

Autism Awareness/ Acceptance

Written and compiled by the University of Edinburgh AS group
March, 2021

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that means Autistic people feel, hear, interpret and see the world differently.

It is a natural neurological difference (also known as a neurotype or form of **neurodiversity**) that means our brains are wired differently. Neurodiversity also includes dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, OCD and many more. The opposite of being neurodivergent is to be neurotypical.

Autism is an invisible disability and presents in each autistic person differently. Asperger's syndrome was a separate diagnosis but is now an archaic term and Autism is used instead. Below are two examples of how some Autistic traits manifest - these particular examples relate to the trait of (hyper/hypo)sensitivity.



"I am hypersensitive to noise, light, touch and food textures, but hyposensitive to colours and temperature."

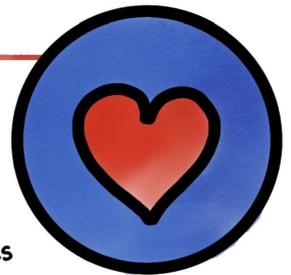
"I am hypersensitive to sounds, smells, colors and food textures. I have synesthesia which means that when I listen to music, I see colors and shapes. It makes listening to music pretty magical but quite intense."



Autism Spectrum

Strengths

- deep focus + attention to detail
- expertise and factual knowledge
- integrity + accepting of difference
- methodical, creative + novel approaches



Challenges

- sensory issues + information processing
- social communication + interaction
- repetitive behaviour + ♥ routines
- anxiety

This information pamphlet was created by Autistic people: we think the best way to learn about Autism is from Autistic people as we are the experts of our own brains.

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Important Terminology



Talking about us

We mostly use identity-first language (“I am Autistic”) rather than person-first language (“I am a person with Autism” or “I have Autism”). This is because we are born Autistic and it is part of our identity - similar to nationality or sexuality. You wouldn’t say a person with British! It goes without saying that we are people, too. Saying we “have” Autism implies a separate condition.

Being overwhelmed

Many Autistics are “hypersensitive” to some senses or stimuli, meaning they feel those senses more strongly than most Neurotypicals do. Prolonged high sensory levels can be stressful for an autistic person and can lead to them experiencing “sensory overload”. These often appear as meltdowns or shutdowns.

Shutdowns and meltdowns are painful and vulnerable experiences that are highly stigmatised, and misunderstood: we’re not “just being difficult”, “petulant” or “throwing a tantrum”. Autistic people experiencing meltdowns (especially Black Autistic people) have been murdered in public - either by police brutality, or by use of dangerous restraints (such as the “prone restraint”).

Term

Definition

Meltdown

A visible form of overload that happens when someone becomes completely overwhelmed by their current situation and temporarily loses behavioural control due to the experienced pain.

It is a loss of control and can be verbal (eg shouting, screaming, crying) or physical (eg kicking, lashing out, biting) or both.

Shutdown

An invisible form of overload, but equally debilitating. It may look like the Autistic person goes quiet or 'switches off'.

Stimming

Self-stimulatory behaviour, or stimming for short, is the repetition of physical movements, sounds, words, or moving objects, They can be involuntary or voluntary and are a great way for regulating anxiety and heightened sensory input. It’s essentially venting.

Some of our favourite stims include spinning, pacing and bouncing off the wall like a rocket, bouncing knees up and down, one handed claps, tapping fingers, swaying, rubbing rocks, skipping, clicking fingers, repeating fun words, wriggling fingers singing, jumping up and down, spinning, toe walking, dancing, and chewing things.

Flapping my hands
feels so good



Ableism

Defined as a discrimination or prejudice against disabled individuals, ableism includes assuming that we won’t have any problems adapting to new situations. assuming we can just deal with our sensory issues, not providing captions, and using terms about disability in a derogatory manner.

