

National Autistic Society

Know yourself series



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Welcome

Welcome to the **understanding yourself** guide from our **Know yourself series**. We know how important it is to hear directly from others just like you when learning about yourself; that's why all resources from our **Know yourself series** are written and led by autistic people.

Firstly, if you haven't already seen our video on understanding yourself from our autistic young ambassadors, then it's the best place to start.

Check it out by [clicking here](#) (or visit www.autism.org.uk/knowyourself)



Introduction

To understand yourself, you need to understand your own likes, dislikes, personality, culture, and also what makes you unique.

This means understanding your autistic identity too.

Visible differences

People across the world all look, sound and act differently. The clothes we wear, our hair colour, shape, size, skin colour, eye colour, all mean we can easily see the external differences we have.

It's harder to see our internal differences.

Let's think about the brain, as it controls everything that we do and feel.



Non-visible differences

Our brains are all unique and we can vary in how we process and understand information. This is called **neurodiversity**.

Neurodivergent is a word that is often used to describe people who are autistic, or who have ADHD, dyslexia or dyspraxia and other differences.

Neurotypical is a word that is often used to describe people who think, act and process information in a way that is typical within their culture. This means they process information and experience the world in a similar way to most other people.

Autistic describes a person who communicates, interacts and processes the world differently to non-autistic people.

If you are autistic, you might describe yourself as **neurodivergent**. This is because your brain (that's the 'neuro' part of that word) processes things differently (that's the 'divergent' part of that word) to the majority of the population.



In order to **understand yourself better**, you need to **explore everything about yourself**, including your needs and preferences.

Only you can truly know what it is like to be you, and although you might still be learning about yourself, you know yourself the best.

By yourself or with others you trust, you can continue to deepen your understanding of what makes you your unique self.

Being different to the majority of people does not mean less. Everyone has something to give to make the world what it is and without difference, we would not have new ideas, ways of living, inventions or advances in technology.

Having people who think differently is vital to drive forward change and new ideas.



Interests

Many autistic people will engage in their interests in a deep and detailed way. You may hear terms for this like 'special Interests' or 'intense Interests'.

“Eye sparkles, super-powers, special interests, whatever they may be are vital to the growth of neurodivergent kids.”

Chloe Hayden (2022)

An interest can be absolutely anything! LEGO, films, music, nature, science, or even a specific person.

These interests may be the same for many years, or may change across time.

Although everyone has interests and hobbies, the beauty of autistic interests is the joy they may bring. These intense interests can support you when you are feeling low and they can help to motivate you when you need it. Long-term interests may even become useful in finding friendships or partners, or for employability later in life.

Autistic interests

Are...

- joyful
- identity building
- something that can lead to shared experiences
- useful for employment or future opportunities
- great for supporting positive mental health.



Are not...

- to be avoided
- usually harmful
- laziness or a waste of time.

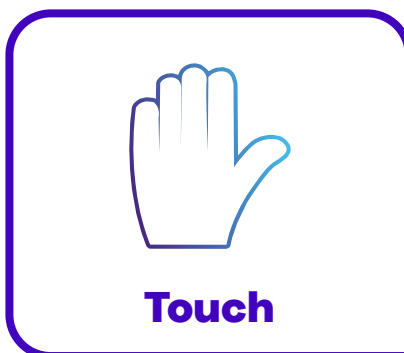


As long as your interest is lawful and not causing anyone or anything any harm, then you should explore your interest whenever you can. Autistic interests are often found to be great for positive wellbeing and supporting you to know yourself.

Sensory

We experience the world around us via our senses. They allow us to understand and make sense of the world.

Let's take a look at our eight sensory systems below:



Now let's look at the two lesser-known senses:

Internal feedback (called interoception) is how we interpret sensations from inside our body, such as how hot or cold you are, if you are hungry or thirsty, or needing the toilet.

Body awareness (called proprioception) is the sense of where your body is in relation to anything else, like knowing you are sitting on a chair and being aware of where all your body parts are, or being aware of how hard to grip a pencil.

We need to **regulate our senses** so that we are receiving the right amount of information. Too much might lead to overwhelm or running out of energy. Too little might mean you miss important information like knowing you are in pain or hearing an important announcement.

Autistic people experience the sensory world around them differently to non-autistic people. Every person is unique; however, autistic people may share similarities in their sensory differences.

These differences in sensory experience might be uncomfortable, overwhelming or even painful for some people. At other times, they can lead to feelings of comfort or joy.

Here are some examples:

“I can taste the bathroom air fresheners while I try to eat my lunch in the dinner hall, it makes me gag so I often skip my lunch at school.”

“The more stressed I get, the harder I find it to focus on anything - everything just sounds muffled and intense.”

“I hate patterned carpets, they make my teeth and spine shudder, and if I add in movement by walking across them, it can make me feel sick or dizzy.”

What are some examples of sensory challenges?



What can you do to support your sensory needs?

Could you wear earplugs, sunglasses, turn volume up or down, sit closer to natural lighting via a window, or have some items to fiddle with? There are many things you can do to support your sensory needs and preferences.

