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PSYCHOLOGY GROUP

Supporting a Loved One After an Autism Diagnosis

A strengths-based guide for partners, family, friends and important people

The heart of this handout: An autism diagnosis does not change who someone is. It can give language, self-compassion, understanding and a clearer path to support.



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What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that shapes how a person experiences the world, communicates, and processes information. It is **not** a character flaw.

Key aspects often include:

- **Deep focus and strong interests:** Intense concentration and passion for specific subjects.
- **Pattern recognition:** An ability to see connections and details others might miss.
- **Honesty and careful thinking:** A tendency towards directness and thoughtful consideration.
- **Unique communication:** Different ways of expressing and interpreting language.
- **Sensory and emotional processing:** A distinct experience of sensory input and emotional regulation.

The Spectrum is Not a Straight Line

The term 'spectrum' refers to the wide variety of profiles within autism, not to a linear scale where some people are 'a little autistic'. Every autistic person is unique and will have a unique autistic profile.

We've been taught to see autism as a straight line, from 'not very autistic' to 'very autistic.' But that's simply not accurate.



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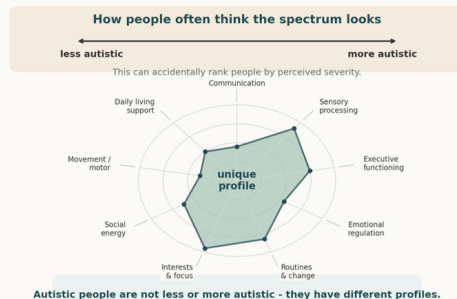


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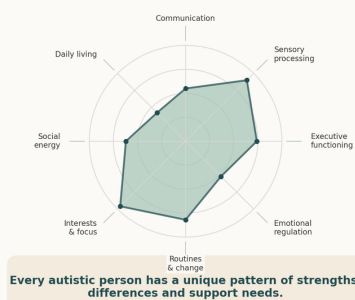
Autism is a spectrum - but not a straight line

It is a multidimensional profile of strengths, differences and support needs.



The autism spectrum isn't linear, it's multidimensional, often visualised as a wheel or radar chart.

Autism is a profile, not a ranking



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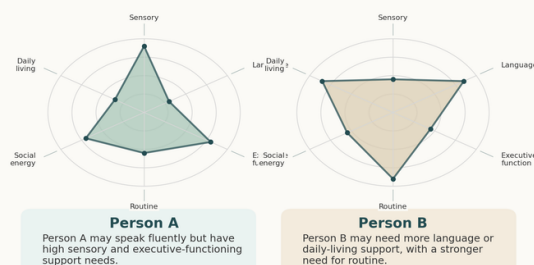
Each individual may experience different traits with varying intensity across multiple areas:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language and communication• Sensory processing• Executive function• Motor coordination | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social interaction• Daily living skills• Emotional regulation• Special interests and focus |
|---|---|

One autistic person may communicate fluently but have high sensory needs. Another may need more support with language or daily tasks. Another may appear socially confident, but experience intense burnout afterwards.

Two autistic people can have very different profiles

Both people are autistic. Neither is more autistic or less autistic.



The helpful question is: What does this person need to feel safe, understood and supported?

Understanding this helps us stop ranking people by perceived 'severity' and start respecting the full, unique profile of each autistic person. Two autistic people may have completely different support needs and strengths, and both experiences are equally valid.



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Common Misconceptions

Myth	Reality
Autistic people lack empathy.	Autistic people experience empathy, but may express or process it differently. They may focus on cognitive empathy (understanding someone's perspective) over affective empathy (feeling someone's emotions).
Autistic people look a certain way.	Autism is an invisible disability. There is no specific 'look' for an autistic person.
Autistic people have poor communication.	Autistic people have different communication styles. They may be direct, literal, or prefer non-verbal communication. 'Poor' communication is often a result of neurotypical expectations.
Autistic people overreact or have meltdowns.	What may appear as an overreaction is often a response to sensory overload, communication breakdown, or unmet needs. These are not controllable temper tantrums.

After Diagnosis: Mixed Feelings Are Normal

Receiving an autism diagnosis can bring a complex range of emotions, including:

- **Relief:** Finally understanding past experiences.
- **Grief:** For lost time or opportunities.
- **Validation:** Knowing they are not 'broken'.



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- **Anger:** About past struggles or lack of support.
- **Shame:** Internalised societal stigma.
- **Self-discovery:** A new understanding of oneself.

It's important to **follow their pace** in processing these feelings and integrating the diagnosis and their enhanced identity.

What Autistic People Often Need From Loved Ones

Believe them: Trust their experiences and self-advocacy.

Ask what helps: Don't assume; inquire about their needs and preferences.

Use clear communication: Be direct, literal, and avoid ambiguity or sarcasm.

Give processing time: Allow space for them to think and respond.

Respect routines: Understand that routines provide stability and reduce anxiety.

