

# Your Literally Ausome Guide to Understanding and Supporting your Autistic Friend



This guide has been developed for anyone who's got an Autistic friend or peer to learn and understand what Autism is, how it may affect and impact your friend and also how their Autism might influence and affect your friendship and relationship.

Everyone in the world is different, and every Autistic person in the world is different, but friendships and being a good friend are all the same. Getting to know someone, learning what their interests are and what they enjoy doing is the best way to be a friend to anyone, whether they're Autistic or not.

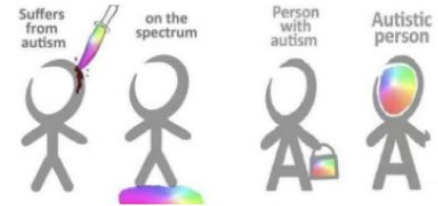
The intention of this guide is to help you understand and even support your Autistic friend which will literally strengthen your friendship and make it even more AUsome!

To ensure the information in this resource is accurate, feedback was provided by Autistic adults.

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This guide uses the term 'Autistic' person, and not 'friend with Autism' as you can't separate someone's Autism (their brain) from themselves. Just like you don't refer to a blind or deaf person as a 'person with blind', or a 'person with deaf', we don't say 'person with Autism'.

Every Autistic person has their own preference as to how they would like to be identified, so it's recommended that you ask them their preference.



Source: 'Neurology is not an accessory', [www.identityfirst.org](http://www.identityfirst.org)



## Neurodiverse and Neurodivergent

The term Neurodiverse refers to everyone with different brain wiring, which is literally everyone in the world!

Autistic individuals and those with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and/or learning difficulties like Dyslexia use the term 'Neurodivergent' when referring to their neurological differences.

Neurotypicals describe those that don't have a brain, or neurological, difference.

# What is Autism?

The official name for Autism is 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD).

Autism is a spectrum of neurodevelopmental conditions, characterised by challenges in the development of social relationships & communication skills, and the presence of unusually strong narrow interests & repetitive behaviour.



An analogy that's been used to describe Autistic brains, is that they're a 'processing error' or 'not normal' which are both incorrect and insulting. Autistic brains are not 'processing errors', but rather 'different operating systems' to Neurotypicals.

Neurodivergent people might use the iOS operating system and Neurotypicals, Windows. Although the programs are similar in the way they run, the icons are all different, the folders and files have different names and things are filed in different locations.

This analogy helps to explain how Neurodivergent brains are different and why Neurodivergent individuals describe their brains the way they do. Their brains process information as 'seeing the world differently', or being 'uniquely wired' which are both positive ways to interpret their brain differences.

The Autistic community are hoping the official name changes to Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), or keeping ASD as the acronym, but making the 'D' stand for 'Difference, not identifying with feeling, or being, disordered.

# Facts about Autism?

Autism is a neurotype, not a defective brain.

There is no 'cure' for Autism as it's not an illness or disease.

Autism is a genetic condition which means it's passed down by parents and grandparents.

Autism is considered a Disability

Autism is NOT caused by childhood vaccinations.

A person doesn't 'grow out' of their Autism. Some Autistic adults say that they've 'grown into their Autism', the more they learn and understand about themselves.

Autistic people don't have any defining features, which means you can't 'look Autistic'.

You might think that it's a compliment to say 'you don't look Autistic' but it's actually really insulting. This observation minimises the impact that their Autism has on your friends' life.

The reason a person's Autistic traits might not be obvious to you is because of how successfully the person's masking their Autistic traits. Just because you can't see their Autism, doesn't mean it's not there.

This statement also puts the person in a position where they feel the need to justify their neurology which is extremely disrespectful and demeaning.

**Autistic Callum (He/Him)**  
"AutisticCallum\_ ...  
me someone says you don't look autistic, politely  
m if you smell autistic.  
an 12, 2022 - Twitter for iPhone

The old, 'she/he doesn't look Autistic' line.  
© literally ausome 2021  
And then me looking at my child & asking, 'could you please show the lady some Autism'.

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# Autistic Functioning Levels

Functioning labels were originally developed so that Governments could assign a 'level' of funding, or financial assistance, based on an Autistic person's level of intelligence (IQ) and the degree to which a person's Autism impaired or disabled them. In addition, these 'labels' were used by professionals to describe which end of the 'Spectrum' a particular Autistic person was at to ensure it matched the level of funds and support they would receive from the Government.

The issue with these functioning labels is that it assumes that there's an easier and harder level of Autism, and it groups Autistic people into certain categories based on whatever people think they need support with.

