



IRELAND'S AUTISM CHARITY

# Talking About Autism

## A Language Guide



#SameChance

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## A Note On Language

Please note that Language and what is considered best practice with regard to language will evolve over time. This Language Guide will be updated routinely to reflect evolving research, evidence and cultural influences.



Autism has enjoyed greater visibility, understanding and acceptance in recent years, but there can still be some uncertainty among wider society around what is the best language to use when we are talking about autism and about the experiences of Autistic individuals.

In a 2016 study from the UK National Autistic Society, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the UCL (University College London) Institute of Education inquiring about the use of language in autism, many Autistic adults preferred the term “Autistic person” to describe their experience of being Autistic, whereas families and professionals favoured the term “people on the autism spectrum”.

A recent study “The use of language in autism research. Trends in “Neurosciences” (Monk, R., Whitehouse, A., & Waddington, H. (2022), reaffirms the findings of the 2016 study.

AsIAm recognises that language can be a powerful and evocative way of describing ourselves and that Autistic people will have many different reasons for why they prefer to use one term over another.

It is evident that there are diverse ways of talking about autism and Disability, and how Autistic individuals may choose to identify themselves.

These are:

- Identity-first language (“Autistic person/people,” “Disabled people”);
- Person-first language (“people with disabilities,” “people with intellectual disabilities”).

## *Identity First Language*

Many Autistic individuals prefer to use identity-first language, like Autistic person which you may either see being capitalised (i.e. Autistic person) or in lowercase (i.e. Autistic person, Disabled person).

Many Autistic people see being Autistic as a core and essential part of their identity. They embrace their identity as an Autistic person as a part of who they are and as a central part of their experience of living in society. They may see being Autistic as either a difference, a Disability, or both.

This is informed by schools of thinking like Neurodiversity and the Social Model of Disability, which both emphasis the way in which society is organised and structured often poses disabling barriers that can hinder or prevent Disabled people, including Autistic individuals, from feeling included and from equally taking part in society.



## *What is the Social Model of Disability?*

The Social Model of Disability was a theory of Disability founded by British Disability rights activists and scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, including the late British Disability Rights scholar Michael Oliver, which states that Disabled people are Disabled by barriers within society, not by their difference or impairment. These barriers range from physical, communication or social barriers, to negative public attitudes, barriers accessing supports, barriers within the environment, to differences in how people socialise and understand each other. These can all make it harder for Disabled people, including Autistic individuals to be fully accepted and included.

The Social Model of Disability supports the view that Disabled people, including Autistic individuals, have the right to fully participate in society, and that everybody in society has a part to play to address barriers which exclude or discriminate against Disabled people. By removing or reducing these barriers, society can support Disabled people to feel included and to equally participate in society and in their local community.

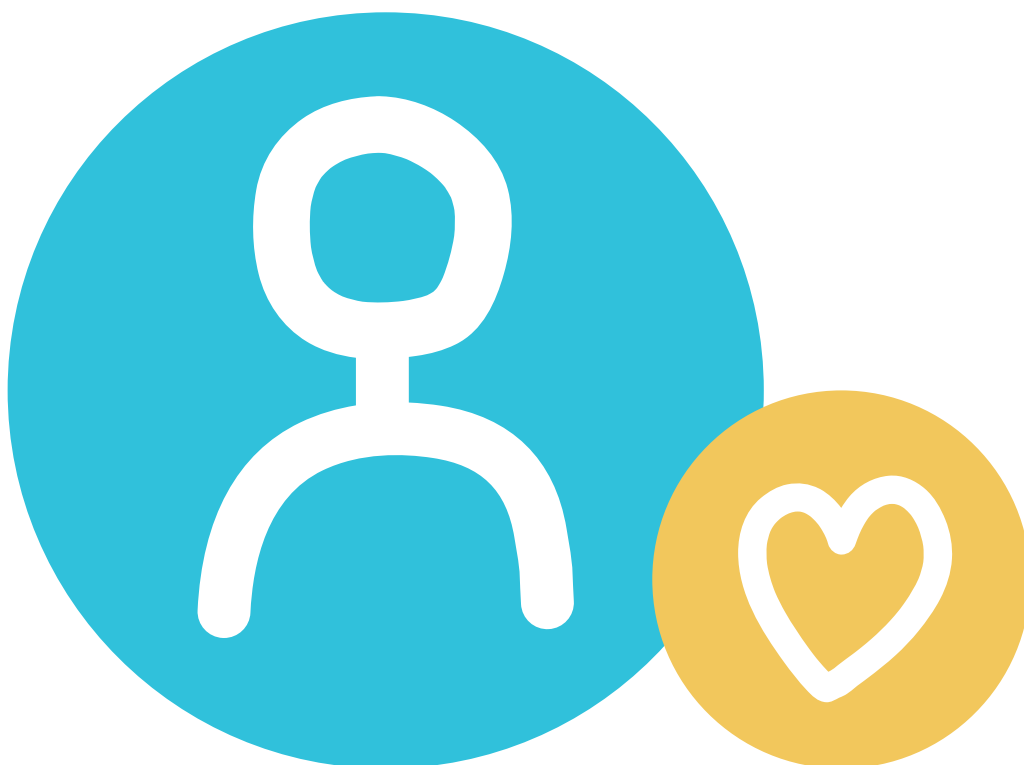
## *Person First Language*

Some individuals within the wider autism community, including families and/or professionals together with some Autistic individuals, may prefer to use person-first language, which is also a completely valid way of identifying Autistic individuals if this is the preference of the Autistic individual.

