

# An Employer's Guide to Workplace Accommodations for Autistic Employees

e-Book by

**Jennifer Kemp**

MPsych(Clinical)

# Contents

<b>Autism in the Workplace.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Understanding Autistic Strengths &amp; Difficulties .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Deep Interests & Focus .....	4
Literal & Direct Communication.....	4
Sensory Processing Differences .....	5
Social Expectations of Honesty, Consistency & Fairness.....	5
Executive Functioning Difficulties .....	6
<b>Suggested Workplace Accommodations .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Role & Task Clarity .....	6
Communication .....	7
Scheduling & Structure .....	7
In-Person Meetings.....	7
Online Meetings .....	8
Sensory Environment .....	8
Access to Deep Focus.....	9
Social Expectations.....	9
Safety & Emergency Procedures.....	10
Onboarding.....	10
Evaluation & Feedback.....	10
HR & Employment Support .....	11
<b>Creating a Culture Where Acceptance Is the Norm.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>About Jennifer Kemp .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## Autism in the Workplace

Autistic people bring valuable perspectives and skills to any workplace. Yet, for many Autistic people, working in environments that do not accommodate or accept their differences causes daily stress, contributing to the significantly higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, mental health issues, chronic ill health and Autistic burnout seen in the Autistic community (Raymaker et al., 2020). Despite this, many Autistic people find it very difficult to ask for - or accept - support due to internalised ableism; the learned expectation that one should be able to meet the same standards as the abled majority without any assistance.

Unfortunately, ableism and discrimination are extremely common in workplaces but may not be recognised as such when they are also seen as *"the way we've always done things around here"*. It's not surprising, then, that the majority of people with disabilities do not ask for workplace accommodations because they fear this will result in increased discrimination, exclusion or othering (Madaus, 2008).

Asking for accommodations is even more difficult for people working in environments with heightened job insecurity, the potential to lose access to insurance or healthcare, or a competitive culture. Requiring disabled employees to ask for accommodations and provide evidence of their needs amplifies this power imbalance by placing the burden and risk of disclosing, requesting, and justifying support on the disabled employee.

Many of the workplace accommodations outlined in this document are simple, practical, and low-cost changes that could support productivity and facilitate the well-being of all staff, not just Autistic team members. This is known as the '[curb cut effect](#)', a simple yet powerful principle that describes how changes that assist people with disabilities can benefit everyone. Examples of the curb cut effect are the sloping edges of footpaths where people cross ("cut curbs"), closed captions, automatic doors and audiobooks.

While the suggestions outlined in this document are tailored towards office environments, the intention is that the principles can be adapted to other workplaces.

## Understanding Autistic Strengths & Difficulties

Autism describes a range of neurobiological differences in information processing that shape how an Autistic person perceives and responds to the world. These differences can often be strengths for Autistic people, but they can become challenges if the environment around them does not fit or support their needs. The key Autistic differences that can influence workplace needs are described below.

### Deep Interests & Focus

Autistic people tend to have a narrower range of deep interests ("spins") in a style of attention known as *monotropism* (Murray et al., 2005). These long-standing spins can be a source of calm, joy and motivation, and may lead to subject-matter expertise and advanced skills (Heasman et al., 2024; Rapaport et al., 2024). By contrast, tasks that fall outside these interests require substantial additional effort.

Being able to focus, uninterrupted, on these interests can enable an Autistic person to produce a large volume of high-quality work. Being interrupted while in this state of "hyperfocus" feels intensely uncomfortable, and it can be very difficult to regain this level of focus. Frequent task switching and competing demands with unclear priorities can cause genuine distress, agitation and frustration by preventing an Autistic person from ever feeling fully engaged in their interests.

### Literal & Direct Communication

Autistic people often build their understanding from the precise, literal meaning of words (semantics). This direct communication is a strength when clarity and speed matter, but it can also be perceived as blunt or rude. Autistic people may miss or misunderstand non-verbal signals, such as hints or implied meanings. In contrast, non-Autistic people pay closer attention to these non-verbal cues (pragmatics) and are more likely to use indirect language. This can be confusing and frustrating for Autistic people, who may find it difficult to interpret hidden meanings and follow vague or incomplete instructions. These differences can lead to

conflict, confusion, or frustration on both sides of the interaction; a situation known as the 'double empathy problem'.

The double empathy problem describes how communication issues between Autistic and non-Autistic people are rarely one-sided. Communication breakdowns are not caused by deficits within the Autistic person; rather, both sides are struggling to understand the other. While non-Autistic colleagues and managers may find it difficult to interpret Autistic communication, *they still benefit from working in a system that preferences their own style.*

Genuine workplace inclusion depends on *efforts from both non-Autistic and Autistic people* to reach mutual understanding rather than expecting Autistic people to conform to a non-Autistic communication style.