With the 'spectrum' understood not being a straight line (or linear), the idea that one 'level' or one 'label' could be applied to describe lots of Autistic people, all of their Autistic traits/characteristics as well as the level, or degree, that they're impacted by their traits is both wrong and outdated.

**High-functioning Autism  
does NOT mean  
EASIER Autism**

Mild Autism doesn't mean one experiences Autism mildly.....  
it means YOU experience their Autism mildly.

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You may not know how hard they've had to work to get to the level they are.

- Adam Walton, The Proud Aspergian

The other issue with using functioning labels in relation to Autism is that it implies that a 'high-functioning' Autistic struggles less with communication, social interactions, sensory overload or restrictive or repetitive behaviours. All this does is describe a person's ability to mask their Autistic behaviours and challenges and we know how emotionally damaging this can be.

I have what's called high-  
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functioning autism, which is  
a terrible name for what I  
have, because it gives the  
impression that I function  
highly. I do not.

- Hannah Gadsby, 'Douglas'



**The term 'high functioning' dismisses the daily struggles and efforts that your friend puts into the smallest things and calling others 'low-functioning' is shaming those who have decided, or chosen, not to mask their struggles.**



# How Autism is Diagnosed

A team of experts such as Psychologists, Speech Therapists and Paediatricians are required to provide an Autism diagnosis to a child.

Adults can be diagnosed by either a Psychologists or Psychiatrist.

These experts use a 'checklist of traits' or 'characteristics' from the DSM-V/DSM-5, which is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed).

**Autism Diagnosis Criteria**  
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A person must meet the following criteria, as identified in the DSM-5:

- Persistent deficits in social communication/social interaction across multiple contexts.
  - Deficits in non-verbal communication, deficits in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships and deficits in social-emotional reciprocity.
- Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, activities manifested by at least two specific examples.
  - Stereotyped/repetitive movements or rituals or fixated, restrictive interests or hyper or hypo-sensitivity to sensory input.
- Symptoms must be present in early childhood.
- Symptoms must limit or impair a person's daily functioning.
- Symptoms cannot be explained by an intellectual disability.

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It's important to remember that every Autistic person is unique and no two Autistic people are the same (not even Autistic siblings) so these traits and the degree to which a person is impacted won't be the same as another.

There are many Autistic individuals who aren't comfortable with the wording of the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5, as it uses words like 'deficits' and 'failure', which are very negative portrayals of Autism.

The terminology also defines Autistic socialising as wrong or disordered, but from the Autistic person's perspective, it's just 'different' socialising. This assumption and the use of negative terms are both offensive and hurtful to the Autistic community.

The criteria also leads itself for thinking that Autism is a behavioural condition which is also incorrect. It also fails to recognise other areas that impact Autistic people such as sensory processing and sensory sensitivities.

## Communication

### ∞ Verbal Interpretation ∞

- ∞ Autistic brains **interpret language very literally**, interpreting the 'exact' meaning of things.
  - For example, if someone tells your friend to 'grab a chair', they're likely to interpret this to mean to literally grab a chair, not realising you meant for them to bring over the chair.
- ∞ Autistic brains also find it **difficult understanding**:
  - ∞ **Sarcasm** (saying the opposite of what you mean; For example, when someone asks if you need help when you're clearly struggling, and you answer, 'no thanks, I'm enjoying the struggle).
  - ∞ **Puns** (jokes using different possible meanings of a word, or words, that sound alike but have different meanings. For example, 'I was struggling to figure out how lightning works, but then it struck me').
  - ∞ **Idioms** (are words or phrases that aren't meant to be taken literally. For example, when someone says they have 'cold feet', it means that they're nervous and not that their feet are actually cold)
  - ∞ **Metaphors** (describes an object or action in a way that isn't literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison. For example, they might ask, 'are there actually any sheep, black or otherwise, in your family'?)

## Communication

### ∞ Non-Verbal Communication ∞

Your friend is likely to struggle using their non-verbal behaviours when socialising. For example during conversations:

- ∞ they might **struggle to make eye contact when listening or talking to you, as well as not nodding to show you that they're listening and/or interested**
- ∞ your friend is likely to **find understanding subtle body language gestures challenging**. For example, the more obvious actions, like shrugging shoulders to mean 'I don't know' would be understood, but the more subtle ones, not.
- ∞ they might **struggle with understanding facial expressions and your tone of voice**. This includes understanding others and well as misusing their own.
  - **Facial Expressions** - are difficult for Autistic people to make sense of. They'd be familiar with happy, sad, angry and surprised, but perhaps not, jealous, hurt, offended and frustrated, and the thousands of others.
  - **Tone of voice** - refers to the sound(s) or ways we change our voice when talking that helps us make our point. We use a 'level' or 'mono' tone of voice when being sarcastic as this helps deliver the message. There are so many ways that we can use our tone of voice when talking - in our requests, instructions, when joking, or when being sarcastic, which can be really confusing and something your friend needs to remember the next time they hear this tone (and then have to match it to the person's facial expressions and/or body language, or gestures),

