



WellTreePsychology

Nurture Your Mind

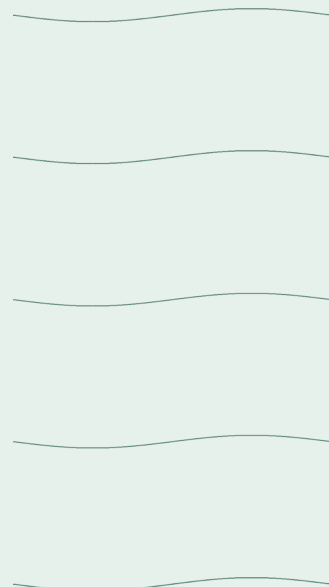
FREE CLIENT RESOURCE

Understanding Autism

A neuro-affirming introduction for Autistic people, families, educators and support networks.

There is no single way to be Autistic. Difference, disability, strengths and support needs can all be present at the same time.

Free client resource | Information checked 17 July 2026



Autism is a neurodevelopmental difference

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference, sometimes described as a neurotype. It can shape how a person senses, processes and responds to information, communicates, learns, moves, focuses and relates to other people and the world.[1]

Every Autistic person is different. The autism spectrum is not a single line from 'mild' to 'severe'. A person can have a distinct combination of abilities, interests, communication styles, sensory experiences and support needs, and that combination may change across settings or over time.[1,2]

i Autism is not inherently positive or negative. It can involve strengths, disability, distress, joy, independence and substantial support needs - sometimes at the same time.

The nervous system and sensory processing

The nervous system receives information from outside and inside the body, organises and interprets it, and helps the body respond. This includes information linked with sight, sound, touch, taste, smell, balance, body position and internal signals such as hunger, pain and temperature.

Autistic people commonly perceive, filter or respond to sensory information differently. Some input may feel unusually intense or painful; other input may be harder to notice; and some people seek particular movement, pressure, sounds or textures. Sensory responses can vary with stress, fatigue, health, familiarity and the environment.[2,3]

More sensitive Ordinary lights, sounds, touch, smells or movement may feel distracting, uncomfortable or painful.	Less sensitive Body signals, pain, temperature, sound or movement may be noticed later or may need to be stronger to register.
Sensory seeking Movement, pressure, repetition, sound or tactile input may support attention, enjoyment or regulation.	Variable The same person can be more sensitive to one type of input, less sensitive to another, and respond differently on different days.

Processing time

Some Autistic people need additional time to understand language, organise a response, begin an action or move between activities. A delayed response is not the same as ignoring, refusing or lacking understanding.

Communication and connection

Autistic communication is varied. It may include speech, writing, gesture, movement, sign language, facial expression, echolalia, or augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Speech is only one form of communication, and the amount a person speaks does not reliably show how much they understand.

Autistic and non-autistic people may read social information differently. Misunderstanding can therefore be mutual rather than evidence that only the Autistic person lacks communication or empathy. Clear language, genuine curiosity and respect for each person's communication method improve mutual understanding.[2,4]

Communication that is easier to access

- Use clear, direct and concrete language; say what you mean without relying on hints.
- Ask one question at a time and allow a genuine pause for processing.
- Offer information in writing, pictures or demonstrations as well as speech.
- Do not require eye contact, still hands or a particular facial expression to prove attention.
- Check understanding without demanding an immediate verbal answer.
- Respect AAC, movement, scripting, silence and other valid ways of communicating.

Interests, routines and movement

Deep interests can support learning, expertise, pleasure, identity and connection. Predictable routines can reduce uncertainty and cognitive load. Repetitive movements or sounds - sometimes called stimming - may help a person concentrate, express emotion, enjoy sensory input or regulate their nervous system.

Harmless Autistic traits do not need to be removed simply because they look unusual. The more useful question is whether the person is safe, comfortable, able to communicate and able to participate in ways that matter to them.

Masking and energy

Masking is the conscious or unconscious effort to hide, suppress or compensate for Autistic traits in order to meet expectations. It may help a person get through a situation, but it can also be effortful. Supportive environments reduce the pressure to perform as non-autistic and make room for rest, direct communication and genuine self-expression.[5]

Strengths, disability and support

Autistic people can have important strengths and still be disabled. Support needs may be obvious or hidden, and may vary substantially across environments. A person who manages independently in a quiet, predictable setting may need considerable support in a noisy, unfamiliar or demanding one.

