

Autism and Mental Health

Toolkit for Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals

This guide was developed for staff working at Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals. This guide was based on information gathered from consultations with staff members from three Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals across Victoria.

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About Amaze

Amaze is a leading autism organisation driving change so that Autistic people and their families can live their best lives.

Amaze:

- works with individuals, families, professionals, employers, educators, government and the wider community to create a more autism inclusive Australia.
- influences policy change for Autistic people
- provides independent, credible information and resources
- partners with others to achieve the greatest impact

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Autism Connect:

Autism Connect is a free, national Autism helpline, providing independent and expert information over phone, email and webchat.

For more information about Autism, or to talk about your situation, contact our Autism Connect Advisors via:

Phone: 1300 308 699

Email: info@autismconnect.org.au

Website and webchat:

www.amaze.org.au/autismconnect

Background

This toolkit is a collection of four resources designed to build knowledge across a variety of topics. Each section begins with introductory information and continues on to finish with specific advice that is relevant to each topic.

It has been created for online use, with ease of navigation and interactivity embedded within. Whilst it has not been designed as a hardcopy resource, it can be printed if required.

To navigate quickly to topics of interest, use the interactive Contents table to jump to the relevant section.

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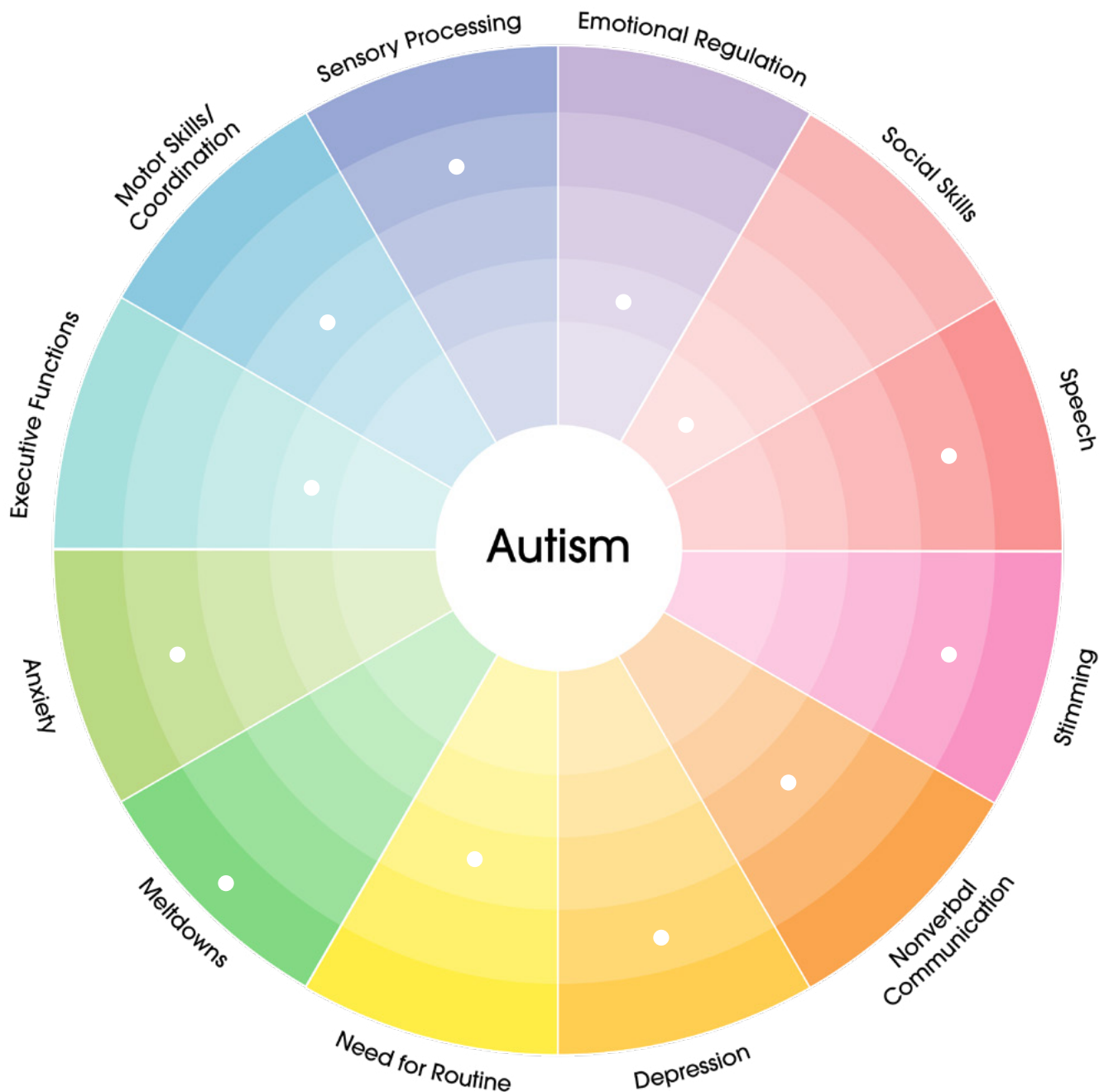
4.3 Supporting Autistic people in mental health services