## Communication

### ∞ Verbal Communication ∞

Your Autistic friend might find it difficult to:

- ∞ Initiate social interactions
- ∞ Maintain a 'back and forth' conversation; which means they might not ask you a question back after they've answered your question which impacts the 'flow' of conversation.
  - Your friend may rely on pre-prepared scripts for their social interactions and it's obvious when they've come to an end of the script, as they're not sure what to say next.
- ∞ Have a conversation about a subject that isn't their special interest and may not want to talk about anything that doesn't interest them.

All combined, conversation flow issues, difficulties understanding facial expressions, tone of voice and body language/gestures will affect the way your friend will engage with you. Your friend is equally likely to confuse their gestures when communicating and/or responding to you.

Your friend may at times say things out of context or use the wrong tone when talking about something or perhaps even have their facial expression not match what they're saying.

You might notice that your friend adopts a 'script' or memorise a 'social sequence' of events and might use it all the time. This will be repetitive and. Your friend might also mis-use their 'script' or 'sequence', not realising that they're not appropriate in all social situations and settings.

### ∞ Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours ∞

There are many ways that these traits are used and/portrayed by your Autistic friend. Some examples include or involve:

- ∞ Following routines/schedules
  - They'll have **daily routines, schedules and rituals** that will make them feel comfortable and in control.
  - They'll insist on **following the rules** (and letting you know when you've broken them).
- ∞ Recognising and adopting patterns for both verbal or non-verbal behaviour
  - **Verbal** - repeating the same words, phrases or even sounds over and over again (called 'echolalia').
  - **Non-verbal** - requiring predictability (knowing what's going to happen in the near future) and also insisting on doing the same things over and over and exactly the same way each time.
    - You might notice that your friend is being really 'bossy' when playing a game. This is your friend's way of being able to control the game; by making up the rules, and/or arranging the teams. This helps your friend feel in 'control' of their environment.
    - Your friend might get angry when playing (without warning). This might be because someone is trying to 'take charge' over the game and making suggestions to change the rules, or the rules have changed and your friend refuses to acknowledge this.

## Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours, Interests and Activities

### ∞ Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours ∞

- ∞ Repetitive behaviours also refer to certain movements or noises that your friend may do to keep themselves calm. This is called '**stimming**' or self-soothing/self-stimulating behaviours.
  - An example of stimming that your friend may do, and something we all do really, to keep ourselves calm or relaxed is play with fidget toys, twirl hair, swing legs under a desk or table or stretch our shoulders when feeling pressured or stressed.



Source: @the.chronic.couple

Everyone in the world stims to provide themselves a sense of calm. The difference between neurotypical and neurodivergent (ND) stimming is that ND stim might look out of context, seem inconsiderate or be ill-timed. For example, if your friends' stim is to click their knuckles, them doing this during a minute silence at school assembly might be portrayed as inappropriate.

- ∞ Being rigid, or fixed, on a set of ideas and their understanding of certain things.
  - This means your friend is convinced that there's only one way to do something and/or that only their ideas or interpretations make sense.
- ∞ Having fixations and/or being fixated
  - Your friend may seem insistent on doing things their way, may not listen to other ideas or ways of doing things as well as not being able to 'move on' or 'let it go' after something's upset them.

### ∞ Restricted and Repetitive Interests and Activities ∞

- ∞ This refers to hobbies and/or actions that may look and/or sound obsessive or intense to others but is how your friend keeps themselves calm.
  - These are usually subjects such as topics that are your friend's 'special interests' or hobbies. Your friend might be completely absorbed in their special interest and might talk incessantly about them. It also wouldn't be unusual for your friend not to be interested in anything other than their favourite topics, even if everyone else is.
- ∞ Restricted and repetitive interests and activities might be lining up toys or items in the same, or rainbow order, reading over lists and facts about their favourite topic(s) or the particular stimming behaviours they do.
  - When your friend shares their interests with you over and over again, it can be really annoying. Try to remind yourself that it's the way your friend/peer is trying to connect with you.
- ∞ A less obvious example might be your friend reading the same books or watching the same TV shows, or YouTube videos over and over again. The content or storylines are familiar and predictable and really help calm their anxious minds and bodies.



