experiences. In contrast with the existing literature that portrays elopement as a threat to well-being, far more participants indicated that “leaving usually makes me feel better” (103) compared to those who said “leaving usually makes me feel worse” (5).

## Results and Conclusion

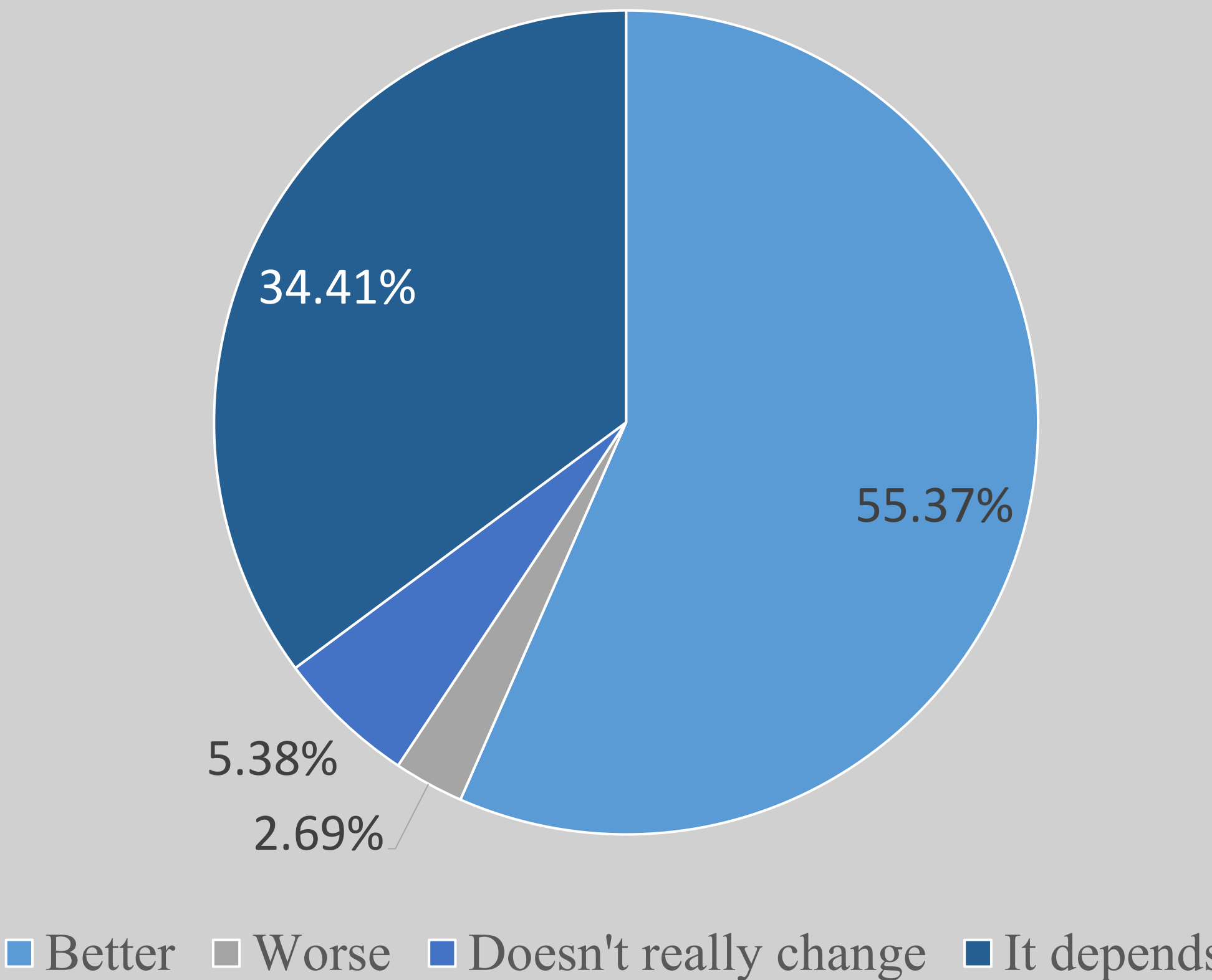
### Reasons People Elope



These findings suggest that people elope for a wide range of reasons. Eloping is not experienced as a singular activity or behavior. Instead, people were often leaving places for important reasons, and at other times might have wandered unintentionally. This study also showed that a participatory approach to survey design resulted in a survey that many members of the Autistic community wanted to respond to. We did not have any participation incentives available with this pilot project, and we were surprised by the number of people who responded. This project also indicates that members of Autistic communities are interested in being a part of research that centers their experiences and respects the knowledge that they can contribute to discussions of why they leave places.

It is also important to note that violence was a common experience that people identified as a part of leaving places. A substantial number of survey participants indicated that they had experienced parental abuse (43), sexual harassment (37), and other forms of violence including excessive force from police (14). While these findings are preliminary, they suggest the need to move away from research and practice that simply seeks to prevent Autistic people from eloping or leaving places.

### How do people feel after leaving?





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