Individuals preferring to use person-first language may wish to do so as for them, it may reflect that they see the person before their Disability or difference. Some families prefer to use person-first language as they do not wish to have an autism diagnosis define who they are or their child is or what they or their child wants to do.

They may have reasonable and legitimate concerns that attaching an identity to themselves or their loved one's Disability or difference like 'Autistic' or 'Disabled' could potentially expose them to feeling stigmatised, to experiencing discrimination or adversity, and that these experiences could potentially have a negative impact on how they decide to live their life or may even limit opportunities in the future.

On the other hand, there are recent movements led by Autistic self-advocates and by the wider Disability rights movement which look to reclaim terms that were once seen as marginalising or stigmatising, including 'Autistic,' 'Disabled,' and recast these words or identities in a more positive, empowering light. This gives the communities who reclaim these terms, like Autistic people, a sense of pride, a distinct identity, an opportunity to bond and share common experiences, and a feeling that they belong to a wider community of like-minded people with similar interests and life experiences.



## Autistic Spelling

You may often see Autistic people also spell Autistic with a capital A, to recognise that they do not just see their autism as a neurodevelopmental difference or Disability or a different neurotype.

Autistic individuals are part of an Autistic community, with a distinct identity and culture that each Autistic individual can also identify with and participate in. They also see this as distinct from the wider autism community which can also include allies like families, partners, friends, professionals (like Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, psychologists, teachers, or Special Needs Assistants), carers and supporters.

It is always important to stress that the language used about Autistic people or the Autistic community or, indeed, the wider autism community should always be guided by Autistic individuals and that language about autism and Autistic people will continually change and evolve.

This is because the Autistic community is becoming more diverse. As more people either receive a formal diagnosis or self-identify become a part of the community and share their experiences, they feel that they belong and feel authentically represented both within the community and as part of society as their authentic selves.

To reflect the preferences of Autistic people in terms of how they wish to identify themselves and be represented, AsIAM uses identity-first language and "Autistic people," "the Autism community", and "the Autistic community" throughout our campaigns, our Advocacy, Policy and Community Support work, our Adult and Employment Support teams, our Family Support teams and, in our Training programmes.



## What is Neurodiversity?

The term “neurodiverse” is used to describe a group of individuals who have a variety of neurological differences. Including all neurotypes, neurotypical and neurodivergent, to include autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and others. It emphasises the idea that these differences are part of the natural variations of human diversity.

Like biodiversity in nature, Neurodivergent people believe that there is no hierarchy as such when it comes to different types of thinking and understanding the world.

Neurodivergent people believe that there is no one “normal” type of brain, and instead, there are lots of different types of brains which think and process information in different ways, called ‘neurotypes.’

From a neurodiversity perspective, many advocates see autism as a ‘neurotype,’ and as a difference, rather than just as a Disability in itself.



A neurotype is a type of brain in terms of how a person thinks about, interacts with the world, and responds to different ways of communicating, such as body language or social cues, etc, as well as to different ways of thinking.

As well as autism, neurotypes also include other neurodevelopmental differences like ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Epilepsy, Tourette’s Syndrome, and some mental health conditions, among other differences or disabilities.

Neurodiversity’s core idea is that these neurodevelopmental differences should be recognised and respected as a natural and essential part of human diversity and that Neurodivergent people have the right to be accepted as they are, as their fully authentic selves.

Neurodiversity advocates also believe that Autistic people do not always need or necessarily want treatments, cures or compliance-based interventions. They also believe that many barriers created by society’s misunderstanding of autism and attitudes towards autism and other neurotypes which were once the prevailing attitudes but are now out of date, can disable Neurodivergent people from being fully included in society.

Many Autistic people and Neurodivergent people believe that society can benefit by allowing them to flourish, to live their lives authentically and to be included in society without needing to 'mask' or camouflage traits other people might feel uncomfortable with.

By accommodating Autistic peoples' support needs, society can help Autistic people to thrive and live active, fulfilling lives in the community, and create a more inclusive society. Neurodiversity advocates use a few terms to describe their experience of living with different neurotypes like autism.

Many people with neurodevelopmental differences or disabilities may often use 'Neurodivergent' to describe the way their thoughts and characteristics diverge or differ from what society expects of us, while a 'Neurotypical' person thinks and experiences the world in ways that society considers to be typical.

'Neurodiverse' refers to a group of people who may contain one or more Neurodivergent members.



No matter what language you use, the most important thing is to accept an Autistic person as they are and to be open and willing to learn from Autistic people's perspectives.

Autistic people, as well as Disabled people want to be accepted as full and equal citizens and to have their voices heard and respected, with dignity, choice and independence over their lives. Autistic people do not want to be seen as objects of pity or charity, or as 'broken' individuals that need to be fixed through therapies, medical or compliance-based interventions.