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disability. It impacts the way people process information and interact with the world. Some common autism traits include:

Social interaction & communication	Thinking	Sensory processing & movement
Preference for direct and literal communication.	May have strong and highly focused interests.	May be under- or over-sensitive to certain senses such as touch, sound, light, taste, and smell.
Can have difficulty understanding sarcasm and figures of speech.	May have strong attention to detail.	
May find eye contact uncomfortable.	May take longer to think about things.	May have difficulty interpreting internal sensations e.g. hunger, temperature or pain.
May speak off topic.	May have a strong preference for routines.	May use stimming: repetitive movements e.g. rocking hand flapping.
Preference to spend time alone.	May find changes difficult to process.	
May use echolalia: repeating phrases or sounds they have heard before.	May have difficulties with 'executive functioning' e.g. planning, starting and finishing a task.	May have difficulty with coordination and fine motor skills.

The Diversity of Autism

The official name for autism is 'autism spectrum disorder' (ASD). However, the word 'spectrum' can be misleading. Many people mistakenly imagine autism as a linear scale, ranging from low to high support needs. In reality, autism is more like a colour wheel – Varied, and unique to each individual. Autism presents differently in every Autistic person. Each Autistic person has their own unique strengths, weaknesses, and ways of interacting with the world, just like everyone else.



¹ Get Safe. (2024). Autism Colour Wheel. Retrieved from: <https://www.getsafe.com/autism-wheel-vs-the-autism-spectrum/>

Many Autistic people report that their ability to function fluctuates. This variation can be due to both internal and external factors. For example, Autistic people may become sensitive to certain sensory input when feeling unwell or may find it difficult to speak during periods of change or transition in their life.

Some Autistic people will develop strategies to “blend in” with others. This is known as masking. Masking can be both a conscious and unconscious process. While it may help individuals navigate social situations, it can also be exhausting. Over time, many Autistic people have reported that masking takes a toll on their mental health. An example of masking would be consciously wearing clothes and using phrases like those around you to blend in, even though those behaviours feel innately unnatural.²

1.2 Co-occurring Mental Health Conditions

Many Autistic people also experience co-existing mental health conditions that can significantly impact their overall health and wellbeing. As a result, many Autistic people will seek mental health services at some point in their lifetime.

Below are some statistics about common co-occurring conditions:

Autistic individuals are **7 times more likely** to die prematurely by suicide compared to the general population, with **females an even higher risk** than males.^{3,4}

48% of Autistic adults attempt suicide in their lifetime, with **up to 90%** of these individuals also experiencing a co-occurring mental health condition.⁴

40% of Autistic individuals will experience depression during their lifetime.⁴

66% of Autistic adults report experiencing suicidal ideation in their lifetime, which is **4 times** higher than the general population.⁴

45% of Autistic adults show significant symptoms of PTSD, which is **10 times higher** than the general population.⁵

60% of Autistic adults experience anxiety at **clinical levels**.⁴

² National Autistic Society. (2024). Masking. Retrieved from <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking> October 2024.

³ Hirvikoski, T., Mittendorf-Rutz, E., Boman, M., Larsson, H., Lichtenstein, P., & Bölte, S. (2016). Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 208(3), 232–238. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.114.160192>

⁴ Hedley, D., Cassidy, S., Templin, C., Hayward, S. M., Bullus, E., den Houting, J., Kölves, K., Maddox, B. B., Morgan, L., Moseley, R., Rabba, A. S., Rose, A.-N., Stokes, M. A., & Young, R. L. (2022). Recommendations from the 2021 Australasian society for autism research “Health, wellbeing and suicide prevention in autism”. LaTrobe University.