Source: @aspiegurl



Source: @justgirlproject

### ∞ Reasons for these Restricted and Repetitive Behaviours, Interests and Activities ∞

- ∞ Your friend is likely to feel anxious, overwhelmed, worried, confused, or a combination of these emotions, and a way of helping themselves stay calm is liking to know what's happening and having things as predictable as possible.
  - This helps to make your friend feel in control, which helps them feel safe and able to deal with the things that are more challenging.
- ∞ 'Unexpected changes' to plans, or when things don't happen the same way as they previously did can be really distressing for your friend and difficult to cope with.
  - Your friend might act out (meltdown) or internalise their feelings (shutdown) and not be able to participate in events, class, or celebrations etc.



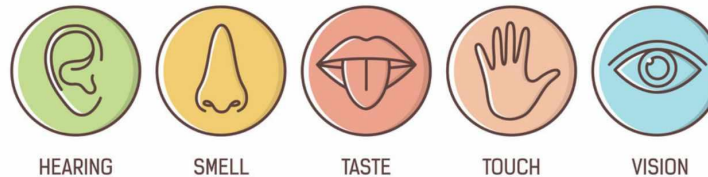
## Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input

### ∞ Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input - The Five Senses ∞

- ∞ The five most common senses that humans sense are, sight (vision), hearing (auditory), smell (olfactory), taste (gustatory) and touch (tactile). Your friend might be really sensitive (hypersensitive), or crave (hyporeactive) any or all of the five senses and the impact of these can range from being a little bit annoying to extremely offensive.
  - For example, it might also mean your friend might not want to go to an event or make arrangements if they know they'll experience sensory overload or attend and participate but bring along some items to support their sensitivities, e.g. noise reduction headphones.

#### The Five Senses

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## Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input

### ∞ Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input - The Five Senses ∞



HEARING

**Sound** includes being really sensitive to sounds and noises (even if it doesn't seem noisy to others).



SMELL

**Smells** can really impact your friend. For example, when particular foods are being prepared or cooked or they might walk really fast past butchers or fruit shops. It might also be certain perfumes (a teacher wears) which can be really overpowering and off-putting or even if a shop or office burns candles/oils that makes your friend really nauseous.



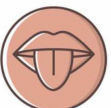
VISION

**Vision** can be impacted by the fluorescent lights used in shopping centres and classrooms being too bright or if it's really sunny outside, it might mean your friend will prefer sitting in the shade, wearing sunglasses, or even sitting inside.



TOUCH

**Touch** sensitivity refers to a person not liking to be touched by others and also includes clothing and fabrics which if too loose, tight, itchy or scratchy can be really irritating and be refused to be worn. Clothing tags are the worst offenders :)



TASTE

**Taste** sensitivities may mean your friend will avoid touching and/or eating certain foods because of their texture.



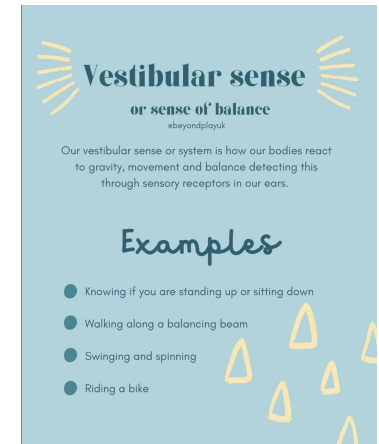
Source: @superspectrumgirl

## Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input

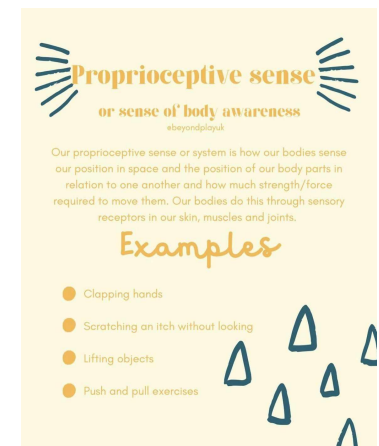
### ∞ Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input - the Sixth and Seventh Sense ∞

#### ∞ The sixth and seventh senses are vestibular and proprioception

- Vestibular refers to 'movement' or the sense of balance, which provides our bodies with information about where our head and body are in space and keeps us upright when we sit, stand and walk.
- Proprioception refers to 'body position', or the body awareness sense, that tells us where our body parts are relative to each other i.e. how much force to use with our hands when doing tasks such as cracking an egg. Autistic people may be impacted by this sense either too much or too little which may impact how they feel in particular places or at particular times.