Often when conversations happen regarding autism, particularly where people who might be perceived to have 'high support needs or have a 'severe' or 'profound' Disability are involved, it can focus on them being in situations where they are distressed, why they are distressed or what the cause of their distress is or what type of care or services are needed. There is less focus on what an Autistic person needs to live the life they want, and how they can be supported to communicate their needs or exercise their agency and independence, and to have their preferences or needs listened to or acted upon.

It is always best practice to ask an Autistic person how they would like to be identified. When you are using language about autism, it is essential to come from the perspective that Autistic people are people, to be mindful of your own beliefs and attitudes about autism and where possible, a willingness to be guided by Autistic people's perspectives and everyday living experiences. Autistic people are not objects of pity, 'broken' people in need of fixing, nor are they 'inspirational' figures just because of their differences, as opposed to their thoughts and actions.

Fundamentally, Autistic people have the same rights as everybody else, regardless of the type and degree of support they need, even if sometimes they may wish to use different ways, supports or accommodations to access these rights. Autistic people have the right to make decisions that affect their lives and to receive any supports and accommodations they need to help make these decisions. Autistic people's communication styles are as unique as Autistic people themselves. Not all Autistic people communicate or necessarily wish to communicate through spoken language.

Many Autistic people are non-speaking, some are gestalt communicators (communicate through memorised phrases or words), and some prefer to communicate through AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication, such as text-to-speech functions on their phone, computer or tablet or other devices or software) or other forms of Assistive Technology, or through writing, among many others.

It is particularly important that you respect and accept as valid each Autistic person's communication preferences.

It is always a great idea to educate yourself on these diverse ways of Autistic communication styles, and how each Autistic person prefers to communicate. If you are unsure on which means of communication is best to support the Autistic person, you can ask them what their preferences are. If you find they cannot indicate to you what their communication preferences are, you can also seek advice from their family members, carers or advocates who support them.



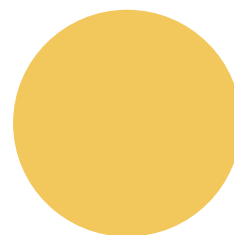
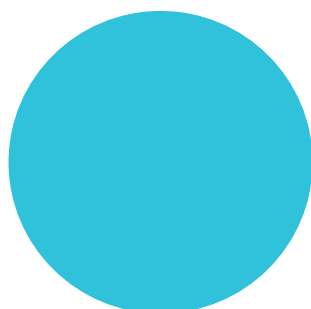
## What are some words Autistic people use?

The following is some of the language that many Autistic people use to describe their experience of being Autistic and living in society. Whilst this is not an exhaustive list of the terminology that Autistic people use; it does give a sense of the language they use to speak about their day-to-day experiences living in society.

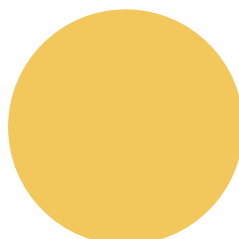
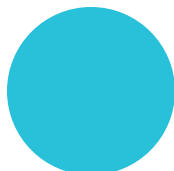
<b>Preferred Language</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<b>Autistic person</b>	<p>Many Autistic people prefer "Autistic person" (or Autistic person with a lowercase a) because they see their autism as a core part of their identity, and as essential to who they are and how they experience and understand the world – a state of being, as opposed to a state of mind or a state of having.</p> <p>Many Autistic people also see autism as a natural part of human thinking that has always existed. Many Autistic people see their autism as a difference and/or a Disability, particularly if their access or support needs are not acknowledged, addressed or accommodated.</p>
<b>Autism is a difference and/or a Disability</b>	<p>Whilst autism is primarily a neurotype and a different way of thinking and understanding the world, many Autistic people also consider it to be a Disability, in the sense that not every person or organisation an Autistic person interact with or use will always be willing to understand, appreciate or accommodate Autistic ways of thinking, communicating, processing, or interacting with the world.</p> <p>There are aspects of how society is organised and structured, like the physical and sensory environment, how they communicate, how they socialise, how they access services and supports, or wider society's attitudes to Autism, which can shape how an Autistic person might feel accepted and included in society.</p> <p>If these access barriers are not addressed, this can disable Autistic people from being accepted and included in society, and from feeling valued as equal citizens.</p>

<b>Preferred Language</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<b>Support Needs</b>	<p>This refers to the level and the type of support that an Autistic person might need in aspects like education or everyday living, as set out by the DSM-5. This replaced functioning labels used by previous DSMs to decide on an Autistic person's level of support needs.</p> <p>These range from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level 1 ("Requiring support"), where an Autistic person might need some supports.</li> <li>• Level 2 ("Requiring substantial support"), where an Autistic person might need more substantial or intense support.</li> <li>• Level 3 ("Requiring very substantial support"), where an Autistic person may require a lot of support or more intense supports, to go about their everyday lives.</li> </ul>
<b>Allistic</b>	<p>This is a term that many Autistic people use to refer to a person who does not have a formal diagnosis of Autism or who do not self-identify as Autistic.</p>
<b>Neurotypical</b>	<p>This refers to a person or people who do not have a neurodevelopmental difference or a type of Neurodiversity, such as Autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc.</p>
<b>Neurodivergent People</b>	<p>People who have one or more types of neurodivergence or neurodevelopmental differences or disabilities.</p>
<b>Neurodiverse</b>	<p>This is often used to refer to a group that includes one or more Neurodivergent people.</p>
<b>Masking</b>	<p>This refers to when an Autistic person, consciously or unconsciously, suppresses the fact that they are Autistic or who suppresses Autistic parts of their identity and culture to fit in with everybody else in society - such as suppressing stimming making eye contact, or having to work on how they appear in public. Masking can have extremely negative consequences for an Autistic person's wellbeing, and can often lead to Autistic burnout, so you should not expect an Autistic person to not be themselves or to have to suppress Autistic parts of themselves to be included.</p>