⁵ Rumball, F., Brook, L., Happé, F., & Karl, A. (2021). Heightened risk of posttraumatic stress disorder in adults with autism spectrum disorder: The role of cumulative trauma and memory deficits. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 110, 103848. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2020.103848>

Factors Impacting Mental Health in the Autism Community

There are several factors that may contribute to poor mental health in Autistic people, including both internal and external influences.

Executive Functioning Challenges

Executive functioning refers to the mental processes that enable us to manage our thoughts, behaviours, and environment. These processes include:

- **Flexible thinking**
- **Working memory**
- **Self-monitoring**
- **Planning and prioritising**
- **Task initiation and cessation**
- **Organisation**
- **Impulse control**
- **Emotional regulation**

Many Autistic people may experience challenges with executive functioning and find some executive functions more difficult to perform than others. It's also common for executive functioning abilities to fluctuate over time. Since executive functioning impacts our ability to manage emotions, physical sensations, and thoughts, it plays a crucial role in both mental and physical well-being. It also affects how we plan, regulate, and act on our thoughts and feelings.

Sensory Burden

A significant number of Autistic people experience differences in sensory processing, meaning they may be either over-responsive or under-responsive to sensory stimuli.

Our senses receive information from the external environment – such as light, sound, taste, texture and smell – as well as from internal systems that monitor balance and movement. This sensory input helps us stay safe and maintain regulation. For many Autistic people, sensory processing differences can lead to overwhelm, making it difficult to stay physically and emotionally regulated. Anticipating or encountering certain sensations in the environment can often trigger anxiety.

Interoception and Alexithymia

Interoception refers to the perception of internal bodily sensations, such as pain, temperature, hunger, thirst, fatigue, bladder and bowel motions. Autistic people may experience difficulties in interoception, sometimes missing or misinterpreting signals from their bodies. Interoception is crucial for emotional and physical regulation.

Alexithymia refers to the difficulty in recognising and naming emotional states. Many Autistic people struggle with this, and it is often linked to challenges with interoceptive confusion, as both involve processing internal bodily signals.⁶

⁶Bonete, S., Molinero, C., & Ruisanchez, D. (2023). Emotional dysfunction and interoceptive challenges in adults with autism spectrum disorders. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(4), 312.

Change and Transitions

Autistic people prefer sameness (the quality or state of being the same). As a result, changes can be challenging to process and navigate. Life transitions typically involve multiple changes at once, or trigger a period of change, which can be overwhelming. Many Autistic people require extra support to prepare for or manage these periods of transition.

It's also important to recognise that some changes that might be manageable for non-Autistic individuals can have a profound impact on Autistic people, particularly for changes related to an area of passion. For example, an Autistic person with a strong interest in Australian politics might experience significant distress over a leadership change or election loss.

Social Communication and Social Isolation

Over two-thirds of Autistic adults (67.5%) report feeling socially isolated.³ This can stem from various factors. Many Autistic people face sensory processing barriers, making socialising in certain environments difficult or overwhelming. For example, an Autistic person who loves following AFL may find it impossible to attend a game due to the noise and crowds.

Many Autistic individuals prefer socialising with other Autistic people and find peer support, both in person and online, helpful. Socialising with other Autistic people often involves fewer communication barriers compared to socialising with non-Autistic people. Several Autistic-led organisations offer in-person events as well as online gaming and interest-based groups to facilitate this.

Historically, there has been a focus on improving social skills in the autism community. This is now considered an outdated perspective. When supporting an Autistic person, it is important to find, discuss and understand their social preferences and needs. Like everyone, some Autistic people are very social, while others prefer less social interaction.

Accessing Mental Health Services

Many Autistic people face substantial barriers when accessing mental health services. These barriers can be both environmental, such as overwhelming sensory stimuli, and systemic, such as navigating complex processes and paperwork. In one survey, more than one-third of respondents indicated they were unable to access mental health support due to these challenges.⁴

Conclusion

It is important to remember that while autism is not a mental health condition, Autistic people do experience poor mental health at a higher rate than non-Autistic people. It is crucial for mental health professionals to understand how to best support Autistic people when they reach out for help.