Source: @beyondplayuk



Source: @beyondplayuk

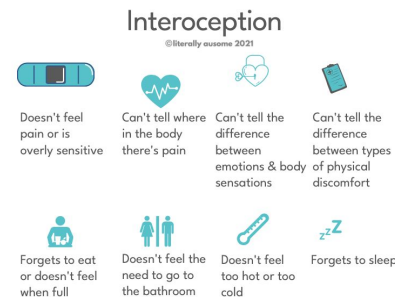
## Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input

### ∞ Hypo and/or Hyper Sensitivity from Sensory Input - the Eighth Sense ∞

- ∞ The **eighth sense**, '**interoception**', refers to the brain messages throughout the body (in organs, muscles, skin, bones etc) that gathers information from inside the body and sends them to the brain.

The brain then helps to make sense of these messages and urges us to take action; if we're thirsty, we get a drink; if we feel full, we stop eating; if we feel cold, we get a top; if we feel the need the bathroom, we go; if we feel anxious, we seek comfort; if we feel frustrated, we seek help.

- Your friend may struggle with this sense because of the difficulty in properly or clearly identifying these feelings/sensations and not responding to them as they feel different in the body. For example, your friend might start to feel really unwell in class. It may be because they've not realised the classroom has gotten really hot and they're still wearing their jumper. They've not made the connection that they're too hot which has made them feel sick and might not be able to explain to the teacher why they feel unwell.



# Executive Functioning

Executive Functioning is described as ‘the CEO of the brain’, where mental skills come together and help us get things done. All neurodiverse people experience difficulties with their executive functioning skills, not just Autistic people.

## The three areas of executive function are:

- ∞ Working memory (short-term memory)
- ∞ Cognitive flexibility (flexible thinking)
- ∞ Inhibitory control (self-control)

## Executive function is responsible for:











- ∞ Paying attention
- ∞ Organising, planning and prioritising
- ∞ Starting tasks and staying focused until completion
- ∞ Understanding different points of view
- ∞ Regulating emotions
- ∞ Self-monitoring (keeping track of what you’re doing)

## Examples of executive functioning challenges:

- ∞ Difficulty starting a task and difficulty completing it
- ∞ Easily distracted
- ∞ Disorganisation such as bringing home the wrong books or resources
- ∞ Messy desk and/or schoolbag

An inability to focus on the main idea of a discussion.

**Executive Functioning Skills**  
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 <b>Planning</b> The ability to figure out how to accomplish our goals.	 <b>Organising</b> The ability to develop & maintain a system that keeps materials & plans orderly.
 <b>Time Management</b> Having an accurate understanding of how long tasks will take & using time wisely & effectively to accomplish the tasks.	 <b>Task Initiation</b> The ability to independently start tasks when needed. It's the process that allows you to begin something even when you don't want to.
 <b>Working Memory</b> The mental processes that allow us to hold information in our minds while working with it.	 <b>Metacognition</b> Being aware of what you know & using that information to help you learn.
 <b>Self-Control</b> The ability to regulate yourself, including your thoughts, actions & emotions.	 <b>Attention</b> Being able to focus on a person or task for a period of time & shifting that attention when needed.
 <b>Perseverance</b> The ability to stick with a task & not give up, even when it becomes challenging.	 <b>Flexibility</b> The ability to adapt to new situations & deal with change.

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# Autistic Masking

Masking, or camouflaging, is when a person copies others in social situations to not stand out.

We all know how this feels. We've all been in a situation where we've misheard (or didn't hear) an instruction, so we watch everyone around us to see what they're doing and we copy them.

We may or may not understand what or why everyone's doing what they're doing, but the feeling in our stomach, of panic, of not knowing what's going on and not wanting to stand out, or be made fun of, motivates us to just 'fake it til we make it'. We're really embarrassed about this and would never admit this to anyone afterwards. Once it's all over, we're super relieved too.

That's masking.

It makes you really anxious. And it's exhausting.

**This is literally what your Neurodivergent friend does every day.**



Source: @kateofgirlsautisticjourney  
Illustrated by: @introvertdoodles

# Masking Is Instinctual and Exhausting

Autistic masking occurs when being different, or neurodiverse, is not understood or welcomed, or when your friend senses being or acting neurotypical is preferred (because it makes others feel more comfortable).

Your friend may feel they have to hide their neurodiverse behaviours in order to be accepted so he/she will mask, or contain or control certain parts of themselves in order to fit in (especially if they've ever experienced teasing or bullying before).

## Masking Is Exhausting

The combination of masking, camouflaging, rehearsing answers to questions or conversations, studying people, mimicking and/or copying others can seriously affect the mental health and wellbeing of a person and might even have them question their own identity spending so much time pretending to be someone they're not.



Source: @21andsensory

Trying to 'pass' as neurotypical, requires lots of time, effort and energy.