<b>Preferred Language</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<b>Unmasking</b>	<p>Unmasking is the process of finding situations where an Autistic person feels more comfortable, confident, and safe to be fully open about being their Autistic selves, and where the neurotypical people in their lives adjust to include and accepts them. For many Autistic people, it may include unlearning feelings of guilt, anxiety or shame that can be associated with Autistic traits if they are not accepted by wider society and taking a greater pride and acceptance of these traits as a part of who they are</p> <p>Autistic people may have different situations where they mask and unmask. A person's mask may be higher in situations they may find stressful like work, travelling or in school or a party, lower while doing activities they enjoy or interested in and gone completely when alone, or with people or in environments that they feel comfortable doing so, like family or close friends.</p>
<b>Autistic Burnout</b>	<p>Autistic burnout is a state of intense physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion that can arise for many Autistic people because of the additional load of having to navigate a world that is not always built with Autistic people in mind, or to accommodate Autistic people's needs. This often arises from having to consistently be in situations where they need to mask their Autistic traits or prolonged periods of sensory overload.</p>
<b>Neurotype</b>	<p>A type of brain in terms of how a person thinks about, interacts with the world, and responds to different ways of communicating, such as body language or social cues.</p>



<b>Preferred Language</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<b>Spoons</b>	Spoons is a metaphor used by many Autistic people and within the chronic pain community, to describe the amount of physical, mental, or emotional energy a person might have in a day, and how much energy it takes to do everyday activities. This is derived from Spoon Theory, created by Christine Miserandino, as a literal or visual way of describing the more limited reserves of energy that many members of both communities' experience and the way that everyday activities we do can often take up more of their energy. A person is said to use spoons when they go out and do an activity (i.e., going to school, commuting to work, or meeting a friend for a coffee, making dinner, etc), and you may find yourself "out of spoons" if you have spent your available energy and you feel exhausted.
<b>Infodumping</b>	Infodumping is when a person, typically Autistic or Neurodivergent, talks extensively about their special interest or a particular topic or hobby they are interested in or passionate about. Many Autistic people see this as a way of showing affection as they believe that it shows that an Autistic person trusts the person with something they care as much about as their special interest.
<b>Hyperfocus</b>	This describes a period where an Autistic person or Neurodivergent person intensely focuses on what they are doing, or what interests them, often to the point that all that matters to the person in the moment is the subject or activity they are interested in.
<b>Stimming</b>	Stimming (short for self-stimulatory behaviour) is repetitive series of actions or movements where an Autistic person may do when they are excited, anxious, or stimulated.





<b>Preferred Language</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<b>Hyperfixation</b>	<p>Hyperfixation is an interest that an Autistic person may be completely engrossed with, be it a hobby, movie, book, or special interest and so on.</p> <p>Whilst it does share some similarities with a special interest, a hyperfixation may not always be enjoyable and can potentially consume the person's life where a person may lose their sense of time or have little energy to focus on other things.</p>
<b>Alexithymia</b>	<p>Alexithymia is a co-occurring difference which can also come with Autism which broadly describes where a person can have more difficulty in identifying, describing or processing their own emotions or feelings and understanding the emotions expressed by others. An Autistic person with alexithymia may need more time than a neurotypical person to process their emotions or feelings, or to express themselves, and they might experience more difficulty in reading or processing the emotions felt by others.</p>
<b>Monotropism</b>	<p>Monotropism is a theory of Autism developed by Autistic researchers, Dinah Murray and Wenn Lawson. Monotropic minds can focus very intently on one thing at a time with very intense interests, though they can struggle with shifting their attention away from their interest or activity. This is sometimes described as 'flashlight' focus due to not only its intensity, but how other aspects of their lives fade into 'darkness' when they are focused on a particular interest or task.</p>
<b>Double Empathy Theory</b>	<p>The Double Empathy Theory is an idea coined by Autistic researcher Damian Milton which challenges the idea that Autistic people lack empathy, instead suggesting that Autistic people experience the world, communicate, form relationships, talk to others and express emotions differently to non-Autistic people.</p> <p>The Theory also states that there are situations where Neurotypical people may not always understand or know how to connect with Autistic culture and communication and situations where Autistic people may not always understand or know how to connect with Neurotypical culture or communication. Because of the differences between how Autistic people connect with the world and how Neurotypical people connect with the world, the gaps in both our perspectives can create problems in understanding each other.</p>

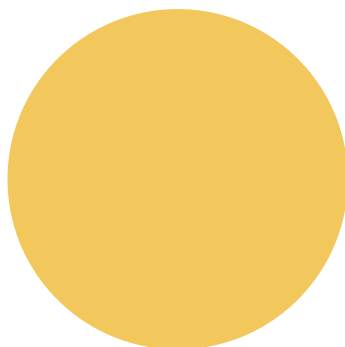
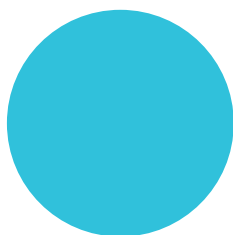