Helpful support is individualised. It starts with the person's goals, access needs, communication, consent and quality of life - not with making the person appear less Autistic.[1,6]

Helpful support often includes

- reducing sensory, communication and environmental barriers
- providing information in an understandable and predictable form
- respecting autonomy, consent and preferred communication
- allowing movement, recovery time and access to regulation tools
- building on interests and existing abilities
- describing specific support needs rather than making broad assumptions

Approaches to avoid

- treating harmless traits as behaviour that must be eliminated
- assuming speech, eye contact or academic ability equals low support needs
- withholding reasonable adjustments until a formal diagnosis is obtained
- forcing sensory exposure when a safer accommodation is available
- using one-size-fits-all goals or rewards without understanding the cause of distress
- speaking about the person as though they are not present

Respectful language

Many members of the Autistic community prefer identity-first language, such as 'Autistic person', because Autism is understood as an integral part of identity. Other people prefer person-first language. Individual preference should always come first.[5]

- Describe the specific strength, barrier, access need or support need being discussed.
- Avoid functioning labels such as 'high-functioning' and 'low-functioning'; they can hide important needs and abilities.
- Use 'non-autistic' or 'neurotypical' where appropriate rather than describing one group as 'normal'.
- Avoid phrases such as 'suffers from autism' unless that is the person's own preferred description.
- Do not say 'everyone is a little Autistic'. Autism is a distinct neurodevelopmental pattern, not a single trait that everyone has in equal measure.

Exploring assessment and next steps

An autism assessment can help a person understand a lifelong pattern of experiences, identify strengths and support needs, consider other possible explanations, and obtain documentation for some services or adjustments. It is not a test that someone passes or fails.

A comprehensive assessment usually draws on more than one source of information, such as the person's own account, developmental history, observation, standardised tools and relevant records. Online questionnaires can help organise thoughts, but they cannot provide a diagnosis by themselves.[6]

A person does not need to wait for a diagnosis before using practical, low-risk accommodations such as clearer written information, additional processing time, quieter spaces or predictable plans.

Free downloadable reading

The Autistic Community: A Welcome Pack

An extensive Autistic-led introduction to neurodiversity, identity, community and self-understanding.

Publisher: Reframing Autism (Australia) - downloadable PDF

[Open PDF](#)

Sensory Processing

A concise guide to common sensory experiences, including visual, auditory, tactile and other forms of input.

Publisher: Autism New Zealand - downloadable PDF

[Open PDF](#)

Autism Terminology Guidance

Language guidance created and reviewed by members of the Autistic community of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Publisher: Autism New Zealand - downloadable PDF

[Open PDF](#)

National Autism Assessment and Diagnosis Guideline

Australia's evidence-based guideline, including plain-language summaries and neurodiversity-affirming principles.

Publisher: Autism CRC (Australia)

[Open website](#)

Sources and further information

This guide uses plain language and a neuro-affirming framework. The sources below provide more detailed information and should be read in their original context.

1. Neurodiversity and neurodiversity-affirming terminology - Autism CRC. [Open source](#)
2. What is autism? - Altogether Autism. [Open source](#)
3. Sensory Processing - Autism New Zealand. [Open source](#)
4. Communication and Autism - Positive Partnerships. [Open source](#)
5. Autism Terminology Guidance - Autism New Zealand. [Open source](#)
6. National Guideline for the assessment and diagnosis of autism - Autism CRC. [Open source](#)

WellTree Psychology

For information about WellTree Psychology's online autism and ADHD assessment and therapy services across Australia, visit the website or contact the practice.

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Email: info@welltreepsychology.com.au

welltreepsychology.com.au



Important note

This resource provides general information only. It is not a diagnostic tool and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or legal advice. Support eligibility, funding rules and service details can change; confirm current information directly with the relevant organisation.

In an immediate emergency, call 000 in Australia or 111 in New Zealand. For crisis support in Australia, call Lifeline on 13 11 14. In New Zealand, call or text 1737 for brief emotional support.