

Understanding Autism

Newham Autism Diagnostic Service
World Autism Acceptance Week 2025

What is Autism

- Autism influences how people experience and interact with the world. It is a lifelong neurodivergence and classified as a disability. Autistic people are different from each other, but for a diagnosis they must share differences from non-autistic people in how they think, feel and communicate.
- Being autistic means you may feel things and react to them differently to non-autistic people. You may find socialising confusing or tiring, and you may become overwhelmed in loud or busy places. You may have intense interests, prefer order and routine, and use repeated movements or actions to calm yourself or express joy. You might mask your discomfort to fit in, which can lead to mental illness.

Explaining the “*Spectrum*”

- Autism is understood as a spectrum. In the past, people thought the spectrum was a straight line between “more” and “less” autistic. This isn’t right. Today we understand the spectrum to mean each autistic person has a unique combination of characteristics. Autistic people can be very different to each other, with different sets of strengths and challenges.

Autism is a spectrum
But!

It's not a like line-graph.



more like a pie chart

Some has more
support needs
than others,
but we are all
#actually autistic



- spacial intersts
- Routines
- sensory issues
- repetitivity
- stimming
- difficulties with social interaction
- language issues
- others

Autism Spectrum

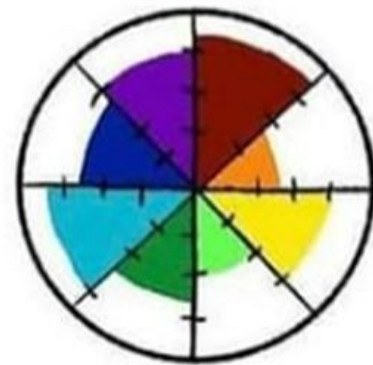
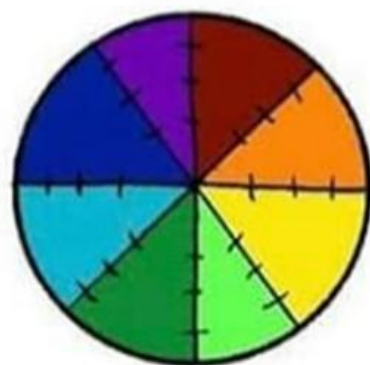
The Autism spectrum is not linear



less autistic

very autistic

The Autism Spectrum looks more like:



- Social skills
- fixations
- routines
- Sensory issues
- stimming
- perception
- executive func.
- other

→ Terms like "high functioning" and "low functioning" are harmful and are not used anymore

Autism - sketches

Autism is a spectrum

NOT like this

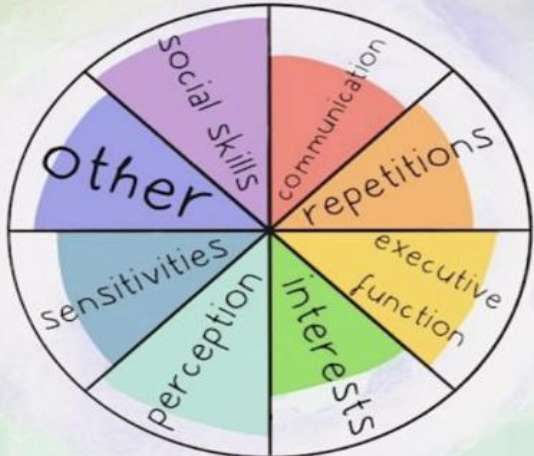
very autistic?
No!



little bit autistic?
No!

But like this

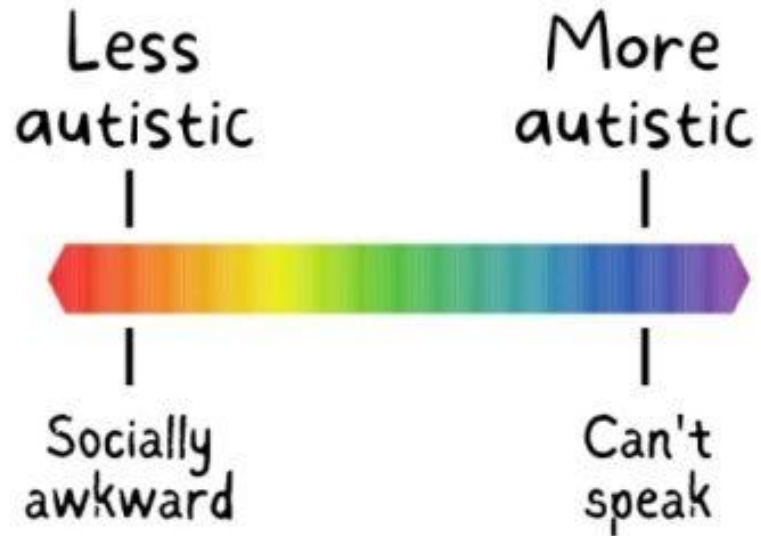
We're both autistic...