<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<i>What can I say instead?</i>
<p>"Has", "Suffers from" or "is a victim of" Autism</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Autism is a disease/illness"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"... lives with Autism"</p>	<p>Clinical professionals are actively involved in diagnosing Autism and developing strategies that support Autistic people to meet their access needs, and so are often the first port-of-call when somebody seeks a formal diagnosis or self-identifies as Autistic.</p> <p>This has often led to medicalised language being used to describe the experiences of Autistic people, which has the effect of portraying Autism in a negative light and attaching stigma and negative perceptions to Autism from the outset.</p> <p>Many Autistic people understandably have strong feelings about how Autism is referred to by professionals, which can often be at odds with how many Autistic people wish to be identified. Many within the community look to move away from medicalised language around Autism towards adopting a neuro-affirmative language which centres Autistic people's agency, perspectives and living experiences.</p> <p>Autism should not be considered an illness, disorder, or a disease. It is important to stress that Autistic people are not broken people that need to be cured or fixed because of their Autism, just for having a formal Autism diagnosis, but should be embraced and appreciated for who they are and with accommodations for an support needs they need.</p>	<p>"... is Autistic"</p>



<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<i>What can I say instead?</i>
<p>Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Disorder"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)</p>	<p>While Autism is sometimes referred to as a 'disorder', often by people who may not necessarily have first-hand experience of being Autistic, a lot of Autistic people express a strong dislike to the use of the word 'disorder' to describe being Autistic. Many Autistic people believe that viewing Autism under such medical, terms is very damaging, which can have the effect of perpetuating stigma and fuelling negative stereotypes surrounding Autism.</p> <p>Autistic people can often feel that a considerable stigma persists around Autism, and that they internalise negative attitudes towards Autism. Many Autistic people believe that these factors can often lead to extremely negative consequences for many Autistic people's wellbeing and quality-of-life.</p> <p>Many Autistic people prefer to describe being Autistic as a "difference," or a "neurotype" rather than a "disorder". This is because an Autistic person's way of thinking is not "wrong" or "broken" - just a different way of thinking, understanding, and processing the world.</p> <p>Many Autistic people, particularly Autistic adults, do not want treatments, cures or therapies centred on harmful approaches such as compliance-based therapies for their Autism or their Autistic traits. Instead, everyone in society can adjust to accept and include Autistic people and families.</p>	<p>"Difference"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"... is Autistic"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Autistic people"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Autistics"</p>

 <i>Avoid</i>	 <i>Why?</i>	 <i>What can I say instead?</i> 
<p>Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Unit</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Autism Unit</p>	<p>The word "unit" carries medicalised assumptions around how Autistic people are educated and presumes that all Autistic pupils need to be educated in segregated settings, even though this is not the case.</p> <p>Most Autistic people are educated in mainstream classrooms, though there are also many people within the community who are educated in a special school or an Autism class in a mainstream school. For many Autistic people and families, the word "unit" implies that pupils who are in autism classes are in clinical settings and that they always need to be educated away from their peers, in separate classrooms or schools.</p>	<p>Autism Class</p>





<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<i>What can I say instead?</i>
<p>"High-Functioning" or "Low-Functioning"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Mild", "Moderate", "Severe" or "Profound"</p>	<p>Autism is a spectrum where no two people will experience exactly the same barriers to participation or have the same support needs.</p> <p>Deriving from the medical profession, these clinical descriptors which aimed at describing what a professional perceives to be a person's level of support needs were carried over into everyday use.</p> <p>Whilst these terms are aimed at giving clinicians clarity over what traits to look for when going through the diagnostic process, however their use has the effect of causing harm to Autistic people. First, it frames Autistic traits in an extremely negative light (i.e., "persistent deficits", "abnormal", "failure", "severity"), which has led to stigma and negative public attitudes to prevail around Autism.</p> <p>It has also led many Autistic people to have negative perceptions of themselves and their differences and personal qualities. They also do not fully capture how Autistic people experience being Autistic nor do they reflect their capacity to make choices and decisions.</p> <p>Autism is a diverse spectrum of traits and differences that no two people will experience exactly the same way or have the same support needs.</p>	<p>Support Needs</p>



## Avoid

## Why?

## What can I say instead?

"Asperger Syndrome"

Asperger Syndrome is no longer an official diagnosis used by clinical professionals as this was amalgamated into a broader definition of Autism (labelled "Autism Spectrum Disorder") in the DSM-5, the manual many clinical professionals use to diagnose Autistic people in Ireland.

Asperger Syndrome is used to describe people who experience no speech differences, who are perceived to have average or higher levels of intelligence, and who may be perceived to not need a lot of support. However, the use of this term has the effect of reinforcing preconceived ideas around Autism, which may not fully reflect what it is like to be Autistic for many people.

The figure it was named after, Dr. Hans Asperger, has become a more contentious and controversial figure within the Autism community in recent years than he would have been when the term was given its name. Recent studies have posthumously connected Asperger's work on Autism to a Nazi eugenics programme in his native Austria, which has led to many advocates disavowing his work on Autism and not wishing to be associated with him.