Struggles and Solutions

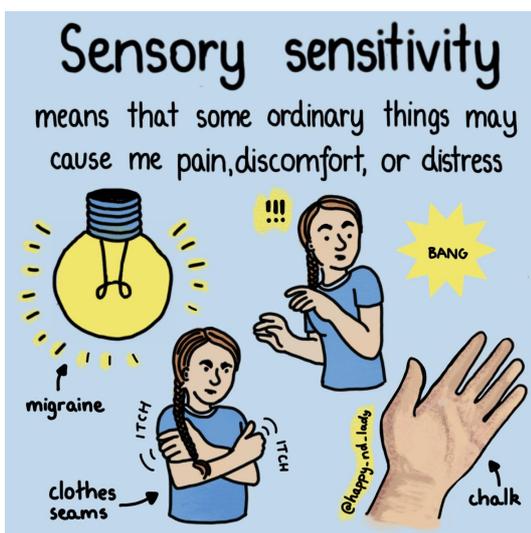
University life

Being an Autistic student at university is hard for various reasons. Some of the barriers we face include:

- An inaccessible physical environment: e.g. light intensity, flickering lights, invasive ambient sounds, crowds and crowd noise, fire alarms, sirens, sudden loud sounds etc.
- Online environment e.g. increased isolation and added difficulty in connecting with peers, schedule restrictions, last-minute changes to timings, etc.
- Stigma of stimming, fear of drawing unwanted attention, mockery by immature and ignorant peers, internalised ableism, etc.

In online lectures, encourage the use of chat function and accept that some cameras are off. Many of us struggle with auditory processing so use of the chat function is much easier, and not using cameras allows us to stim without anxiety.

During in-person lectures, encourage sign-clapping (which are jazz hands in BSL), and/or lap-tapping, have frequent breaks and normalize stimming.



Societies can help us feel welcome by providing maps and information about what happens at their events and socials, as we are more likely to attend if we know we can expect.

Using ice-breakers instead of small talk is a great way to start things off instead of making us feel pressured from the beginning.

Exams

I will get exam adjustments



It is possible to get accommodations through the **Student's Disability Service**. One such example is being in a different room with extra time for exams. This helps with sensory sensitivity and time management.

However, it can also be difficult for Autistic people to determine as to exactly what the examiner is expecting of them - particularly because autistic people can be more likely to want to include more points that get deemed "irrelevant" in arguments.

Mental health

Autistic people are more likely to experience problems with mental health, including feelings of hopelessness, depression and elevated suicide rates.

Mental Health services and waiting times in the UK are long and it is also hard to find neurodiverse-specific help: many mental health services fail to account for the needs of Autistic people, which renders the treatment ineffective at best, harmful at worst (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2020).

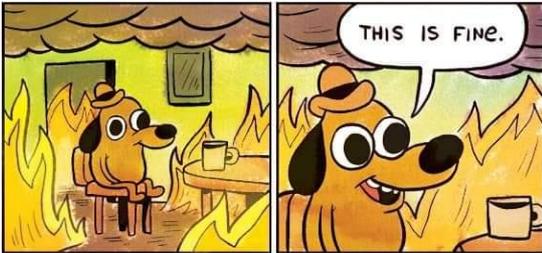
Autistic people often do feel more isolated and a sense that they don't belong which is often accompanied by feelings of self-loathing and internalised ableism: when an Autistic person believes that they don't deserve to be accommodated in society, often feeling like a "burden". All Disabled people deserve to be accommodated, and regarded as equal members of society.

Struggles and Solutions

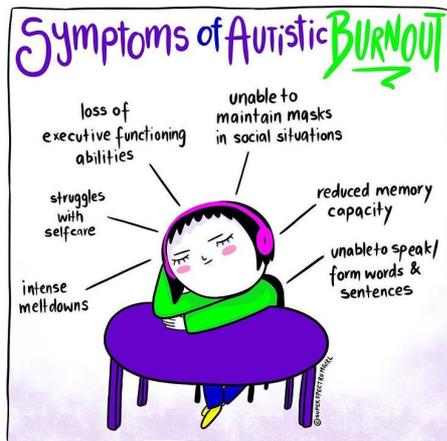
Everyday life

Sudden changes are very hard! Many of us rely on routines to help us cope, so when things do not go as we have planned, it takes us longer to adapt.

when you arrive at your favorite restaurant to find the menu has changed



We process a lot more information than non-Autistic brains, which makes us more prone to **meltdowns** (see page 2) and **burnout** (analogous to a computer crashing). You can help by removing the causes of the meltdown/ burnout and allow us to take frequent breaks.