The next section will explore Autistic communication styles and offer guidance on how non-Autistic people can be supportive communication partners.

³ Hirvikoski, T., Mittendorfer-Rutz, E., Boman, M., Larsson, H., Lichtenstein, P., & Bölle, S. (2016). Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 208(3), 232–238. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.114.160192>

⁴ Hedley, D., Cassidy, S., Templin, C., Hayward, S. M., Bullus, E., den Houting, J., Kölves, K., Maddox, B. B., Morgan, L., Moseley, R., Rabba, A. S., Rose, A.-N., Stokes, M. A., & Young, R. L. (2022). Recommendations from the 2021 Australasian society for autism research "Health, wellbeing and suicide prevention in autism". LaTrobe University.



Part 2

Autistic Communication

Introduction

Autistic people seeking support from mental health services often report facing numerous barriers, particularly in communication styles.

Mental health professionals can employ various strategies to facilitate better interactions with Autistic people. Many of these strategies do not require additional physical resources – just time and a willingness to adapt communication styles.

2.1

Communication

There are a range of communication traits and styles which are unique to the autism community. These include:

Direct and Literal Communication

Autistic people tend to communicate in a direct and literal way, and prefer the same approach in return. This method of communication is more efficient for processing and conveying information. Some non-Autistic people may find this rude or confronting – this is typically not the intention.

Tone and Volume of Voice

Communication involves not only words, but the tone and volume in which they are spoken. Some Autistic people may find it difficult to interpret other people's tone of voice, including changes in tone implicitly altering the meaning of what is being said. Tone can also convey emotional cues, which may be challenging for Autistic people to understand.

Some Autistic people may have difficulty regulating the tone and volume of their voice. As a result, those who speak in a monotone may be perceived as disinterested, while others who speak loudly may be perceived as aggressive. These differences in communication can often lead to misunderstandings with non-Autistic people.

Speaking Passionately About a Topic

Many Autistic people have strong passions, such as specific hobbies or areas of interest. Autistic people can speak at length about these topics. Within the autism community, this is often referred to as “info-dumping”.

Echolalia

Echolalia refers to the repetition of speech or sounds. It can be immediate, repeating something just heard, or delayed, where phrases from past experiences are repeated. Some Autistic people may repeat phrases from their favourite movies or famous figures. For many Autistic people, echolalia serves as a valuable tool for learning speech and social interaction, often evolving into personal scripts.

Non-Speaking Community

Some Autistic people are non-speaking and may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to communicate. AAC encompasses a variety of methods used to support or replace verbal speech. Common AAC methods are:

- **Key word sign language**
- **Electronic touch displays**
- **Voice generation devices**
- **Eye gaze systems**
- **Teletypewriter (TTY) services**
- **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)**
- **Pragmatic Organisations Dynamic Display (PODD)**
- **Visual schedules**
- **Printed word boards**
- **Photo books**

It is also common for Autistic people to experience situational mutism (formerly known as selective mutism). This may occur in stressful situations, such as speaking on the phone, or in public. Some Autistic people may only feel comfortable speaking verbally with trusted individuals and use AAC to communicate with others.



Be an Effective Communication Partner

Below are some tips to help you become a more effective communication partner with Autistic people.

Allow For Processing Time

Processing verbal information can require more energy than other forms of communication. Autistic people may require more time to process verbal information and respond. Stress, anxiety and illness can slow down processing time. Longer pauses may be necessary when speaking to an Autistic person. Be patient and give them the time they need to respond.

Reduce Distractions

Minimising environmental distractions can help Autistic people engage more effectively with others. Busy environments, such as cafes or reception areas, can present challenges, with background noise and bright lights being distracting and making it harder to focus. Whenever possible, find a quiet space to have your conversation.

Articulate One Idea at a Time

Presenting too much information at once can be overwhelming. Autistic people may find it difficult to process large amounts of information simultaneously, leading to feelings of confusion or overwhelm. To avoid this, communicate one idea at a time and present information in logical, chronological order. This reduces cognitive load and can help avoid confusion or misunderstanding.