## Reasons for Autistic Masking

- ∞ Autistic masking occurs when being different, or neurodiverse, is not understood or welcomed, or when your friend senses being or acting neurotypical is preferred (because it makes others feel more comfortable).
- ∞ Your friend may feel they have to hide their neurodiverse behaviours in order to be accepted so he/she will mask, or contain or control certain parts of themselves in order to fit in (especially if they've ever experienced teasing or bullying before).
- ∞ The most common reason for Autistic masking is usually for social reasons, including avoiding negative consequences (like teasing or bullying), as well as methods to form social connections with others.
- ∞ Whatever the motivation for masking, your friend may feel they must hide their differences or change the way they naturally act, because their environment doesn't tolerate, support or respect their neurodiversity, or because their peers and/or friends don't understand them when they're not masking.
- ∞ The most common reason why Autistic girls/women are diagnosed much later than boys/men, is because of their ability to socially mask/mirror and camouflage so well. (There are many boys that also present with these female characteristics and are master maskers and also diagnosed later).



# Examples of Autistic Masking

Learning social cues from watching YouTube and TikTok videos and clips

Examining and observing social interactions that occurs around them.

Observing facial expressions and body language that others are using during conversations, and practicing them in private.

Researching and studying social rules and applying rules around their use.

Matching the tone of voice and body language of the person they're talking to during social interactions.

Practicing to appear interested and relaxed during social interactions, including nodding to show they're listening.



# Autistic Meltdowns and Shutdowns

Autistic meltdowns and shutdowns are both behavioural responses to feeling overwhelmed, overly frustrated, tired and/or experiencing sensory overload. The difference between the two is that meltdowns are outward, and shutdowns are inward responses or behaviours.

Autistic meltdowns are not the same as temper tantrums, so please be mindful when using the term 'meltdown' when you actually mean tantrum as this can be really insulting to Autistic people and their families.

- ∞ A **meltdown** is a temporary loss of control of behaviour. This loss of control might be expressed verbally (for example, shouting, screaming or crying), physically (for example, kicking, lashing out biting) or both.
- ∞ A **shutdown** is when a person may partially or completely withdraw from their surroundings, either physically or mentally. They might be unable to talk (so, unable to respond), might go to a safe place/space, or might lie down on the floor.

## Meltdowns and Shutdowns

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### Meltdowns

- These happen when a person is emotionally overwhelmed by unpleasant feelings that can no longer be controlled or hidden from others.
- Behaviours may show extreme behaviours like shouting, self-harm, aggressive behaviour & repetitive behaviours.
- Meltdowns are time-limited.
- During meltdowns, there may be a risk of harm to the person themselves or to others. Meltdowns can be very distressing for the person as well as the people supporting them.
- During a meltdown, a person finds it extremely difficult to process verbal language & will be more threatened & anxious by the words coming at them which they can't comprehend or reply to.
- A child will likely operate a fight or flight response, so provide them with a safe place to go to calm themselves down. Make sure the person is safe & not a threat to themselves or anyone else.
- If destructive or aggressive behaviour occurs during a meltdown, discussing these during the meltdown is not the time.
- These behaviours need to be dealt with & discussed during times of calm not during times of crisis. Discussing the, during the meltdown will only serve to inflame the situation further. Once the young person is fully calm after the event, they can be asked about what happened & decisions about consequences can then occur.

### Shutdowns

- During a shutdown, a person may either partially or completely withdraw from the world around them. They may not respond to communication anymore, retreat to their room or lie down on the floor.
- They may also no longer be able to move from the situation they are in, no matter what it is (for example, a shopping centre or a classroom).
- Shutdowns tend to be more discreet than meltdowns & may sometimes go unnoticed. However, like meltdowns, they are a person's response to reaching a crisis point.
- The only thoughts the person's having is ruminating about what caused the shutdown.
- Give the person time to withdraw & recover from their shutdown.
- Discuss with the person when they are not distressed how they would like to be supported during a shutdown.

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# Autistic Shutdown - Things to Know

When your friend has an Autistic shutdown, they might stay where they are but completely disassociate themselves from the situation.

For example:

- ∞ They might stay seated at their desk in class, but not be able to move, participate in what's happening or be able to respond to their teacher.
- ∞ They might also not be able to move from the situation they are in, no matter where it is, even in a supermarket.
- ∞ Some people experience 'situational mutism', which means they're unable to access their words.

It may look as though your friend is being disrespectful and/or behaving badly towards adults, teachers, others and even you by 'ignoring' everyone, but this isn't the case. They're legitimately unable to communicate at that time.

Shutdowns may be more discreet than meltdowns and they can go easily unnoticed as they're not 'loud' or 'disruptive, however they are still very real and intense emotional responses to feeling overwhelmed or distressed.