In the workplace, many autistic people have to decide if they should **disclose** they are autistic to their boss(es). Not disclosing is a barrier to appropriate accommodations, whereas disclosing may lead to discrimination. You can help us by ensuring a non-discriminatory work environment.

Autistic people in the workplace often have to conform to unrealistic standards of toxic productivity in an unfriendly sensory environment with few accommodations. You can contribute to a culture where people are not valued on their productivity rather than their wellbeing, which will decrease likelihood of Autistic burnout, and hence prevent damaging environment for the physical and mental health of Autistic workers, who are just as valuable an asset as Neurotypical workers, but thrive under different working conditions.

Social communication

Understanding the common barriers faced by Autistic people in social communication is important. A few examples include:

- Social situations can be confusing and stressful to navigate, especially in crowds, or around strangers. Provide guidance, and “social stories” are helpful.
- Neurotypical social norms are often illogical and perplexing, and many NT’s react in an unsympathetic way to natural autistic traits.
- Not all Autistic people use vocal communication, and many use non-vocal communication methods to communicate. This is only a barrier if people communicating with them are intolerant of such methods, however. You should be respectful of non-vocal communication methods, and if you are unsure of what was said or how to respond, just ask!
- Harassment and ostracism of Autistic people, including gaslighting and microaggressions
- Authority figure threat
 - including police brutality of (especially) Black Autistics due to misinterpretation of behaviour (e.g. meltdowns) as “aggressive” due to racist, sexist, ableist, and/or cissexist biases.

Other ways to help

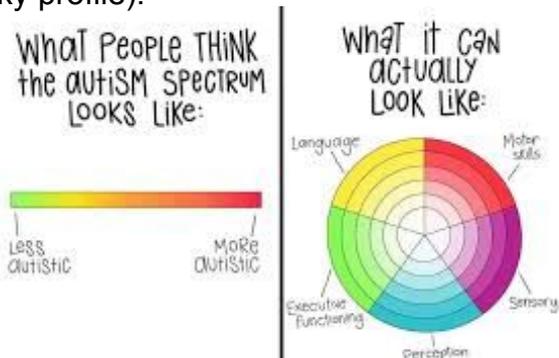
- Challenge any biases about autistic people that you have. Black, female and LGBT+ autistic people experience heightened prejudices on top of ableism (by itself).
- Understand that we have limited energy- especially for social settings, new situations, or even unclear directions, and be respectful of that.
- If you see someone stimming, please do not stare and/or make any rude comments - stimming is a natural way for autistic people to vent stress in a situation that might be overwhelming to them.
- Pay attention to sunflower lanyards- people wear them to make their own disabilities visible, and be respectful of other people’s accommodation requirements.

Myths and Misconceptions

“Everyone’s a little bit Autistic”

No. By this logic, everybody is a little bit pregnant. 1-4% of the population are autistic.

The autism spectrum is not a sliding scale that goes from “less autistic” to “more autistic”. Rather, it is more like a circle of traits. Autistic people tend to be very good or very bad at them (this is called a spiky profile).

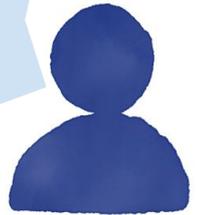


“We NeEd To FiNd A CuRe”

We absolutely do not. Autism is not an illness, therefore it does not need to be cured or treated. And before you ask - no, vaccines do not cause autism.

Autism is a fundamental part of who we are, it is everything we do and in every way we think and act, and it cannot be removed from us to be “cured”. To try to cure us from it is to remove the very core of who we are: we do not need to be cured of ourselves.

“This is what we hear when you pray for a cure. This is what we know, when you tell us of your fondest hopes and dreams for us: that your greatest wish is that one day we will cease to be, and strangers you can love will move in behind our faces.” - Jim Sinclair



“Levels of autism are rising/ Autism is being overdiagnosed!”

No! Awareness of autism is rising, so more people are seeking diagnoses. The person saying this usually is not a doctor, psychiatrist or psychologist (the only person whose opinion matters outside of your own about diagnoses).

Diagnosis is still a costly and lengthy process unavailable to those in marginalised Socio-economic backgrounds, Ethnic minorities, Women and LGBT+ people, who are still frequently misdiagnosed (e.g. with anxiety, depression, bipolar, BPD or ADHD).

