



# What is Autism?

Autism is a **neurodevelopmental difference**, not a disorder to be "fixed."

Autism **exists on a spectrum**, which means it affects people in different ways, at different times, in different situations.

**Every autistic person is unique** - spectrum means variation, not severity.

## Differences may include:



### Sensory preferences

Many Autistic people **process sensory input in a heightened or more intense way.**

- Sounds may feel intrusive
- bright lighting may be exhausting
- certain textures may be unbearable
- crowded places can become overwhelming very quickly.

Because of this, **getting through everyday environments often takes extra effort, planning, and self-regulation**, especially when a person is already tired or stressed.

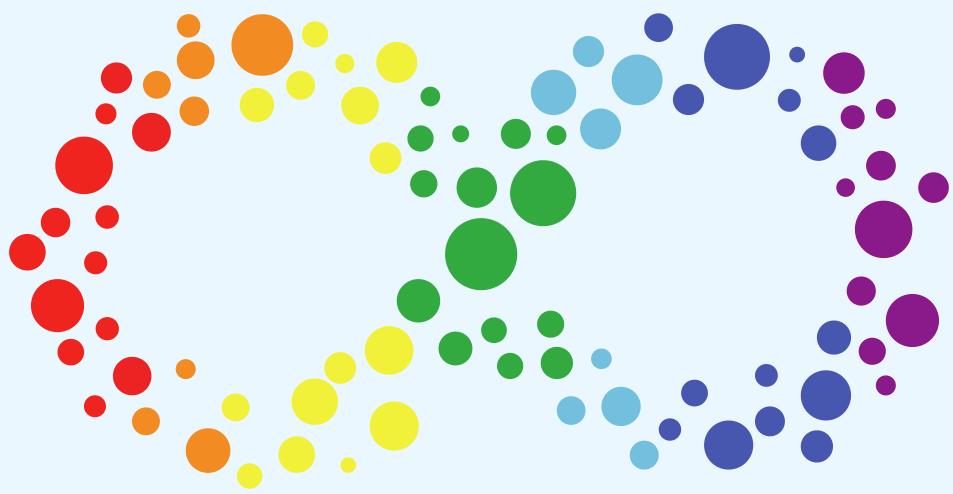
### Social energy.

Autistic people often want connection and enjoy socialising around shared interests, but **social interaction can take a lot of energy and require longer recovery periods afterwards**, especially in larger groups or busy settings.

Many Autistic adults also describe enjoying socialising that does not only rely on shared dialogue, such as engaging in shared interest-based activities.

## Communication preferences

- Many Autistic people prefer to communicate in a **clear, direct, precise, and thoughtful way**,
- Indirect communication, mixed messages, or implied social cues can be **tiring or confusing**.
- **Eye contact** can feel **uncomfortable**, intense, or distracting.



## Routine and predictability

- Many Autistic people are helped by **routine, sameness, and knowing what to expect**.
- **Predictability** can create a **sense of safety** and reduce the mental load of everyday life.
- **Unexpected changes**, vague plans, or having to constantly adapt can feel **disproportionately stressful**, even when other people seem unbothered

## Focused interests

- Many Autistic people gain a great deal of enjoyment, comfort, and restoration from the things they care deeply about.
- These interests can be both energising and soothing.
- The **level of focus, knowledge, and personal connection** to these interests can often be especially **strong**.
- **Talking about these interests** in depth is also a common and meaningful way for Autistic people **to connect with others**.

## Masking

“Masking” refers to making efforts to:

- hide one’s natural responses
- suppress movement patterns
- rehearse social scripts
- copy neurotypical behaviours associated with certain emotional responses
- manage how they come across in order to present themselves in a way that may be expected.

This can be very tiring for an Autistic person.

## Experience of overwhelm

Many Autistic people experience periods of overwhelm when too much builds up at once. This can be **triggered by**:

- **sensory overload**
- **sudden changes**
- **emotional stress**
- **social pressure**
- **simply too many demands** without enough recovery time.

Overwhelm might look like:

- crying
- agitation
- restlessness
- increased stimming
- self-injurious behaviour
- shutting down
- going quiet
- finding it difficult to speak clearly
- needing to completely retreat

**These responses** are not chosen or performed – they **are signs that a person's nervous system has been put under more strain than it can manage.**



## “Stimming”

Stimming can involve:

- body movements
- vocal sounds
- repeated phrases
- repeating the same activity such as replaying favourite songs or seeking out particular sensory experiences.

Reasons people stim include pleasure, **self-soothing, calming, sensory regulation, or coping with stress, managing overwhelm,** or improving focus.

## Deep empathy and care

Many Autistic people care intensely. Deep empathy and care may look like:

- being highly affected by other people's distress
- feeling deeply moved by cruelty or inequality
- having strong values around justice, honesty, and doing the right thing

This depth of feeling can be a real strength, but it can also be emotionally taxing when someone is repeatedly exposed to conflict, suffering, or people whose values feel very different from their own.