However, there are some people within the community who also choose to identify with the term "Asperger Syndrome" (or "Aspie"), as this was what they were diagnosed with at the time, or they might also identify with some of its cultural aspects. It is important that if they decide to use these terms, to respect their preference.

Autistic Person



<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<i>What can I say instead?</i>
<p>Backward</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Deranged</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Handicapped</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Re*****d</p>	<p>Understanding of Autism and Disability have evolved in recent years. For years, people have used outdated terms about Autistic people and Disabled people which reinforced harmful stereotypes around Autism and Disability.</p> <p>Autism has inaccurately been perceived as a mental health condition or an intellectual Disability, and this has led people to use derogatory terms which have the effect of many people seeing Autism in a negative light and to stigmatising Autistic people. Although many Autistic people may also have an intellectual Disability or a mental health condition, it is wrong to use these terms to 'other' Autistic people and Disabled people.</p> <p>Many Autistic people see their Autism as a critical part of who they are and may prefer not to use terms that minimise or separate their Disability or difference from their worth, dignity, experience, or achievements as people.</p>	<p>"People with a learning Disability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"People with an intellectual Disability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Disabled people"</p>



Avoid	Why?	What can I say instead?
<p>"Special needs" (Special Needs children, Children with Special Needs)</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Special"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Additional needs"</p>	<p>Many Disabled people consider "special," "special needs", and to a lesser extent "additional needs", to be patronising, as many believe that it can reinforce outdated attitudes around Autism and Disability - that portrays Autistic people as objects of pity, rather than having rights, independence, or agency over their lives.</p> <p>These are often seen as euphemistic terms which can allow people who might feel uncomfortable to talk about issues relating to disavility without having to directly discuss a person's difference or Disability or address the barriers that Disabled people experience in society.</p> <p>Whilst Disability and Autism can be difficult topics for neurotypical people to discuss, where it can be hard to know what the right language is to use, it is important to remember that the needs or rights of Autistic and Disabled people are not "additional" or "special". Autistic and Disabled people have the same rights as everybody else, even if they might sometimes need different supports to access these rights, or to live their lives in the way they want to.</p> <p>"Special needs" or "additional needs" can be used in an educational or medical context to refer to pupils (i.e., some Autistic people, or people with disabilities who need additional supports related to their education) who might attend a special school or an Autism class for part or all the school week.</p> <p>Whilst "special needs" and "special education" is commonly used in schools and in clinical settings to refer to the needs of Autistic and disavled children as many in the Autism and Disability communities take issue with the use of this term as euphemisms for Autism and other differences or disabilities, it is best practice to avoid using these terms to refer to Autism, or Disability more generally. Even if you work.</p>	<p>"Disabled people"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"People with Disabilities"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Autistic people"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Within an education context, you can also use "Support Needs"</p>



Avoid	Why?	What can I say instead?
<p>"Diffability" / "Different ability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Handicapable"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Disability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Differently abled"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Overcame their Autism/Disability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Overcame the odds"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Despite/in spire of their Autism/Disability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Look past their Disability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Inspirational"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Courageous"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Defying our Autism/Disability"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Our Autism/Disability did not stop us from..."</p>	<p>Whilst some people can use these terms to try to celebrate Autistic people or Disabled people, it can in fact be harmful or reinforce negative stereotypes around Autism. It can suggest that it is not OK to simply be Autistic or Disabled and be part of society, that they must also be inspirational in some way to have worth and dignity in society.</p> <p>It also implies that their Disability or Autism itself is the limiting barrier is keeping Autistic people or Disabled people from ever doing what they want to do, and not looking at what society can do to accept or include Autistic or Disabled people.</p> <p>Whilst an Autistic person is not inspirational just because they are Autistic or Disabled, they have many positive traits that you might find inspiring.</p> <p>Autism and Disability are not dirty words. It should not be seen as something that is taboo, a negative aspect or trait of a person to avoid, or an obstacle to overcome. It is possible to be successful in their chosen career or field that they are interested in, and still be Autistic or Disabled.</p> <p>We need not be afraid of using these terms when talking about Autistic and Disabled people, as these are terms that many Autistic people and Disabled people prefer and would like everybody to use when talking about Autism or Disability.</p>	<p>"Autistic"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Disabled people"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"People with Disabilities"</p>



<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<i>What can I say instead?</i>
<p>"Normally developing children/adults"</p>	<p>Using "normal" when referring to non-Autistic people implies that Autistic people are somehow 'abnormal' or 'broken' for developing differently from neurotypical people. It also infers that Autistic people need to be 'fixed' or 'cured' of their Autistic traits.</p> <p>It also fuels the idea that Autism and Disability are taboo subjects to avoid, rather than something to embrace as part of the human experience. At least 1 in every 65 people are Autistic, around 1 in 10 people are neurodivergent and around 1 in 7 people have one or more Disabilities, so it is highly likely that you know somebody that belongs to any or all these communities, be it a family member, a friend, a loved one, or somebody you know in the community.</p> <p>There have always been Autistic people and Disabled people - it is just that attitudes towards Autism and Disability are evolving, and they know more about these differences and how to accommodate their access needs!</p>	<p>"Neurotypical"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Allistic"</p> <p>OR</p> <p>"Non-Autistic children/adults"</p>

# Guidelines on Autism and Imagery

The use of symbols like puzzle pieces, ribbons, and lightbulbs in relation to autism has generated significant discussion within the autism community.