Reduce Figurative Language

When speaking with Autistic people, it's helpful to speak plainly. Avoid using jargon, idioms, or figurative language (such as metaphors and similes). Idioms often have both literal and implied meanings, which can require additional processing time. Using straightforward language ensures clarity and reduces confusion.

Tone of Voice

When communicating with an Autistic person, it's preferable to maintain a calm and even tone of voice. Variations in tone and volume can change the meaning and emphasis of a message, making it more difficult to process. A steady tone helps ensure the focus remains on the content of the words.

Be Specific

Autistic people are often highly detail-orientated and have excellent attention to detail. This means they can sometimes get confused when someone communicates with broad, vague, or general statements. When communicating, be as specific as possible, providing context and clear details to avoid misunderstandings.

Closed Questions

Ask closed questions where possible. Open questions can present too many options and take up more processing time. For example, instead of asking 'How can I help?' ask 'What has brought you here today?'

Use milestones to reference time

For some Autistic people, recalling timelines can be tricky. They may remember more concrete details, such as the time of year, specific locations, or who was present during an event. Referencing these specific details can help prompt memory recall.

It's important to note that some Autistic people have an excellent episodic memory and can recall times and places in remarkable detail.

Passions

Many Autistic people have strong passions and interests. Engaging in conversation about these topics is a great way to build rapport. For some, this passion can be tricky to contain, so for structured appointments or group sessions, schedule some time for an Autistic person to share information about their interests.

Conclusion

While social communication differences are a key aspect of autism, the autism community encompasses a diverse range of communicators.

Communication is a shared experience between the sender and receiver of a message. This means it is not just up to Autistic people to adapt their communication style, but also up to non-Autistic people to adapt their communication to support smoother communication.



Part 3 The Autism Identification Journey

Introduction

Autism is a condition that is typically identified in childhood, but for many people in the autism community, this is not the case. Autism can be formally identified or diagnosed at any age. This section will cover:

- **The identification of autism in adults**
- **Supporting a person's decision to seek a diagnosis**
- **Barriers to a formal diagnosis**
- **Autistic identity**

Overview

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that is often first identified in early childhood. Autism impacts the way the brain and nervous system develop, meaning there is no specific age or stage of development where autism will be identified. Autism can be identified and formally diagnosed at any age.

For some people, particularly those diagnosed later in life, autism traits may be masked, or internalised. This means that their Autistic traits are less obvious to others, as they may have developed strategies to hide or mask these traits. Autism may be further masked by co-occurring conditions such as anxiety, depression and ADHD, contributing to a delayed diagnosis.

Before the 1980s, little was known about autism. It was often confused with other diagnoses, such as schizophrenia. During this time, many individuals in Australia and other parts of the world were institutionalised, and there was significant stigma surrounding autism. Mothers were often blamed for their child's diagnosis and encouraged to institutionalise their child. Unfortunately, the stigma and shame experienced by families is still felt today.

For many older Autistic adults, the limited scientific understanding of autism in previous decades meant they were not identified as Autistic in childhood. Since the early 1990s, however, the definition of autism has expanded, leading to more people meeting the diagnostic criteria. There has also been an increase in awareness about autism among medical professionals, mental health experts, and the broader community.

For a deeper understanding of the historical context and generational impacts of autism, Steve Silberman's book [NeuroTribes: The legacy of the autism and future of neurodiversity](#) provides an excellent overview.

Self-Identification

For many Autistic adults, the identification journey can be long and varied. There are many ways someone can arrive at the realisation that they are Autistic. These might include:

- **A family member receiving a formal autism diagnosis.**
- **Meeting and speaking to an Autistic person.**
- **Learning about Autistic public figures or influencers on social media.**
- **Reading or watching interviews about autism in the media.**

For some, self-identification is where they will stop, and within the autism community, people who self-identify as Autistic are welcomed. For others, self-identification may lead them to pursue a formal diagnosis.

Formal Diagnosis/Identification

Some people will want to pursue a formal autism diagnosis as an adult. There are various reasons someone may want to do this, including:

- **Self-discovery**
- **Validation of their identity**
- **Accessing services and support**
- **Correcting a past misdiagnosis**

To receive a diagnosis, adults can be assessed by either a psychologist or psychiatrist. When looking for a clinician to conduct autism assessments, it is important to note that not all psychologists and psychiatrists are trained in autism assessments. You can find clinicians that specialise in autism by:

Visiting the Australian Psychological Society
[Find a psychologist](#) webpage

The Royal Australian College of New Zealand College of Psychiatrists
[Find a psychiatrist](#) webpage.