## **Sensory Processing Differences**

Autistic people commonly experience heightened or lessened sensitivity across all eight senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, proprioception (movement), vestibular (balance) and interoception (internal sensations such as pain, hunger or fatigue). For many, exposure to uncomfortable sensory input causes significant stress that can affect mental and physical health, while others need more sensory input to feel comfortable and maintain focus.

Autistic people use repetitive sensory behaviours known as "stimming" to sustain their attention, regulate their emotions, and manage energy levels. These are valid, effective and essential self-regulation strategies, not habits to be discouraged.

## **Social Expectations of Honesty, Consistency & Fairness**

Autistic people often have a strong commitment to fairness and honesty and expect others to be consistent by following through on commitments (doing what they've said they would do). They can experience dissonance and distress in workplaces where social dynamics and politics influence decision-making or lead to sudden shifts in direction or strategy.

Autistic people also tend to be less influenced by social pressure and groupthink and are more likely to speak up honestly about problems

others overlook. This can be beneficial for any organisation but may also be seen as disruptive or undermining authority in hierarchical command-and-control settings.

## **Executive Functioning Difficulties**

As part of the overlap with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), some Autistic people have greater difficulty planning, organising, prioritising, staying focused, managing impulses, initiating and switching between tasks, and managing their time; however, this difficulty generally only applies to tasks outside their deep interests. Constantly overloaded executive functioning can contribute to stress, anxiety, burnout, and chronic feelings of overwhelm.

## **Suggested Workplace Accommodations**

Listed below are a range of accommodations that may be useful for Autistic employees. As you review this list, consider how well your workplace currently meets the needs of Autistic people and how this could be improved. You may like to use these suggestions as a guide for individual conversations with employees, or to support broader management conversations about how your workplace can help Autistic staff to perform and feel their best.

### **Role & Task Clarity**

Consider providing:

- Clearly defined roles and tasks
- Checklists for task completion and quality
- Clearly written processes
- Written rather than verbal instructions being the default
- Offering an explanation or rationale for changes (the "why")
- Clearly stated priorities (what's most important, what can wait)
- Explicit expectations around timelines and deadlines
- A defined point of contact for questions

Things to avoid:

- Changes to plans, scope of work, deadlines, priorities, tasks, goals, processes, or team structure, without notice or explanation

## Communication

Consider providing:

- Polite, direct and clear communication
- Communication via the person's preferred medium
- Written summaries of verbal agreements

Things to avoid:

- Verbal instructions, given "on the fly"
- Vague, idiomatic language such as "Take the ball and run with it" or "Let's circle back later"
- Inferred meanings and hints, such as "You might want to consider..." when there isn't the option to disagree

## Scheduling & Structure

Consider providing:

- Predictable routines and schedules
- Advance notice of changes to hours, location, or tasks
- The flexibility to vary start and finish times as needed
- Additional time for task-switching and transitions

Things to avoid:

- Last-minute requests or changes
- Messaging outside agreed work hours
- Expectations that work will be completed outside core work hours

## In-Person Meetings

Consider providing:

- Pre-agreed written agendas
- Minutes (and/or AI transcription summaries) with action items
- Access to any documents being discussed in advance
- Permission not to attend non-essential meetings

- Permission to make themselves comfortable during meetings by using sensory/fidget tools or having the ability to stand up, stretch or move
- The option to contribute in a written format rather than verbally
- Advance notice of topics or issues where input will be sought

Things to avoid:

- Spontaneous, unplanned meetings or cold calling
- Mandatory contributions without advance notice, "round robins", or "ice breakers"

## Online Meetings

Consider providing:

- Permission to have cameras off
- Closed captions
- A transcription and/or AI-generated summary
- Access to any documents being discussed in advance
- The ability to use the chat feature to ask questions or make comments
- Opportunities to give additional input before or after the meeting

Things to avoid:

- Mandatory requirement to have cameras on
- Mandatory verbal contributions without advance notice
- The assumption that people will be able to interject if they have anything to add

## Sensory Environment

Consider providing:

- Access to a dedicated low-stimulation sensory space (also known as a "sensory room")
- Access to quiet offices
- Work from home options
- The ability to adjust lighting, chairs, air conditioning, etc.