## Barriers Related to Media Portrayals of Autism

1. **Stereotyping:** Media often depicts Autistic individuals through narrow stereotypes (e.g., the “savant” genius or the nonverbal child), which can lead to a misunderstanding of the diversity within the autism spectrum.
2. **Lack of Authentic Voices:** Many portrayals do not include the perspectives of Autistic individuals, leading to narratives that do not reflect their experiences or needs.
3. **Overemphasis on Deficits:** Media representations may focus heavily on challenges associated with autism, overshadowing the strengths, talents, and positive contributions of Autistic individuals.

## Here are some guidelines to consider when using imagery related to autism:

### 1. Understand the Context

- **Historical Significance:** The puzzle piece has been a widely recognized symbol for autism since the 1960s, initially intended to represent the complexity of the condition. However, it has also faced criticism for implying that Autistic individuals are “missing” something or are inherently incomplete.
  - **Diverse Perspectives:** It’s important to acknowledge that opinions on imagery can vary greatly among Autistic individuals and their families. Some may embrace these symbols, while others may find them problematic.
- .....

### 2. Promote Positive Representation

- **Focus on Strengths:** When using imagery, consider emphasizing the strengths, talents, and diverse experiences of Autistic individuals rather than presenting them solely through the lens of challenges. For instance, featuring visuals of Autistic individuals engaging in activities they excel in can highlight their capabilities.
- **Celebrate Neurodiversity:** Use imagery that reflects the concept of neurodiversity, valuing all neurological variations as part of the natural human experience. This can help shift the conversation toward acceptance and inclusion.

### 3. Use Inclusive Language

- **Identity-First Language:** When discussing autism, it's beneficial to use identity-first language (e.g., "Autistic person") to emphasize the individual rather than defining them solely by their diagnosis. However, be respectful of personal preferences, as some may prefer person-first language (e.g., "person with autism").
  - **Avoid Stereotypes:** Be cautious of generalizations about Autistic individuals. Each person's experience is unique, and it's vital to acknowledge their individuality.
- .....

### 4. Engage with the Community

- **Involve Autistic Individuals:** Seek input from Autistic individuals and their families when using imagery or creating educational materials. Their perspectives can guide respectful and meaningful representations.
  - **Listen and Learn:** Be open to feedback and willing to adapt your approach based on the voices and experiences of the autism community.
- .....

### 5. Create Positive Imagery Alternatives

- **Alternative Symbols:** Explore and promote alternative symbols that represent autism more positively, such as the infinity loop, which symbolizes the diversity of experiences and the spectrum of autism.
  - **Visuals that Empower:** Use imagery that depicts Autistic individuals engaging in activities, expressing their interests, and thriving in inclusive environments.
- .....

### 6. Educate and Advocate

- **Raise Awareness:** Use opportunities to educate others about autism, the diverse experiences of Autistic individuals, and the importance of acceptance and inclusion.
- **Advocate for Change:** Support initiatives that promote respectful representation and understanding of autism, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions in society.



## Criticism of Lightbulb and Ribbon Imagery in Autistic Culture

While lightbulbs and ribbons have been used as symbols in autism awareness and advocacy, they face criticism within the Autistic community. Here are some concerns:

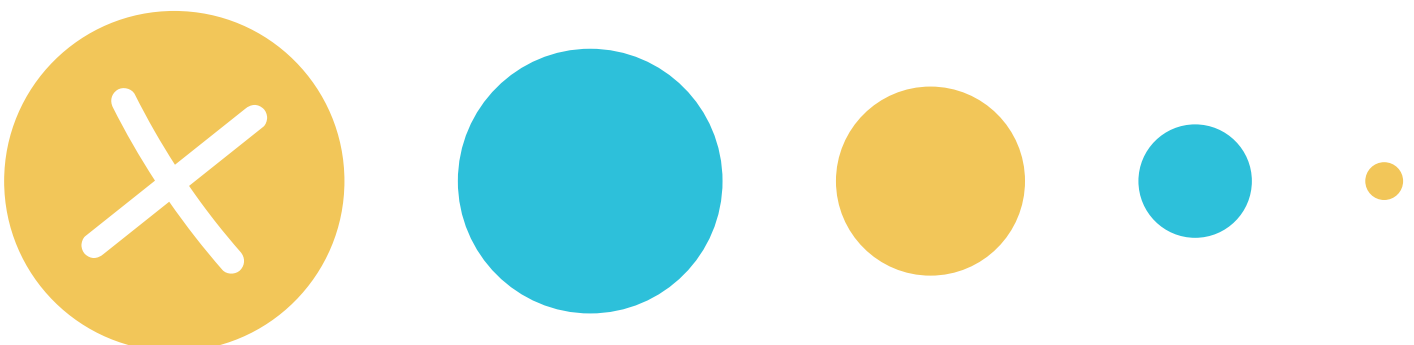
### 1. Lightbulb Imagery

- **Oversimplification:** Lightbulb imagery often suggests a simplistic view of autism, framing it as merely a moment of insight or creativity, which can minimize the complex realities faced by individuals on the spectrum.
  - **Invisibility of Challenges:** While lightbulbs might symbolize creativity, they can overshadow the daily struggles many Autistic individuals experience, such as communication difficulties and sensory sensitivities.
  - **Lack of Representation:** This imagery may fail to reflect the lived experiences of many Autistic individuals, particularly those who do not conform to traditional notions of creativity.
- .....