...but we have different strengths and difficulties



What people think
autism spectrum
looks like



What it can actually
look like



Image credit: www.tanyaheasley.co.uk

Autistic burnout

- Autistic burnout is a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic life stress and a mismatch of expectations and abilities without adequate supports.
- Autistic burnout is described as chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, and reduced tolerance to stimulus. It is described as affecting every part of life and lasting for long periods of time (typically 3+ months). Many first experienced autistic burnout during puberty, graduation from secondary education, or at other times of transition and changes in developmental expectations.

Reasons why autistic burnout might occur

- Masking of autistic traits, for example by suppressing autistic behaviours, pretending to be non-autistic, or working very hard to act in a non-autistic way.
- Difficult or unreachable expectations from family, school, work, or society in general.
- Stress from living in a world not set up to accommodate autistic people, for example managing the stress of having to be in noisy environments.
- Life-changes and transitions that are stressful for anyone, for example transitioning from school to work, experiencing a mental health crisis, or the death of someone close.

The Cycle of Autistic Burnout

Autistic person appears to be coping so demands are increased.

Prolonged exposure to stressors without adequate support is unsustainable.



Energy and functioning slowly improve.

Demands are removed or reduced. Increase in soothing and regulating activities.

Severe fatigue, loss of functioning.

Autistic Fatigue & Burnout

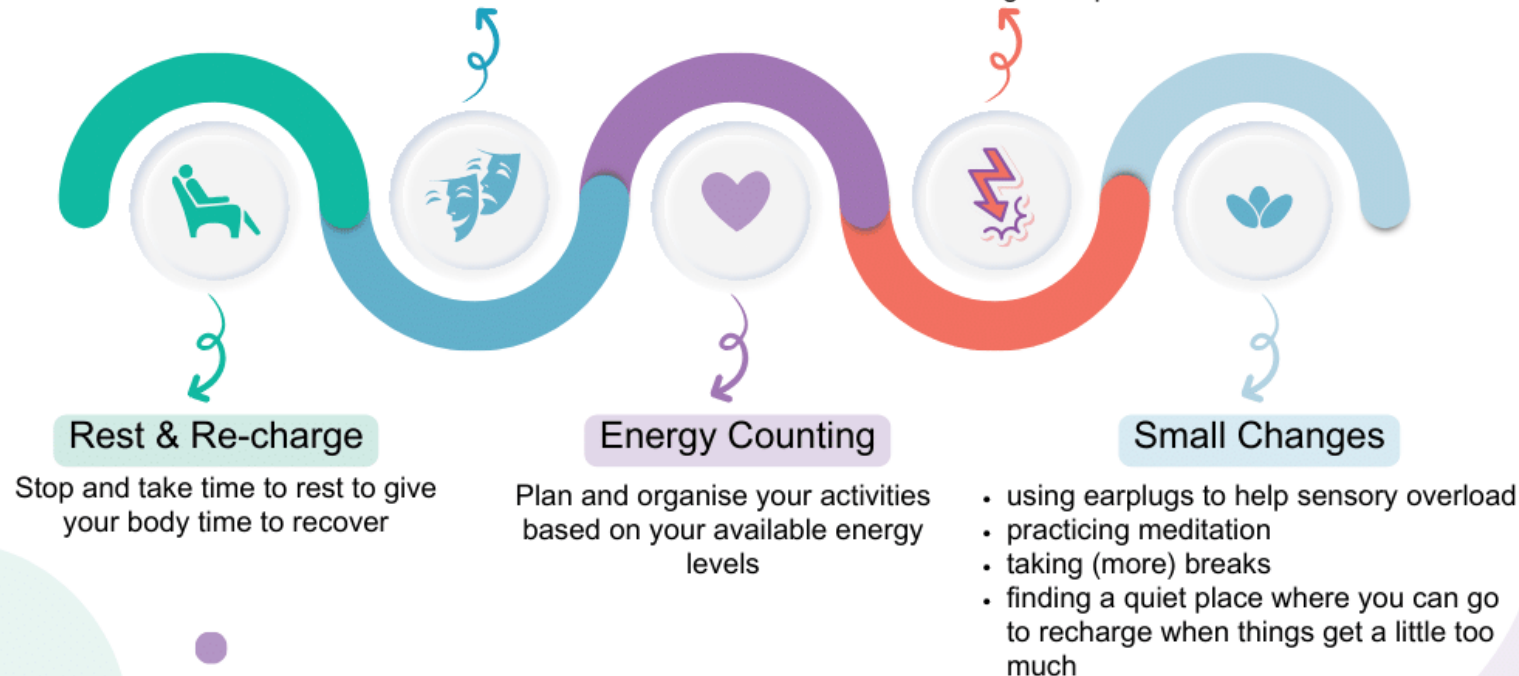
Coping Strategies

Unmasking

Allowing yourself to act naturally without worrying about your behaviour is an important step to help recovery.

Identify Triggers

Identifying patterns can help you understand what your triggers are. This will give you more control over situations and allow you to put strategies in place.



Rest & Re-charge

Stop and take time to rest to give your body time to recover

Energy Counting

Plan and organise your activities based on your available energy levels

Small Changes

- using earplugs to help sensory overload
- practicing meditation
- taking (more) breaks
- finding a quiet place where you can go to recharge when things get a little too much

Reasonable Adjustments

- Reasonable adjustments are changes organisations must make for people who meet the legal definition of disability (including autistic people) to stop them being disadvantaged.