“Diagnoses don’t matter”

A diagnosis allows Autistic people to understand themselves better, feel less “broken”, opens up access to accommodations, support from professionals and the #ActuallyAutistic community, and starts on the path to self acceptance.

Diagnoses also matter because if a parent of a child is autistic, their child has a 1 in 4 chance of also being autistic.

To emphasise: official diagnoses are not available to everyone, and self-diagnosis is valid.

Historically, cures and treatments have been aimed at erasing Autistic behaviours in an unnecessary attempt to make us fit in better amongst non-Autistic peers. This is not only ineffective but damaging.

Currently, some places still use ABA as a “cure”. ABA stands for Applied Behavioural Analysis and it is a pseudo-therapy designed to make autistic children “indistinguishable from their neurotypical peers”. It uses “behavioural reprogramming” techniques, long sessions and constant forcing the Autistic person to ignore (for us) painful sensory stimuli in order to appear more “normal”.

Because it was so abusive and harmful, it has been rebranded as Positive Behavioural Support (PBS) but still works from the same premise: to extinguish what is seen as “Autistic behaviours” and make us appear non-Autistic.

Myths and Misconceptions

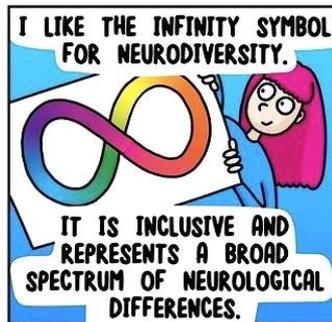
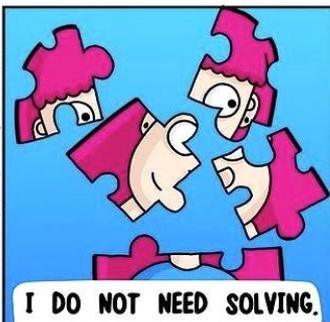
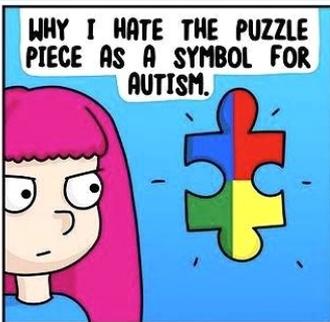
Functioning labels

Because we (the authors) are at university, many people say “you must be high functioning!” or “is your autism quite mild?”. These functioning labels are frowned upon by the Autistic community, because:

- They describe our existence and struggles from the point of view of other people (we may appear highly functioning in a lecture, but collapse at home). Our “functioning” fluctuates depending on energy, sensory input, activity, and many other factors.
- “Low-functioning” Autistic people are equally valuable to society - and it is easy to say “high support needs” instead.
- They are a form of gaslighting - functioning labels are used either to deny autonomy or to deny support.

"[So-called] Mild autism doesn't mean one experiences autism mildly... It means YOU experience their autism mildly. You may not know how hard they've had to work to get to the level they are."

-Adam Walton-



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Jigsaws/ rainbow infinity

A puzzle piece used to be the symbol of autism... until Autistic people were consulted. It is now only used by people who view autism as a “puzzling disease”... which it is not. Neither are we missing pieces!

The new symbol is a rainbow infinity sign. It accurately reflects an inclusive spectrum, and looks friendlier, too.

There are multiple other ways of representing invisible disabilities, such as sunflowers or Euan's guide.



GUIDE

EUAN'S

Busting Myths About Our Personalities

- We do, in fact, have a sense of humour (it usually works best with other neurodivergent people)
- We are not all “savants”, but we may know a lot about our special interests.
- We don't have superpowers per se, although sometimes Autistic people will describe their hyperfocus and literal, logical ways of thinking as being superpowers for the purposes of affirmation.
- Many of us are, in fact, sociable and extroverted.
- We can, and do, maintain strong and healthy friendships and relationships with both neurodivergent and neurotypical people.
- Autistic people do have empathy (if not hyperempathy) - what we don't always know how to do is express that empathy to Neurotypical people (in particular) in a way that they find socially acceptable. What isn't obvious is that Neurotypical people may struggle to empathise with Autistic people since we don't necessarily share the same experiences of the world, and Neurotypical people don't experience ableism by virtue of their neurotype.

