

Realising that you are autistic can prompt a lot of feelings. Maybe you're intrigued, relieved, shocked, upset, or joyful; these reactions, and more, are completely valid. Though it can be a lot to process, identifying your autism and learning about it will hopefully let you gain a deeper understanding of, and ultimately more empathy for, yourself—past, present and future.

Autism is defined as a neurodevelopmental disability, due to the difficulties autistic people can encounter when navigating a world that is largely built to suit the majority of people, who are neurotypical, over those who are neurodivergent. To be 'neurodivergent' is to have a different neurotype, or mental make-up, to that which is most common, being 'neurotypical'. Neurodivergence impacts how one interprets, experiences and responds to the world. Autism, as a neurotype, is therefore intertwined with one's personality, emotions, reactions, relationships, identity and overall experience of life. You may have seen autism described with the otherness-fearing, close-minded focus of mainstream society on its *challenges*—which, ironically, arise from the flaws and restrictions of this society itself—rather than its many wonderful aspects. This emphasis is disproportionate and ableist, and attempts to undermine the diversity, individuality, beauty and interest that comes with difference.

Being an intrinsic part of you, autism shapes your experience, to some extent, all the time. However, it can be helpful to learn about its impact through more concrete examples, so some areas of life where you may notice that your experience differs from a neurotypical person's are briefly summarised below. Of course, everyone is different, so it's to be expected that you'll relate to some experiences more, or less, than you will others.

- Social interaction:

You might find that socialising poses challenges, or feels draining, especially within neurotypical settings. Maybe you feel like there are certain people you can be yourself around, or are often on the same wavelength as, but it's rare to experience this within the broader public. You might find it difficult to notice or respond to non-verbal cues, like facial expressions or body language, or may spend a lot of time and energy thinking about or planning for these, to mask. 'Masking' is the process of forcing yourself into ill-fitting, normative expectations, often at the expense of your own wants or needs. Beyond these impacts, conversations or interactions might feel overwhelming, or you might need a longer time than others to take in information. Unspoken rules and social norms can feel

nonsensical, or frustrating, and the discomfort and pressure of masking can impact self-esteem, and lead to burnout or the development of social anxiety.

- Communication:

Often autistic people value truth and clarity, and both give and take information as it is. Maybe you find sarcasm difficult to sense, or tend to take things literally, or your honesty is sometimes interpreted as bluntness or insensitivity, when that is not your intent. You might find it difficult to express your needs, or take time to process and convey your thoughts and feelings. You may prefer clear, direct communication, or dislike small talk, and find yourself tripped up by the double meanings and hidden undercurrents of neurotypical conversation. This could cause difficulties for you, like unfair criticism or judgment, but you have no obligation to conform to ableist structures and standards of interacting, and to struggle to do so suggests a limitation of the systems in place, not of you.

- Sensory sensitivities:

Autistic people often experience an altered level of sensitivity to certain sensory input, such as light, sound, textures, tastes, smells, or internal sensations. Heightened sensitivity can mean that sensory information feels overwhelming or uncomfortable, which triggers anxiety, as you become overstimulated. It can be helpful to understand what overstimulation feels like for you and what it can be prompted by, so that you can acknowledge and address your needs by moving to a more sensory-friendly space, using earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones, or avoiding certain situations.

If you're curious, this video, around 2.36–2.55, shows an example of what experiencing heightened sensory input can look like: <https://youtu.be/KhT0NxCayEg>.

Sometimes, sensory input can also feel muted, and it is common for autistic people to experience difficulties with interoception, or registering and understanding your body's internal state. Feelings like hunger, thirst, pain, warmth or cold may be difficult to pinpoint, while many autistic people also struggle to name and distinguish their emotions, which is often referred to as alexithymia.

- Routine and Predictability:

Lots of autistic people thrive on routines, and find comfort in predictability. You might find changes or transitions stressful, draining or difficult—both within daily life, like when you travel from home to school or work, get out of bed, or get in and out of the shower—and on a larger scale. For instance, experiencing big life changes, like milestones and getting older, or leaving home or a job, may feel very distressing.

You might also find repetitive sounds or movements, or stimming, comforting. 'Stimming', or self-stimulatory behaviour, can present as different actions or habits, like foot-tapping, nail-biting, tongue-clicking, hair-twirling, hand-flapping, skin-picking, repeating words or singing, which regulate your nervous system and help you to feel more calm or in-control. These are performed more often by autistic people than neurotypical people, though everyone stims to some extent.