Offer practical support: Help with tasks that are challenging for them.

Repair misunderstandings gently: Address communication breakdowns with patience and a focus on understanding.

How Love and Feelings Can Look Different

Autistic ways of showing and experiencing love and connection can differ from neurotypical norms. Look for:



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- **Remembering details:** Recalling facts about your interests or conversations.
- **Solving problems:** Offering practical solutions or research to help.
- **Sharing interests:** Wanting to connect through their passions.
- **Honesty:** Directness in expressing thoughts and feelings.
- **Loyalty:** Deep and steadfast commitment.
- **Showing care through actions:** Demonstrating affection through practical help or shared activities.

Women, Girls, and People Who Appear 'Non-Autistic'

Many autistic individuals, particularly women and girls, develop strategies to **mask or camouflage** their autistic traits to fit in. This can be exhausting and lead to burnout.

Autistic Burnout

Autistic burnout is a state of intense physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion, often caused by the chronic stress of trying to meet the demands of an ableist society.

Signs include: Increased meltdowns/shutdowns, difficulty with daily tasks, social withdrawal, loss of skills, and physical symptoms.

What helps: Reduced demands, more rest, sensory regulation, prioritising special interests, unmasking, and seeking understanding support.



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Unmasking: Hard, Important, and Gradual

Unmasking is the process of letting go of camouflaging and allowing oneself to be authentically autistic. It can be challenging due to fear of judgment but is crucial for well-being and authenticity. It is often a gradual, personal journey.

Show them you love them for who they are, not the person they work hard to present as. Get to know them more deeply through this process.

Shutdowns: What They Are and How to Respond

A shutdown is a state of 'going offline' often experienced by autistic people when overwhelmed. It can manifest as extreme quietness, withdrawal, inability to speak or respond, and dissociation.

How to respond:

- **Do not force interaction:** Give them space.
- **Ensure safety:** Remove them from the overwhelming situation if possible.
- **Offer quiet presence:** Be nearby without demanding anything.
- **Use simple, direct communication:** If they can respond, keep it minimal.
- **Avoid judgment:** Understand this is a coping mechanism.



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Possible Adjustments and Needs

Area	Potential Needs/Adjustments
Noise/Sensory	Quiet spaces, noise-cancelling headphones, avoidance of strong scents or bright lights, predictable sensory environments.
Routine	Advance notice of changes, consistent daily structure, clear expectations.
Food	Acceptance of a limited diet, clear preparation methods, understanding of sensory preferences (texture, temperature, taste).
Communication	Written communication, allowing time to respond, avoiding interruptions, clear and literal language, respecting non-verbal communication.
Special Interests	Allowing time and space to engage with interests, showing genuine interest, understanding their importance for regulation and joy.



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How to Respond When Someone Shares Their Diagnosis

Helpful Responses:

- 'Thank you for sharing that with me.'
- 'How are you feeling about it?'
- 'Is there anything you need from me now?'
- 'I'm here to listen.'
- 'What can I do to support you?'

Less Helpful Responses:

- 'Are you sure?' or 'But you seem so normal.'
- 'So, does this mean you can't...?'
- Offering unsolicited advice or trying to 'fix' them.
- Minimising their experiences.
- Immediately comparing them to other autistic people you know.

Language: What Terms Are Generally Accepted?

While preferences can vary, many autistic adults prefer **identity-first language** (e.g., 'autistic person' rather than 'person with autism'). This emphasises autism as an integral part of their identity.

It's generally accepted that the term "Asperger's" is no longer an appropriate or affirming term to identify an autistic person who is gifted, due to the historical origins of the term. ***Twice exceptional, or twice gifted is often preferred.***



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What Autistic People Often Wish Others Knew

- Autism is not a choice, a disease to be cured, or something that can be 'outgrown'.
- Sensory sensitivities are real and can be debilitating.
- Social misunderstandings are often due to different communication styles, not malice. Autistic people connect in different ways, and even express feelings on their face differently to neurotypicals. Try to meet them halfway, so they are not working so hard to speak your language. If you find this exhausting, imagine how hard it is for them, all day, everyday.
- Clarifying instructions and information is not a challenge or questioning a person's story, it is a genuine need for more information to avoid confusion or a miss understanding. For some neurotypicals it may feel jarring if questions are unexpected.
- Special interests are a source of joy, learning, and regulation.
- Stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour) is often a coping mechanism for anxiety or sensory input. Stimming is a way to stay connected, calm, relaxed, and recharge. Stimming is not something anyone should aim to "extinguish".

Autism as a Recognised Disability

Autism is a recognised disability. This recognition is not about deficiency in the individual, it acknowledges how the environment can impinge on an autistic brain. No single person has the power to change the entire environment around them. It is up to all of us to care for and support all members of society, creating spaces where autistic people can thrive without having to constantly adapt to a world not designed with them in mind.