### 2. Ribbon Imagery

- **Medicalization of Autism:** Ribbon imagery can frame autism as a disorder needing to be "cured," which can perpetuate stigma and negative stereotypes.
- **Lack of Autistic Voices:** Many advocacy organizations using ribbon imagery are not led by Autistic individuals, resulting in a disconnect between symbolism and the perspectives of those on the spectrum.
- **Overemphasis on Awareness:** Ribbons are often linked to awareness campaigns that focus on raising awareness rather than fostering genuine acceptance and inclusion.

By following these guidelines, we can create a more inclusive and respectful dialogue around autism, ensuring that imagery used in communication reflects values of empowerment, acceptance, and understanding.



## Understanding Medicalized Imagery in Autism

Medicalized imagery often frames autism primarily as a medical condition, focusing on deficits and treatment approaches. Here are considerations regarding medicalized imagery:

### 1. Focus on Deficits

- **Stereotype:** This imagery often emphasizes challenges associated with autism, overshadowing the strengths and talents of Autistic individuals.
  - **Implication:** This can lead to a one-dimensional view that fails to celebrate their abilities and contributions.
- .....

### 2. Pathologizing Autism

- **Stereotype:** Depicting autism primarily as a disorder that needs to be fixed fosters stigma and undermines the concept of neurodiversity.
  - **Implication:** This perspective can further marginalize Autistic individuals, framing them as “broken” rather than valuing their differences.
- .....

### 3. Overemphasis on Treatment

- **Stereotype:** This imagery prioritizes medical interventions, which can imply that Autistic individuals require constant intervention to fit societal norms.
  - **Implication:** Such representations can diminish the inherent value of Autistic individuals.
- .....

### 4. Lack of Individuality

- **Stereotype:** Representing Autistic individuals uniformly in clinical settings fails to capture the diversity of experiences.
- **Implication:** This reduces Autistic individuals to a diagnosis, ignoring their unique identities and stories.



## *Moving Beyond Medicalized Imagery*

- **Emphasize Neurodiversity:** Use imagery that celebrates the strengths and contributions of Autistic individuals.
- **Highlight Personal Stories:** Share authentic narratives from Autistic individuals to portray their experiences and achievements.
- **Balance Perspectives:** Acknowledge medical aspects while also reflecting the social and personal dimensions of being Autistic.
- **Use Inclusive Visuals:** Opt for imagery that depicts Autistic individuals in everyday settings, engaging in activities that reflect their interests.

By being mindful of the implications of medicalized imagery, we can create more inclusive representations of autism that reflect the rich diversity of the Autistic experience. This shift supports a broader understanding of autism as part of the spectrum of human diversity, rather than merely a medical condition.



## Addressing Harmful Stereotypes About Autism

Understanding and addressing harmful stereotypes is crucial in promoting acceptance for Autistic individuals. Here are some common stereotypes and their implications:

### 1. The "Rain Man" Stereotype

- **Stereotype:** This portrays Autistic individuals as having extraordinary talents, leading to unrealistic expectations.
  - **Implication:** It overlooks the diverse challenges faced by many Autistic individuals.
- .....

### 2. Lack of Emotion or Empathy

- **Stereotype:** This portrays Autistic individuals as having extraordinary talents, leading to unrealistic expectations.
  - **Implication:** It overlooks the diverse challenges faced by many Autistic individuals.
- .....

### 3. Nonspeaking Equals Unintelligent

- **Stereotype:** Assuming nonspeaking Autistic individuals lack intelligence.
  - **Implication:** This stereotype can lead to underestimating their capabilities.
- .....

### 4. All Autistic Individuals Are Alike

- **Stereotype:** Generalizing that all Autistic individuals share the same characteristics.
- **Implication:** This ignores the vast diversity within the autism spectrum.

### 5. Autism as a Tragedy or Burden

- **Stereotype:** Framing autism negatively as a burden to families and society.
  - **Implication:** This fosters stigma and overshadows the positive aspects of neurodiversity.
- .....

### 6. Behavioural Issues as the Whole Story

- **Stereotype:** Focusing solely on language and phrases such as 'challenging behaviours'.
- **Implication:** This neglects to address the context and underlying causes of behaviours.

## Addressing Stereotypes

- **Education and Advocacy:** Raise awareness through accurate information and personal experiences from Autistic individuals.
- **Promote Positive Representation:** Highlight diverse narratives showcasing achievements and contributions.
- **Encourage Empathy:** Foster understanding by promoting meaningful connections with Autistic individuals.
- **Challenge Misconceptions:** Advocate for respectful representations of autism in society.

By actively working to dismantle harmful stereotypes, we can create a more inclusive environment for Autistic individuals and their families.



## Footnotes

[1] Whilst the term 'ASD' is often used by educational and medical professionals, one may prefer to use the term 'autism spectrum condition' or 'on the autism spectrum' because it avoids the negative connotations of 'disorder.'



## References

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