- Executive functioning:

Differences in executive functioning, or the brain's skillset to do with organisation, planning, time-management, problem-solving and regulating emotions and behaviours, means that you might experience difficulties or differences in these areas, and in how information is filtered and understood.

- Emotional regulation:

Autistic people are generally more susceptible to anxiety than non-autistic, or allistic, individuals, due to challenges navigating social situations, and a neurotypical-centric society in general, as well as sensory overload and difficulties with emotional regulation, among other struggles. For instance, those within the autistic community are often subjected to increased levels of criticism, exclusion, invalidation or mistreatment. Emotional regulation can be especially difficult in high-stress environments or when sensory input is overwhelming, and a state of emotional overwhelm can lead to meltdowns or shutdowns, which are intense, involuntary physical responses to overwhelm.

- Focus and Interests:

Having a special interest, or intense passion around and ability to immerse yourself in a topic, is quite common for autistic people. If you experience special interests, you might find that you lose track of time when you're able to concentrate wholly, or hyper-focus, on them, and that they boost your mood and often occupy your thoughts. You likely experience lasting, and powerful, curiosity and excitement around these interests. Special interests are a beautiful part of the autistic experience, which can bring a lot of joy when being discussed or explored, and often become areas of great expertise, skill or understanding.

The following dot points provide some information on ways that autistic neurotypes can differ, which it might be helpful to be aware of.

- Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

PDA is currently considered a profile of autism, which 1 in 5 autistic people are said to demonstrate traits of. It involves anxiety-driven avoidance of perceived or stated demands, which can result in the person who experiences PDA withdrawing, or having meltdowns or panic attacks. Though it can be mislabelled as defiance or “being difficult”, PDA generally stems from anxiety, especially around maintaining control, autonomy or a sense of emotional safety. It could be helpful to view PDA as a fight/flight/freeze/fawn survival response to anxiety triggered by demands for flexibility, spontaneity or change, or demands in general, which fail to meet one’s needs and feel overwhelmingly large and stressful. PDA can therefore make starting tasks very difficult, and if you experience it you might feel anxious, trapped, reactive or frozen in the face of demands or expectations. Appropriate support for those with a PDA profile includes using non-demanding language, creating predictable routines and incorporating choices, managing anxiety with relaxation techniques and sensory accommodations, and reducing or breaking down demands.

- Autism and ADHD

Though research findings on the overlap of co-occurrence between autism and ADHD are limited, they do show a clear link between the two, where 22-83% of autistic children also meet the diagnostic criteria for ADHD, while 30-65% of children with ADHD have clinically significant levels of autistic traits. Many genetic and neurobiological factors, as well as typical traits, overlap between ADHD and autistic neurotypes, so that they can be hard to distinguish and diagnoses can be missed. But since you are autistic, it could definitely be worthwhile to investigate ADHD as well. Those who are AuDHD (autistic-ADHDers) often experience and demonstrate qualities of both neurotypes, though these can present slightly differently once combined—at different times they can be intensified or masked by, at odds or working with, the other. If you are AuDHD, maybe you crave routine, consistency, novelty and chaos all at once, or in different ways depending on the situation. Maybe you hyperfocus intensely on special interests but find certain tasks near-impossible to start. You likely fidget and stim, and find certain sensory situations overwhelming, though sometimes you might relish this sensory intensity. You might make a comprehensive plan for your day and not stick to it whatsoever, or have months’ worth of admin organised and then forgotten about, wasting away in carefully designated spaces across your room. Being AuDHD is an often contradictory, frequently emotionally and sensorily intense experience, but it allows for powerful individuality, passion, creativity and drive.

Though being different from the norm is certainly not easy, it is, and you are, so valuable. More often than not, autistic people are interesting, fun, creative, intelligent, passionate, sensitive, empathetic, fair, honest, perceptive, brave, steadfast and genuine. It is in no way a

fault to communicate honestly, question rules, feel deeply, experience the world intensely, find things difficult, think outside the box, stay true to your values, face challenges, and to try. It is okay to need help, time or space, to set boundaries and prioritise yourself. You might be grieving time you've spent feeling out of place, or struggling and not knowing why, or experiencing criticism or judgment you never deserved, from others or from yourself. But you have every right to be exactly who you are, and the world is far better for it.

Resources

If you're interested in learning more about autism, here are some resources you might find useful, or validating.