Barriers and Considerations for Formal Diagnosis

There are several barriers to obtaining a formal autism diagnosis in adulthood. Autism assessments for adults aged 25 and over are not funded under Medicare, meaning people must use the private health system, which can be expensive. For many people, the cost will be a significant barrier. As Autistic people often have co-occurring conditions, there may also be additional assessments required, such as cognitive assessments or ADHD assessments.

For people living in regional or remote areas of Victoria, access to clinicians trained in adult autism assessments may be limited. Along with the cost, travel may present an additional barrier.

It is important to note that there are strategies people can use to overcome barriers to diagnosis. Some people may seek out clinicians who offer payment plans. These services can be difficult to find and may require extensive research. Additionally, some people have used no-interest loans (NIL) to pay for assessment services. While this may be helpful in certain situations, it is not something that can be universally recommended.

Important note – not all Autistic people who receive a later diagnosis will be eligible for government funding or support. This is an important point for people to consider when exploring whether to proceed or not.

3.3 Ableism and Internalised Ableism

Some people may choose not to pursue a diagnosis for reasons beyond financial constraints. It is important to recognise these barriers to pursuing diagnosis when discussing autism identification. One prevalent common barrier is internalised ableism. Ableism refers to discrimination and prejudicial attitudes toward people with disability. Internalised ableism occurs when a person with a disability has internalised negative messages about their disability.

In some cases, internalised ableism may stem from comparison. Some later-identified Autistic people may feel like their needs are invalid or may compare themselves to those with complex support needs, or to people identified in childhood. This can lead to imposter syndrome, and thoughts and feelings surrounding this comparison that they will need to work through. It's crucial to understand that every journey towards identification is unique, and every Autistic experience is valid.

Often, people experiencing internalised ableism have been exposed to outdated or stereotypical ideas about autism, which don't reflect their own personal experience.



3.4 Reactions to diagnosis

For some Autistic adults, a formal diagnosis can bring about feelings of grief. For many who have faced challenges throughout their lives, receiving an autism diagnosis can provide new insights into their past experiences. This understanding can be both empowering and reflective, especially when they have lacked the appropriate supports or language to explain their experiences until that point.

3.5 How to help

It's important for people on the autism identification and formal diagnosis journey to connect with the experiences of other Autistic people. The autism community is diverse, and there is a vast range of experiences shared. People can connect through:

- **Face to face peer support groups**
- **Online peer support groups**
- **Following Autistic-led organisations on social media**
- **Engaging with online advocates/activists using hashtags such as #actuallyautistic**
- **Seeking out books, podcasts, and documentaries**

Is This Good Advice?

The internet and social media are filled with well-meaning but sometimes misleading information. In the autism community, dangerous and outdated advice has circulated for years. Here are some key points to consider when evaluating autism-related content:

Is the content created by Autistic people or co-designed with them?	Content authored or developed by Autistic people is more likely to be accurate and respectful of lived experience.
Is the information recent?	Aim for content that is no more than 5 years old – Autism research continues to evolve, and outdated advice can perpetuate misconceptions and misinformation.
Is the content promoting a product or service?	Material that is trying to sell something may not be objective and truthful.
Is the content autism-positive?	Content that uses deficit-focused or medical language may be less affirming of Autistic identity.
Is consent clear?	Sometimes Autistic people are discussed or represented without their consent. Always check if the voices and experiences shared are consensual and respectful.

Suggested Resources

Below are some helpful resources both for the Autistic community and mental health professionals. Many of the authors are Autistic allied health professionals, blending their expertise with lived experience to provide authentic, accurate information about autism.



Books

[Late Bloomer](#)

Clem Bastow

[Unmasking Autism](#)

Devon Price

[Different Not Less: A neurodivergent's guide to embracing your true self and finding you happily ever after.](#)

Chloe Hayden



Podcasts

[The Neurodivergent Woman Podcast](#)

[Divergent Conversations](#)

[Divergent Dialogues Podcast](#)



Videos

[Actually Autistic: All about women 2023](#)

[Autism from the Inside](#)

[Perspective Shift - episode 2 Prue Stevenson](#)

Conclusion

The Autistic identification journey is unique for each person. It is important to recognise that formal diagnosis may not be the right path for everyone; what matters most is finding what works best for each person.