# Challenges Switching between Tasks

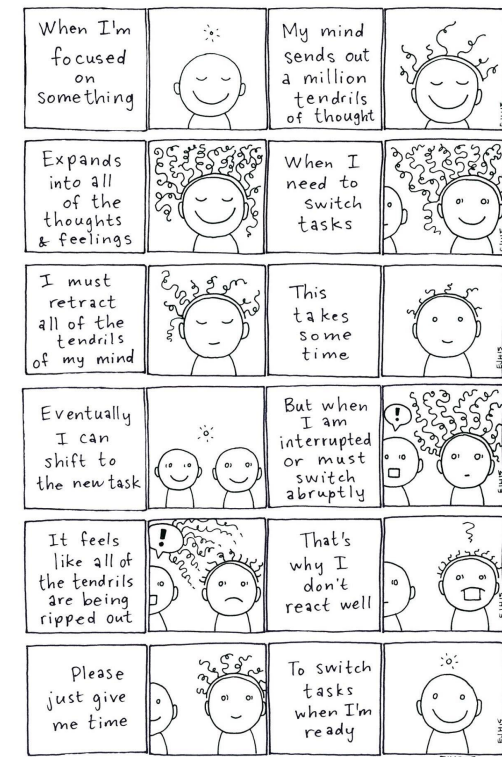
Neurodiverse people find it really difficult switching between tasks as their focus and flow gets interrupted and going back to the original task is really difficult.

The thought of doing this can be really hard and they need extra energy to motivate themselves to get going. In addition to this, they need to use their 'executive functioning' to organise their thoughts and actions on this new task.

Your friend:

- ∞ Might need a small break between tasks as it gives their brain time to clear its attention from the previous task so they can start on the next one.
- ∞ Might need to start the task from the beginning as they've got a certain way, or order, of approaching it.
- ∞ Might need to get used to different sensory conditions if they need to move to a new or different location.
- ∞ Might need extra time (or mental preparation) if the task is new, for them to work out what's required, as well as come up with the best way, or most efficient way, of doing it.

## Why it's hard to switch tasks (Let's call it Tendril Theory)



Source: @erin\_human\_comics

# Challenges Switching between Tasks

- ∞ There may be times when your friend hasn't completed their previous task and has to start a new one. This can be really distressing and your friend might get mentally 'stuck' or 'fixated' and insist or demand being allowed to finish it. If they're not allowed to, or unable to, this can make concentrating on the new task especially difficult.
- ∞ Changing tasks without warning can be especially distressing (as it's an 'unexpected change') so your friend might feel overwhelmingly frustrated and irritated, which can come across as them being stubborn. Their frustration is because they've been focusing on something and having to leave one task to do something else without warning or time to prepare themselves.
- ∞ The changing of tasks might happen several times a day; either in the same class or across different classes, which can cause a 'build up' of irritation and frustration throughout the day.
  - This might also explain why changing classes are challenging at times especially if your friend hasn't finished their task.
  - These frustrations might also explain why they'd like to have some time alone at recess or lunch as they've used lots of energy dealing with these frustrations and don't have anything left to socialise (as this takes a lot of energy too). The build-up might also result in them going into meltdown or shutdown.

## ∞ In social situations ∞

- ∞ Let your friend know your plans as they'd like to know what you're going to be doing so they can prepare themselves for it.
  
- ∞ If the plans change, update your friend and check with them to see if they need some time to process this unexpected change.
  - It may seem as though your friend is annoyed at you, however, it's highly likely to be because the plans changed and having to process this unexpected change, and not about you at all.
  - If this happens a few times in a row, your friend might decline arrangements with you for a while, as they might be worried about the likelihood of plans changing again. Try and remember that this is your friend practising self-care and looking after themselves and not because they don't like you or want to spend time with you.
  - These updates and warnings might seem annoying and tiresome, but it's important to understand how difficult these unexpected changes are for your friend and how they always feel anxious over the possibility of things changing (especially if it's happened in the past). Even if the plans remain the same, their worry over the possibility of them changing can be really tiring.
  
- ∞ Try being patient when you've asked your friend a question, as they might need time to process this and need to think about how to respond.
  - It's not just your comment or question they need to consider, but also take into consideration your facial expression(s), your tone of voice and body language/gestures and match this information to what you've asked so they can respond correctly or as closely as they can after piecing together all of that information.