- Access to an outside, smoke-free space
- A dedicated or consistent workspace, desk or office
- A low-fragrance or fragrance-free policy
- The ability to adapt the uniform or wear clothes according to sensory needs
- Reduced visual clutter, loud patterns or bright colours

Things to avoid:

- Open plan workspaces as the only option
- Hot-desking
- Workspaces where people can walk, watch or monitor the employee from behind their back or over their shoulder

## **Access to Deep Focus**

Consider providing:

- Permission to wear noise-cancelling headphones/earbuds
- Blocks of time for deep focus without interruptions
- Access to quiet workspaces
- Permission for employees to listen to podcasts, audiobooks, etc., while working
- Flexibility in when deep/focused work is done (not just 9-5)

Things to avoid:

- Inflexible work hours
- Frequent interruptions
- Noisy environments

## **Social Expectations**

Consider providing:

- Clarity regarding which social events are required or optional
- The option to have limited customer or supplier contact
- Reduced expectation of small talk or social performance
- An onboarding process that describes social expectations

Things to avoid:

- Pressure to attend optional social events
- The assumption that workplace social norms are understood

## **Safety & Emergency Procedures**

Consider providing:

- Written or visual emergency plans and procedures
- Advance notice of fire drills or lockdown exercises
- The option not to attend emergency drills if they are distressing
- A clear, designated role during emergencies

Things to avoid:

- Unexpected and unavoidable distressing sensory experiences (e.g. alarms, flashing lights)

## **Onboarding**

Consider providing:

- Extended onboarding time
- A designated mentor or buddy during induction and for an extended period afterwards
- Access to organisational charts and clear role descriptions
- Ability to ask clarifying questions to establish why things are done this way
- Sufficient time to take detailed notes

Things to avoid:

- The assumption that workplace expectations are understood
- The assumption that systems and processes are understood when they are customised to each organisation

## **Evaluation & Feedback**

Consider providing:

- Explicit recognition that communication style differences are not performance issues
- Regular, structured feedback against job/role requirements (not just annual reviews)
- Advance notice of the performance review criteria
- Clear feedback with specific examples
- Additional processing time to formulate a response to feedback, preferably in a second meeting

Things to avoid:

- Vague or implied suggestions for improvement
- The assumption that a lack of visible facial reactions means the person does not care or has not understood

## **HR & Employment Support**

Consider providing:

- A specific HR contact who is familiar with neurodiversity and affirming workplace practices
- Confidential options for disclosing support needs
- A clear, straightforward process to request reasonable adjustments
- Peer networks or neurodiversity employee groups
- Access to an Employee Assistance Program

Things to avoid:

- Waiting for workplace issues to emerge before providing accommodations
- Negative consequences for requests for accommodations, such as having fewer promotion opportunities

## **Creating a Culture Where Acceptance Is the Norm**

This document is just a starting point for a broader conversation. Today's organisations have an opportunity to play a substantial positive role in improving the lives of Autistic people by recognising individual needs and being flexible, adaptable, and supportive. Ultimately, the most

important part of this process is having proactive, open, curious, and supportive conversations with Autistic employees, listening to their suggestions, making positive changes, and being willing to adapt when needs change.

As an employer, the well-being of all staff, especially disabled staff, is both a legal requirement and a moral obligation. Instead of waiting for issues to arise, employers can be proactive in supporting the needs of disabled employees by offering flexibility and accommodations to all staff who require them. This approach can benefit everyone, potentially improving staff performance, well-being, retention and job satisfaction.

Yet, for these changes to be truly effective, disability-friendly environments and accommodations must be developed in collaboration with disabled people, who should be meaningfully involved in the design process from the outset. In disability contexts, this is referred to as *"nothing about us, without us"*.

Now is the perfect time to begin working towards a future where everyone's needs are considered, workplace cultures are supportive, physical environments are adaptable to individual needs, and employee well-being, both at work and more broadly, sits at the core of workplace culture, design, and practice.

## References

- Heasman, B., Williams, G., Charura, D., Hamilton, L. G., Milton, D., & Murray, F. (2024). Towards Autistic flow theory: A non-pathologising conceptual approach. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 1-29. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12427>
- Madaus, J. W. (2008). Employment self-disclosure rates and rationales of university graduates with learning disabilities. *J Learn Disabil*, 41(4), 291-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219407313805>
- Murray, D., Lesser, M., & Lawson, W. (2005). Attention, monotropism and the diagnostic criteria for autism. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 9(2), 139-156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361305051398>
- Rapaport, H., Clapham, H., Adams, J., Lawson, W., Porayska-Pomsta, K., & Pellicano, E. (2024). "In a state of flow": A qualitative examination of Autistic adults' phenomenological experiences of task immersion. *Autism in Adulthood*, 6(3), 362-373. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2023.0032>
- Raymaker, D. M., Teo, A. R., Steckler, N. A., Lentz, B., Scharer, M., Delos Santos, A., Kapp, S. K., Hunter, M., Joyce, A., & Nicolaidis, C. (2020). "Having all of your internal resources exhausted beyond measure and being left with no clean-up crew": Defining Autistic burnout. *Autism in Adulthood*, 2(2), 132-143. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0079>

## 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.](#)"

Find more free resources and e-books at [www.jenniferkemp.com.au](http://www.jenniferkemp.com.au).