Resources the Authors Recommend

Books

- The Reason I Jump
- Explaining Humans
- Diary of a Young Naturalist
- More recommendations [here](#)

Instagram

- happy_nd_lady
- eatsleepstim
- 21andsensory
- My_unsecret_diary
- wrongplanetcomics
- the.autisticats
- superspectrumgirl
- autismisabitch
- hvppyhands
- autiebiographical
- schumn

Blogs and Websites

- Ambitious About Autism Blog
- Autreat: Don't Mourn For Us
- Spaced Out and Smiling
- BMA: Autism
- Different Minds

Advocacy Organisations

- Autism Self Advocacy Network
- Autism Women and Non-Binary Network
- Autistic Inclusive Meets

Youtube

- Autistic Tyla
- Yo Samdy Sam
- Nathan Selove
- The Aspie World
- Paige Layle
- Jessie Gender
- Joe Jamfrey
- Amythest Schaber
- Invisible i
- Purple Ella
- Kayla Smith
- Category: OTHER
- Claudia Brown

Podcasts

- BBC 1800 Seconds on Autism
- Autism by Autistics
- Spectrumly speaking
- The One Percent (Autistic Tyla)

TikTok

- soundofftheforest
- auteach
- actuallyautistickatie
- awwwtisticat
- lafilledani
- wheresmytonin
- evelynjeans
- theaspieworld
- linzrinzz

Films and TV shows

- **Good:** “Everything’s going to be OK”, “The A Word”, “The Reason I Jump”, “Loop (Pixar)”, Hannah Gadsby, Fern Brady and many other comedians
- **Okay:** “Atypical”, “The Good Doctor”
- **Bad:** “Rainman”, Sheldon from “The Big Bang Theory”, Sia’s film “Music”, anything portraying Autistic people only as savants, and anything featuring Autistic characters made without consulting the Autistic community.

Appendix of Memes

Autie-biographical



By: Theresa Scovil



Spiderman Ted Talk - autism is not a disorder or illness and should not be treated as such.

ABOVE Sia's film "Music" fails to represent Autistic people: it did not include Autistic people in the writing or making process, and portrayal of Autistic people is ableist and racist.

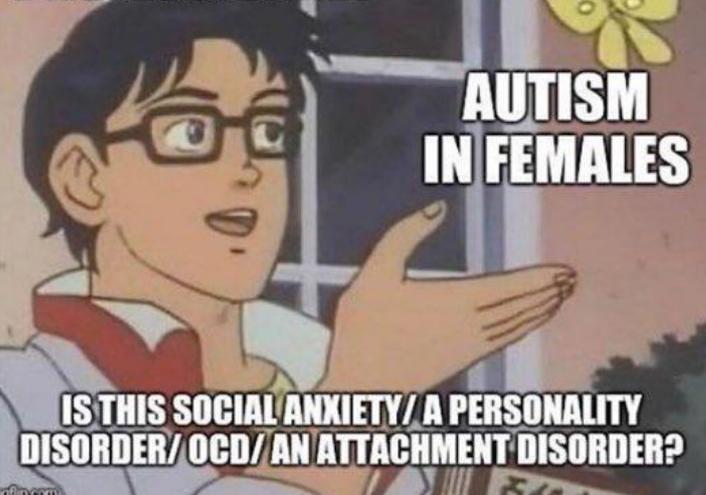
RIGHT Condescending Wonka - this highlights a common micro-aggression commonly seen when Autistics disclose to Neurotypicals. Rather than disbelief, a better response would be asking questions and a willingness to learn.

OH, I DON'T LOOK AUTISTIC?



MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

AUTISM IN FEMALES



Butterfly - due to the misconception that only (or mostly) boys are autistic, Autistic women(+) are frequently misdiagnosed with social anxiety, personality disorders, OCD, attachment disorders, and many more.

People when they find out you are Autistic

People when they see you exhibit autistic traits



Gordon Ramsay - while people may be supportive when a person discloses their autism, autistic people still face a lot of stigma when actually showing autistic traits.