Many autistic people talk about stimming.

Stimming is a way of regulating your sensory inputs. It is a rhythmic, repetitive, familiar or calming action or movement. It is often used to gain more sensory stimulation.

Stimming varies from person to person and can include rocking, pacing, bouncing, lining things up, fiddling with an object or even listening to the same song on repeat.

Stimming can occasionally be harmful and lead to injury, in which case you should seek professional advice. But usually stimming is a very positive thing and can help when you feel anxious or sad and can bring relaxation or enjoyment.

What might be useful to carry with you when you are 'on the go'?

Here some ideas of things that might help you keep focussed, avoid too much input from a sense or help you communicate your needs with other people.



pen and notepad



fidget toy



headphones



music



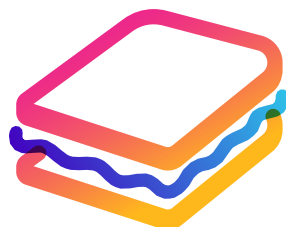
emergency contacts



phone or tablet



autism alert card



a snack



earplugs

Masking

Autistic people often hide parts of their identity and needs to try to fit in with others. This is called masking.

Some autistic people mask a lot, others might mask in specific places or with certain people, some may not mask at all.

Some autistic people might choose to mask, whereas others might be unaware that they are masking.

Masking is nothing to be ashamed of. It is also not something that you have to do or need to fully stop doing.

Masking might include doing some of these things:

- copying facial expressions of others
- copying eye-contact or handshakes
- pretending to be interested in something
- acting, or putting on a different personality
- preparing conversations or responses to questions in advance
- mirroring the speech of others
- hiding your sensory needs
- changing your voice or copying an accent
- dressing in a certain way to fit in, rather than wearing what you want.

Masking can stop you learning more about yourself, so try to find time when you feel safe and comfortable to explore your true thoughts, feelings and needs. This will help you develop a positive relationship with your real self.

If you are always masking, this can lead to exhaustion. When you are trying to recover from this exhaustion, it can be useful to use your own strategies. This might be sharing space with a safe person, time alone or doing something you enjoy.

If you want others to help support you, getting them to read this information or explore the resources might be a good starting point for them.

Communication needs and preferences

No one style of communication is correct, just different.

Autistic communication styles can be different to non-autistic styles.

Autistic people may vary in the amount of words they use:

- Some people are non-speaking
- Some people use only a few words
- Some people may only feel comfortable speaking in certain situations or with certain people
- Some people may use lots of words
- Some people may use technology to communicate
- Some people may sign or use gestures to communicate.

Let's explore some autistic communication styles.

Literal: You might find direct communication easier to use and understand.

However, often non-autistic people use language that is not directly true or use phrases and sayings to express what they mean. They may also use slang that you might not understand.

Here are some examples:

What the other person said...
"I have eyes in the back of my head."
"Well, that's just great" said while rolling their eyes.
"He's ghosting you."

What the other person means...
They are aware of what has or is happening.
They are being sarcastic - this means they aren't happy with something.
This is not about a ghost, but is a phrase used to mean a person is avoiding you.

If everyone said what they meant, and were directly honest, communication would be much easier. However, this is not how most non-autistic people communicate. Social language is full of indirect communication and extra or confusing words.

Due to these different ways that people communicate, it might take you a bit longer to process information that isn't shared in your natural way.

For example:

- If you make a direct comment about not liking someone's eyeshadow colour they might be upset. If they are upset, it is because they interpret your comment as judgement (or criticism). Whereas what you are trying to do is be helpful and suggest that other colours might suit them better.
- If someone says "you need to come to the party, everyone will be there" - this doesn't actually mean that everyone will be there. They are not being dishonest; it is just an indirect way of saying to you that they really want you to come to the party. It is ok if you need some extra processing time to understand this different style of communication.

Communication differences go both ways; we need to be respectful to each other about our different communication styles.

Social communication

People often use body language, facial expressions and eye-contact to communicate. This could be challenging for autistic people as it's very indirect, often comes with hidden meaning and is a social way of communicating, which might feel difficult or even painful to you.

Honesty

People tell you to be honest, yet can often get upset if you are honest in a reply to them. For example, if someone has cut their hair or got new clothes and you don't like it, socially it is expected that you don't tell them that you don't like it.

Change

There are lots of changes that will happen during your teenage years. It is important to understand these changes as it will support the process of understanding yourself, what it means to be an adult and how to achieve what you want from life.

Autistic people often seek the safety and calmness of familiarity and routine, which can make change difficult to cope with.

Why are the teen years such a challenge for autistic teenagers?

What changes	How it might change
Your body	Puberty can be such a big change and includes things such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• developing body hair• body odour• getting your period• your voice deepening.
Other people	Your peers might: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• behave differently around others (eg flirting)• change who they are friends with• find the things you all used to do childish (eg playing with toys and doing previous hobbies)• be less friendly or start being nasty to others (bullying or gossiping).