Social media accounts:

- Neurodivergent Lou (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)
- Kaleidoscope Assessment (Facebook, Instagram)
- creatingwith_melissa (Instagram)
- neuroberrie (Instagram, TikTok)
- neuro_divinity (Instagram, TikTok)
- The Daily Tism (Instagram, Facebook)
- tism.and.cats (Instagram)
- neurodivergent_insights (Instagram)
- The Autistic Teacher (Facebook, Instagram)

Books:

- *Sincerely, Your Autistic Child* edited by Emily Paige Ballou, Sharon deVanport and Morénike Giwa Onaiwu
- *Unmasking Autism* by Dr Devon Price
- *Divergent Mind* by Jenara Nerenberg
- *Different, Not Less* by Chloé Hayden
- *Someone Like Me* edited by Clem Bastowe and Jo Case
- *Late Bloomer* by Clem Bastowe
- *The Neurodivergence Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD* by Jennifer Kemp and Monique Mitchelson

Podcasts:

- The Neurodivergent Woman (not just for women!)
- Uniquely Human
- PDA Voices
- Yellow Ladybugs

Videos:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwaaphuStxY>—what is autism?
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwu3iZSgf10>—commonly shared autistic experiences from late-diagnosed autistic people
- <https://youtu.be/KhT0NxCayEg>—explaining autism
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnyIM1hI2jc>—an example of communication/language/life through an autistic lens
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1AUdaH-EPM>—about autism, particularly helpful for those late-diagnosed

Websites:

- Reframing Autism: <https://reframing-autism-s-school.teachable.com/>
- Embrace Autism: <https://embrace-autism.com/>
- Amaze: <https://www.amaze.org.au/>
- Kristy Forbes, specialising in PDA: <https://www.kristyforbes.com.au/>
- The Neurodivergent Woman Podcast: <https://www.ndwomanpod.com/>
- PDA Society: <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/>
- Onwards & Upwards Psychology:
<https://www.onwardsandupwardspsychology.com.au/>
- NeuroClastic: <https://neuroclastic.com/>
- Neurodivergent Insights: <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/>
- Yellow Ladybugs: <https://www.yellowladybugs.com.au/>
- The Kidd Clinic: <https://www.kiddclinic.com.au/>

Reading:

Particularly helpful if you've just recently found out you are autistic:

- <https://reframingautism.org.au/service/welcome-pack/>
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/insights-about-autism/202003/5-messages-my-younger-autistic-self>
- <https://www.onwardsandupwardspsychology.com.au/post/neurodiversity-affirming-resources>

On autism and the nervous system:

- <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/blog/autistic-adhd-nervous-system#:~:text=Several%20studies%20have%20found%20that,does%20not%20as%20flexibly%20adapt>

On tools to self-assess whether you might have autistic traits:

- <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/a-review-of-autism-screeners-for-adults/>

Or traits of ADHD:

- <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/a-review-of-adhd-screeners/>

On executive dysfunction:

- <https://www.additudemag.com/executive-function-disorder-in-adults-symptoms/>

On monotropism, or the autistic attention style:

- <https://embrace-autism.com/monotropism/>

On sensory issues:

- <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/blog/sensory-issues-in-adults>

On RSD (Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria):

- <https://embrace-autism.com/rejection-sensitive-dysphoria-in-adhd-and-autism/>

On PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance):

- <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/demand-avoidance>

On social anxiety and autism:

- [https://neurodivergentinsights.com/social-anxiety-or-autism/#:~:text=Social%20anxiety%20is%20particularly%20common,%25\)%20\(NICE%2C%202013a](https://neurodivergentinsights.com/social-anxiety-or-autism/#:~:text=Social%20anxiety%20is%20particularly%20common,%25)%20(NICE%2C%202013a)

On autistic burnout:

- https://files.zandahealth.com/380cbc5f-2efa-444b-b248-eb219a1c93c4/public/Burnout_handout-20a360de.pdf

For families, partners, and allies, post-diagnosis:

- <https://reframingautism.org.au/a-manifesto-for-allies-adopting-an-acceptance-approach-to-autism/>, <https://reframingautism.org.au/learn-with-us/>
- <https://www.onwardsandupwardspsychology.com.au/post/so-someone-just-told-you-they-re-autistic-what-next>

On health conditions associated with neurodivergence:

- <https://neurodivergentinsights.com/autism-and-health-issues/>—It may be useful to explore conditions like Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS), hypermobility, Ehlers-Danlos syndromes, Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD), iron deficiency, vitamin/mineral deficiencies and more, as they tend to be common among the neurodivergent community.