There are several Autistic organisations, groups, and resources available to help Autistic people explore their identity and connect with the Autistic community.

Part 4

Mental Health Concerns and Help Seeking Supports

Introduction

Autistic people may encounter unique barriers when seeking mental health support. These challenges can be multifaceted, but when mental health services are aware of them, they can take proactive steps to address and alleviate these barriers.

This section will cover:

- **Signs of mental health concerns**
- **Autistic burnout**
- **Meltdowns and shutdowns**
- **Tips to support help seeking.**

4.1 Signs of Mental Health Concerns

Like non-Autistic people, Autistic people can experience mood changes that may signal mental health concerns. However, there may be autism-specific indicators of distress that differ from non-Autistic people.

The core traits of autism are explained in [Part One](#) of this document. Often, Autistic people report noticeable changes in these Autistic traits when experiencing mental health challenges. This may include:

- **Increased stimming to self-soothe**
- **Stimming becoming potentially harmful (e.g. using rough or dangerous objects, skin-picking, head-banging)**
- **Changes in executive functioning capacity, particularly working memory, which may make daily tasks more difficult**
- **Difficulty with speech, or becoming non-speaking for periods of time**
- **Loss of interest or motivation in passions or hobbies**
- **Changes in sleep patterns and diet**
- **Autistic inertia, which refers to a feeling of being “stuck in the moment”, making it difficult to start or stop tasks**
- **Increased sensory sensitivity or sensory-seeking behaviours, which may include:**
 - A decrease in the range of foods that can be tolerated and sticking to safe foods, e.g. a bland diet
 - Becoming more sensitive to certain fabric textures, tight clothing, and/or footwear
 - Changes in light and sound sensitivity, including stimuli causing pain and distress
 - An increase in aversion to certain smells which may make daily tasks difficult, including taking out the rubbish or changing the kitty litter.

Other considerations include:

Meltdowns

Autistic adults describe meltdowns as a 'sense of feeling "overwhelmed" by information, sensory stimuli, social situations, changes to routine, their emotions, or other stresses leading up to a meltdown.'⁷

Many people experience:

- Extreme emotions
- A loss of logic, including memory loss
- Loss of self-control
- A sense of release after the meltdown.

Autistic people may experience more frequent and/or intense meltdowns if they are experiencing mental health concerns.

Autistic burnout

Autistic burnout is 'a long-lasting pervasive state of exhaustion, loss of functions, and reduced tolerance to stimulus that is conceptualised as resulting from chronic life stress and mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports.'⁸

During Autistic burnout, many Autistic people report a range of different symptoms, such as meltdowns and increased sensory sensitivity. Some people report a regression in skills, whether that be activities of daily life or work/academic skills. It is reported by Autistic people that short term relief from burnout is tricky to find.

Shutdowns

A shutdown is the withdrawing internally in response to stress. Autistic people may become unresponsive as a way to cope with stresses. This can be conscious and unconscious.

A shutdown is the opposite to a meltdown. Shutdowns can be trickier to notice, as there are few visible signs, whereas a meltdown externalises distress. Shutdowns have a protective component to them.⁹

Some Autistic people may experience an increase in shutdowns if they are experiencing mental health concerns.

⁷ Lewis, L. F., & Stevens, K. (2023). The lived experience of meltdowns for autistic adults. *Autism*, 27(6), 1817-1825.

⁸ Raymaker, D. M., Teo, A. R., Steckler, N. A., Lentz, B., Scharer, M., Delos Santos, 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.

⁹ Reframing Autism. (2024). All about Autistic shutdowns: A guide for allies. Retrieved from <https://reframingautism.org.au/all-about-autistic-shutdown-guide-for-allies/> October 2024.

What Can Mental Health Services Do?

Ensure all staff understand Autism, including staff who greet and welcome people to your service. The autism community is diverse, so it is important to meet people where they are at in their individual experiences.

An Inclusive Welcome

Asking an Autistic person “how can I help you?” can be an overwhelming question for them to start with, particularly if they are experiencing Autistic burnout. A more inclusive way to begin the conversation might be, “what has brought you here today?”