What changes	How it might change
Less obvious rules	<p>As you get older, it might feel like there are unwritten or secret rules that everyone around you just seems to magically understand.</p> <p>There might be social expectations about what clothes you should wear, what you talk about or what activities and interests you have. In some situations, you might find people with common interests, however it is important to be aware that in many situations people pretend that their interests are the same or similar to others'. They do this because they want to fit in and be accepted in a group. This can be confusing, but being aware that this might happen can help make sense of less obvious situations.</p> <p>Many of your peers might also not fit into these new social expectations, but might pretend that they are interested due to fear of being excluded, teased or bullied. This could mean that they might say things that they don't actually do or don't talk about things they do still like in front of others.</p>
Expectations and choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer pressure to do things you don't want to do. • There can be more social pressures and decisions to make about things, such as whether to shave, what clothes to wear or food choices. • More pressure to be working towards independent living skills.
School	Intensity increases around exams and what you will do when you leave school or college.

Everything that we have explored so far is the reason why you might have additional challenges during these changes in the teenage years.

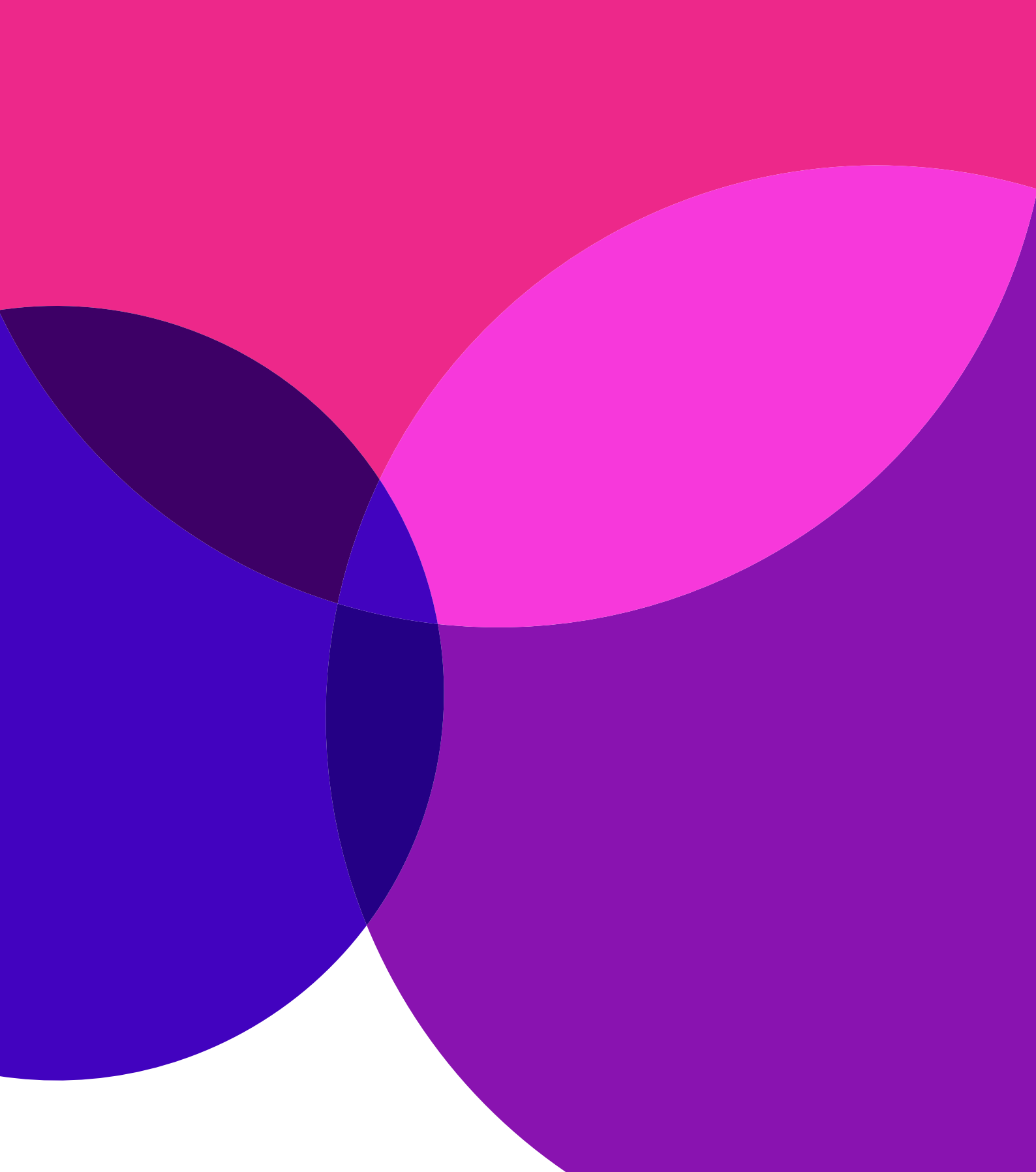
Summary

It is important for everyone to understand their own identity, likes and preferences.

Alongside understanding yourself, there is also a need to figure out who and what can help you.

A good place to start exploring everything you have focused on in this resource is our **[“Other resources that might be useful”](#)** document at **www.autism.org.uk/knowyourself**





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