

## “Walk with Me:” an Interview with Dr. Robyn Thom

**Dr. Thom, can you please tell us about your area of expertise and why you chose to specialize in that area?**

I’m a psychiatrist specializing in the care of people with autism and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Within this area, I have a particular interest in helping people manage anxiety. I also work a lot with people with Williams Syndrome, a genetic syndrome, who tend to have a lot of anxiety. I got into studying autism and Williams Syndrome based on great mentorship, from people like [Dr. Chris McDougle](#), the Director of the Lurie Center, and the wonderful geneticist, [Dr. Barbara Pober](#), who has dedicated her career to Williams Syndrome. I think that once you start working with people with Williams Syndrome, it’s hard to stop. It’s a very special population and has a very dedicated research community.



**What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?**

I love working every day to help improve the lives of people. I get to do that by working directly with patients and by doing research. These two realms inform each other. When I’m seeing patients and working with them and their families to find treatments that are safe and effective, it makes me think about the gaps in knowledge that still exist. That brings me to research, where I try to design studies that will answer some of the most impactful questions that could improve people’s lives.

**What breakthroughs do you hope to see in the future related to ASD and Williams Syndrome?**

Very little research has been done to identify treatments for comorbid psychiatric conditions specifically for people with ASD or Williams syndrome. We’re a little further along for ASD, in that clinicians have started to modify certain types of psychotherapy, like cognitive behavioral therapy, for people with autism. But there’s still so much work to be done. There is no evidence-based anxiety therapy for people who have language impairment or intellectual disability, and these issues affect a huge proportion of the autism population. More than half of the people with autism have an anxiety disorder, yet there’s very little high-quality research to guide clinicians. In my career, I really hope to

transform the way we diagnose and treat mental health conditions in people with developmental disorders.

**What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?**

I've always wanted to be a physician. There was a brief period when I was a teenager when thanks to amazing opportunities like the International Science & Engineering Fair (ISEF), I felt inspired to be a scientist. Now I get the best of both worlds because I get to do both research and clinical practice.

**If you had to describe yourself using three words, what would they be?**

I would say "Walk with me." My colleagues and mentees know that unless there is a Nor'easter, the best way to talk with me is to walk with me. I love how the Lurie Center for Autism is located right on the Minuteman walking path. Taking a walk outside is a welcome break from my hectic schedule. As a lifelong athlete and former Division I swimmer, fitness and movement has always been very important to me, and I find walking a great way to get to know my colleagues and trainees in a different light.

**Do you have a favorite book, movie, or tv show?**

I'm not much of a movie or TV person. I read a lot though, so it's hard to pin down a favorite book. Some of my favorite genres are biographies and historical fiction.

*Many thanks to Dr. Thom and interviewer, Heli Patel, a clinical research coordinator at the Lurie Center.*

To see studies being conducted by Dr. Thom click [here](#).

Robyn Thom, MD, is a graduate of Harvard College, University of Toronto Medical School, the Harvard Longwood Psychiatry Residency Training Program, and the Massachusetts General Hospital/McLean Hospital Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship Program. As a child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist at the MGH Lurie Center for Autism and co-Director of the MGH Williams Syndrome Program, she specializes in diagnosing and treating comorbid psychiatric conditions in individuals with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities. She has a specific interest in the psychiatric care of individuals with Williams syndrome.