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Co-occurring Conditions

Autism often co-occurs with other conditions. This is not a coincidence, many of these conditions share underlying neurological or genetic factors, or may develop as a result of living in a world not designed for autistic nervous systems.

Common co-occurring conditions include:

- **ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder):** Difficulties with attention regulation, executive function, and impulse control. Many people are both autistic and have ADHD.
- **Anxiety disorders:** Heightened anxiety is common, often related to sensory overload, social demands, uncertainty, or past trauma.
- **Depression:** Can develop from chronic stress, masking, social isolation, or unmet support needs.
- **PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder):** Autistic people may be more vulnerable to trauma, particularly from bullying, abuse, medical procedures, or invalidation.
- **Eating disorders or disordered eating:** May relate to sensory sensitivities, need for control, alexithymia (difficulty identifying emotions/hunger cues), or co-occurring conditions.
- **Sleep disorders:** Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or irregular sleep patterns are common.
- **Other chronic conditions:** chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, hypermobility, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, endometriosis, Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, dysautonomia/POTS, autoimmune conditions (lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid disorders), mast cell activation disorder, migraines, IBS and other gastrointestinal disorders.



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Each of these conditions may require separate assessment and support. A diagnosis of autism does not explain away or replace these other experiences, they can and do exist alongside autism and deserve attention in their own right.

The Strengths of an Autistic Brain

Autistic people bring remarkable strengths and perspectives to our world:

- **Exceptional pattern recognition:** The ability to see connections, details, and systems that others may overlook.
- **Clarity and genuineness:** Direct, honest communication that builds trust and authenticity.
- **Deep knowledge and insight:** You will learn so much from their focused expertise and unique perspectives.
- **A different lens on the world:** Autistic people see and experience the world differently, and this matters, many have changed the world through groundbreaking contributions in technology, science, physics, mathematics, arts, and innovation.
- **Loyalty and commitment:** Deep, steadfast relationships and dedication to people and causes they care about.
- **Creative problem-solving:** Approaching challenges from fresh angles and finding innovative solutions.
- **Attention to detail:** Noticing nuances and maintaining high standards in their areas of interest.



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A Practical Support Script

When you notice someone is struggling or overwhelmed, you could try saying:

'I can see you might be finding this difficult. I'm here if you need anything. Would you like to talk about it, would you prefer some quiet time, or is there something practical I can do to help?'

Clarify if they don't respond or say "I don't know". This can mean many things to many people. **Ask, what does your I don't know mean:**

- You don't want to tell me?
- You're overwhelmed?
- You can't talk anymore today?
- The way I asked you didn't make sense?

Offer them the option to reply without talking. Get to know their support preferences. It could be:

- A weighted blanket
- A dark space or dimmed lights
- A silent space
- A relaxing texture to touch
- Their favourite smell
- Their beloved pet
- Alone time
- Tight hug
- Temperature regulation (too hot)
- Help identifying overwhelm



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Clarity is Kindness: Communication Examples

Autistic people often prefer direct, clear communication. What might feel polite or subtle to a neurotypical person can feel confusing or anxiety-inducing to an autistic person. Here are some examples of how to communicate more clearly:

Vague (Neurotypical Style)	Clear (Neuroaffirming Style)
Are you leaving work soon?	Hey, I'm leaving now. Would you like to walk out with me?
We should catch up sometime.	Would you like to have coffee on Saturday at 10am?
Let me know if you need anything.	I can help with grocery shopping or picking up your prescription. Which would be helpful?
Are you okay?	I noticed you seem quiet. Do you need some space, or would you like to talk?
Whatever you want to do is fine.	I'm happy with either the museum or the park. Which would you prefer?
Don't worry about it.	I'm not upset. You don't need to apologise.
Maybe we could...	I'd like to go to the movies on Friday. Are you interested?



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Closing Note

The goal is to create an environment where the autistic person feels safe, has choice, can conserve their energy, and has the room to simply **be themselves**.

Further Reading & Resources

- **Divergent Futures:** Australian neuroaffirming resources, education and reflections on neurodivergence, identity, late diagnosis and support.
- **The Neurodivergent Woman Podcast:** Australian podcast hosted by neuropsychologist Dr Michelle Livock and clinical psychologist Monique Mitchelson, exploring autism, ADHD, masking, burnout, and identity.
- **Reframing Autism:** Australian autistic-led organisation with strengths-based articles, lived-experience resources and education for families, professionals and autistic people.
- **Yellow Ladybugs:** Australian organisation supporting autistic girls, women and gender-diverse people, with helpful resources.
- **Different, Not Less by Chloé Hayden:** Australian autistic author and advocate; helpful for understanding neurodivergent identity, self-acceptance and lived experience.
- **Anomalous by Em Rusciano:** Australian podcast exploring ADHD, autism, late diagnosis, women, masking and neurodivergent identity.

If you'd like any support, care, coaching or therapy to support your loved one or your self - contact Immersive Psychology Group Pty Ltd.

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