Instead of ‘how can I help you?’ try...

‘What has brought you here today?’

Finding Out More

It can be difficult for Autistic people to answer standard mental health questionnaires.⁹ Autistic people have reported difficulties with the language in some mental health questionnaires, such as:

- **Unclear questions**
- **Use of figurative language, such as ‘feeling blue.’**
- **Questions that don’t relate to Autistic experiences (e.g., ‘would you say that food dominates your life?’ or ‘about how often did you feel restless or fidgety?’).**

To gather clear background information, consider these alternatives:

- **What’s your normal?** — Understanding what is typical or normal for a person can help them describe changes. Are they doing more or less of certain activities? Are there changes in their thoughts or feelings? Tools like diaries and calendars can be helpful for recognising and reflecting on these shifts.
- **Energy states over emotional states** — Some Autistic individuals find it easier to describe what energises or drains them, rather than trying to label emotions (e.g., ask ‘what energises you’ or ‘what drains your energy’ rather than ‘what emotions have you been feeling?’)

⁹ Amaze (2019). Going to the General Practitioner (GP) about your mental health: A guide for Autistic women. Retrieved from https://www.amaze.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/MAMMH-Full-Guide_SR-FINAL-16-10-24.pdf October 2024.

- **Using mood tracking tools:** Some people will find using apps or website to track mood helpful. The following resources were co-designed with Autistic people:
 - [You feel like s@\\$t](#) — A self-care game designed to assist Autistic people who are having trouble with self-care decisions and figuring out what to do next. This is a website, not an app.
 - [Molehill Mountain](#) — An app developed by Autistic people to help track their worries and anxiety while developing coping strategies.
- For those who prefer not to use technology, worksheets or journals may be a better fit for expressing feelings. Some people may also prefer using creative outlets, like drawings, to share their feelings.

Autistic burnout

Recovering from Autistic burnout can take a long time. The recovery process depends on the amount of support available and how much mental and emotional load can be reduced from daily routines. Many Autistic people report the following strategies are helpful in their recovery:

- **Engaging in passion areas or special interests to regain energy.**
- **Unmasking as much as possible, when safe to do so.**
- **Spending time with other Autistic people.**
- **Identifying and letting go of societal “shoulds” (e.g. “I should eat more vegetables” or “I have to attend that birthday party.”)**

After experiencing burnout, many Autistic people find they are better able to identify early warning signs and implement strategies. Often, scheduling rest periods and time for personal interests or hobbies is a good place to start. Some people track their energy levels across different tasks and learn to recognise when their energy levels are getting low.

Read more about burnout:

- **National Autism Society (NAS) - [Understanding autistic burnout](#)**
- **Reframing Autism - [Navigating Autistic Burnout: Self-care strategies to recover and recalibrate.](#)**

Supporting Meltdowns

If an Autistic person is experiencing a meltdown, it is important to remain calm, keep the person safe, and offer privacy. Here are some key strategies for supporting them:

- **Minimise verbal communication - Offer brief, essential instructions in a calm tone (two-to-three words).**
- **Provide a private or safe space - If possible, guide the person to a private space, or ask bystanders to move away to give them space and maintain privacy,**
- **Reduce sensory input - Lower noise levels and adjust lighting to create a more calming environment.**
- **Avoid crowding or overwhelming them - Supervise the person but don't crowd them.**
- **Offer water**
- **Do not rush the person - give them time to recover.**

Read more about meltdowns:

- **Autistica** – [Supporting Autistic people who are overwhelmed or having a meltdown.](#)
- **Reframing Autism** — [All About Autistics Shutdowns: A guide for allies.](#)

Conclusion

There are a range of tools available to staff supporting Autistic people with their mental health concerns. By adjusting communication styles and showing an interest in understanding autism, you can create a welcoming and supportive environment for Autistic people.

Autism Connect is a free, national Autism helpline, providing independent and expert information over phone, email and webchat. For more information about Autism, or to talk about your situation, contact our Autism Connect Advisors via:

Phone: 1300 308 699

Email: info@autismconnect.org.au

Website and webchat: www.amaze.org.au/autismconnect

Available from 8am to 7pm, Monday to Friday (excluding public holidays).

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