- Reasonable adjustments are particularly important in employment and education. They should be considered and put in place from the application and interview stage onwards. Reasonable adjustments may need to be updated as your health, task demands and aspects of the social or physical environment can change over time.

What makes an adjustment reasonable?

- Is the change practical to implement?
- Will the change be effective in reducing or removing the disadvantage you face?
- Is it cost effective considering the resources available to the organisation or can funding be sought elsewhere? For example, in an [Access to Work](#) grant, through an [Educational Health Care Plan](#) or [PIP](#)?
- Are there any health and safety concerns?
- Will it be disruptive to other students or employees?

Different types of adjustments and examples:

1. A change to how the organisation normally does things.



Hybrid Working



Online or in person interview options



Additional breaks



Make teambuilding events, socialising on breaks and networking optional



Relaxing the dress code or uniform



Accommodate different learning and communication styles



Start/ finish time to avoid rush hour

2. A change to the physical environment



Dim Lighting



Quiet Break Area



Restrict food and drink consumption in study/ work areas.



Provide quiet work areas



Personal work space



Restrict exposure to customer facing areas

3. Providing an auxiliary aid or service



Work Buddy.

This can be someone employed through an Access to Work grant a designated colleague to help with meetings or presentations (eg helping explain subtext and decode social cues) .

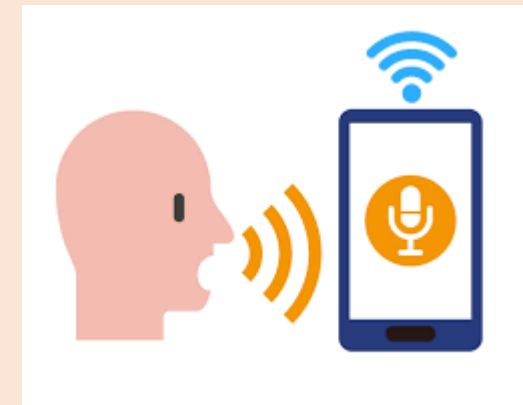
Virtual buddies can help remotely with executive functioning and organisation tasks.



Noise cancelling earphones
To prevent sensory overwhelm but can also act as a Do not Disturb sign.

Computer Aids

For example voice activated software or using AI to help with nuance in emails.



Further information

- [Understanding autistic burnout](#)
- [Autistic Burnout Guide](#)
- [The Cycle of Autistic Burnout - Dr Alice Nicholls](#)
- [Autistic Fatigue and Burnout coping strategies](#)
- [Autistic fatigue and burnout | Autism Space | Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust](#)
- [Anxiety in autistic people](#)

Further links and reading

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-adjustment-passport>
- <https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/reasonable-adjustments-college-university>
- <https://adhdandautism.org/information/reasonable-adjustments/>
- https://www.acas.org.uk/neurodiversity-at-work?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwhYS_BhD2ARIsAJTMMQaUmXnvovwk2ErYujQ-qvPutHkmSBSBB3UDuOfjyAPk3LV6C8E5RbwaAkUdEALw_wcB
- <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/employment/what-are-reasonable-adjustments-and-when-can-they>