



What does it mean to be Autistic?

Autism describes a group of neurobiological differences in information processing that define how a person perceives and responds to the world. *Being Autistic* is a valid social identity that connects you to other people who share these differences in information processing.

Each Autistic person has a unique “spiky profile” of strengths and difficulties, and needs that fluctuate depending on the environment they are in. The key differences in information processing are outlined below.

1. Narrower and deeper range of interests

Autistic people tend to find things either intensely interesting or not at all interesting. This pattern of interacting with the world is known as *monotropism*, and Autistic deep interests are often called *spins*, which is short for “special interests.” Engaging in your spins can trigger intense joy and deep focus.

2. Sensory hyper- and hypo-sensitivities

Autistic people tend to have sensory experiences at the extremes, being either highly sensitive or relatively unaware of their sensory experiences across all eight senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, proprioception, vestibular (balance) and interoception (internal sensations). This has a significant impact on how an Autistic person feels when interacting with the world, with ongoing exposure to uncomfortable sensory experiences triggering sensory stress.

3. Literal use of language

Autistic people tend to prioritise the literal meaning of words (language semantics) and focus on using language precisely and clearly. This honesty and directness are valuable in situations where clarity is essential, but can also be misunderstood as blunt or even rude by others. Autistic people may find it more challenging to understand hints and sarcasm, and may not fully grasp the meaning behind body language, tone, and indirect language.

4. Social expectations based on consistency, fairness, and honesty

Autistic people tend to have a strong sense of justice, deep dislike of dishonesty, and a preference for following the rules, but only if those rules are logical and fair. Autistic people may feel uncomfortable or distressed in situations where expectations are unclear or frequently change, or when people's choices are unfair or unjust.

5. Difficulties with emotion awareness and regulation

Due to differences in interoceptive sensory awareness, some Autistic people feel emotions intensely in their body, while others have a quieter, muted experience of their emotions. Approximately 75% of Autistic people have difficulty interpreting their emotions, which is known as *alexithymia*. These difficulties can contribute to mental health problems.

6. Overloaded and under-resourced executive functioning

Our executive functions are a set of skills that include planning, organising, prioritising, focusing our attention, managing impulses, monitoring our behaviour, and keeping track of time. In an overlap with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), many Autistic people experience executive functioning overload, which contributes to Autistic burnout, stress, and meltdowns.

7. Self-regulation through repetitive behaviours and interests

Autistic people tend to regulate their attention, emotions, energy levels, and impulses through repetitive behaviours and by connecting with their interests. Soothing sensory experiences and actively engaging in spins can be calming, focusing, and a source of comfort.

Many Autistic people hide their differences and difficulties and work hard to fit in with others. This is called masking and camouflaging, and Autistic women and non-cisgender individuals are more likely to mask, often so automatically that they don't realise they are doing it. Many Autistic men mask, too. People who mask are more likely to be denied a diagnosis of Autism if the assessor does not understand how to recognise more subtle, and sometimes hidden, Autistic differences. The key is to listen to the person's experiences of life, take time to explore their unique experience of the world, and look for the subtle differences outlined here.

For further information

There are several books that explore the more subtle and hidden expressions of Autistic differences. You may like to start with these:

- Henderson, D., Wayland, S., & White, J. (2023). *Is this Autism? A Guide for Clinicians and Everyone Else*. Routledge.
- Kemp, J., & Mitchelson, M. (2024). *The Neurodivergence Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD: Cultivate Self-Compassion, Live Authentically, and Be Your Own Advocate*. New Harbinger Publications.
- Price, D. (2022). *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing Our Hidden Neurodiversity*. Hachette.

About Jennifer Kemp

Jennifer Kemp is a clinical psychologist based in Adelaide, Australia. Her neurodiversity-affirming approach is founded on her own experience of being late-diagnosed as Autistic and an ADHDer, listening deeply to the experiences of her neurodivergent clients and the latest research. Jennifer weaves together acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) with compassion-focused approaches to help her clients improve their mental health and develop greater self-acceptance, self-compassion, and pride in their neurodivergent identity.

Jennifer is the co-author of ["The Neurodivergence Skills Workbook for Autism and ADHD: Cultivate Self-Compassion, Live Authentically, and Be Your Own Advocate"](#) and author of ["The ACT Workbook for Perfectionism: Build Your Best \(Imperfect\) Life Using Powerful Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and Self-Compassion Skills."](#)

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