## ∞ In social situations ∞

- ∞ Try to phrase your thoughts and ideas clearly and avoid sarcasm, idioms and metaphors as they won't be understood.
- ∞ Offer to explain to your Autistic friend what's actually being said or what something actually means, as well as needing to explain body language, gestures and movements when they appear confused. (They might not care, so it's good to have this established early on). You both need to make sure (by establishing rules\*) if or when they'd like to be told about these at the time (during the situation) or if they'd prefer to have this explained privately afterwards.
  - Your friend will really benefit from having these explanations as they'll help them understand these situations and scenarios in the future.
  - (\*These rules might be knowing which friends your Autistic friend is comfortable enough to have you explain these things in front of them).
- ∞ Your friend might say something 'off topic', seem strange or weird or even repeat the same saying over and over again (which is part of their restricted and repetitive behaviour), as explained, this is their way of wanting to form social connections and be included, and perhaps not sure how. This may happen when your friend's been successful in the past using a certain strategy and they'll apply it to another situation (because it's 'literally' worked before) without realising, recognising or understanding that their behaviour isn't appropriate or socially applicable this time.



## ∞ In social situations ∞

- ∞ There may be times your friend may seem disinterested in what's going on, in what's being discussed or in making friends, but it may be that they're really unsure how to start a conversation, get involved in a conversation, or how to react, behave or respond.
- ∞ Because your friend might not be aware if/when their facial expressions and/or tone of voice matches what they're saying, they might have become really self-conscious which has impacted their confidence to initiate or get involved in social situations.
- ∞ Consider your friend's sensory challenges when making plans and/or arrangements. For example, if you decide to grab some lunch and eat at a food court, it might help to try and find a table away from the food outlets so the cooking/food smells won't overpower your friend's enjoyment of their meal. (Of course, if smells are ok, don't worry!)
  - It's always a good idea to check with your friend (or have them choose) where to sit to make sure the smells and the lighting (just examples) will be problematic, if they're sitting too close to others (as they're likely to be distracted by their conversation) or if they're ok squeezing in a booth next to you or others as they might find this closeness or being touched difficult to manage.

## ∞ Spending Time Together ∞

Your friend might have or rely on a social script whether they're in a group setting or with you one on one. This script has literally memorised questions (to start and maintain a conversation) as well as things to say after someone else has spoken, like, 'what else did you like about it/that?', or 'I didn't know that', or even, 'that's really interesting'. If your friend has stopped talking, it's likely they've run out of things to say, or literally, finished their script. If this happens, it would be helpful for you to keep the conversation going so your friend can once again participate, unscripted, and with you to help guide the dialogue.

- ∞ Your friend might talk too much as they're not sure when to stop. You can help them by letting them know when a conversation has finished as they might not know or be able to tell when it has.
- ∞ Your friend might also interrupt you when they're excited about something. You can gently point out their interruption as it's not been intentional and perhaps, they may not even realise what they've done.
- ∞ Your friend might want to share their special interests with you as this is the way of connecting with you without realising by your facial expressions or your body language that you're not interested in what they're saying or that you're bored. You might want to set up some rules about this, for example, 'you can only tell me facts about your interest three times a day' or 'you can only tell three stories a day about your special interest', or even set a ten minute limit of them talking about their special interest and once ten minutes is up, that's it for the day!

## ∞ Spending Time Together ∞

- ∞ If you're uncomfortable setting up these kinds of rules, perhaps let your friend know when you don't want to talk about that topic anymore and suggest to do or talk about something else that you both have in common instead.
- ∞ You might also just let your friend know that you're going to tell them when you've had enough of listening to them talking about their special interest.
- ∞ Your friend may prefer spending time with one or two friends at a time as it can be really difficult for them to follow group conversations. Keep this in mind if your offers to 'join the group' at recess and lunch are declined as there's usually a reason for this and not because they don't value your relationship.
- ∞ Your friend might also want to be alone at recess or lunchtime so they can calm themselves down if they've just experienced an unpleasant or upsetting incident, or had to deal with unexpected change (For example, dealing with a timetable change, unexpectedly having another teacher/CRT for a lesson, or having a surprise test or assessment, all without any notice or warning and also if/when something that was meant to happen, didn't).

## ∞ Spending Time Together ∞

- ∞ There may be times when your friend may prefer spending time with you participating in things that you both enjoy doing or seeing like a shared activity, rather than talking. Understanding this and having your friend hang out with you (and maybe some others) and without forcing/making them socialise with you, is really meaningful and appreciated by them, especially if they're socially exhausted or worn-out. Although they won't be making themselves 'known', try to make sure you don't forget them or exclude them when they're there.
- ∞ Your friend might enjoy spending time with you, but might be quiet when they're with you, might appear disinterested or might struggle to have a conversation with you as they're 'socially exhausted'. They might just need to quietly recharge themselves (which relates to burnout)
- ∞ Your friend might not always look at you during a conversation, but it doesn't mean they're not listening to you. (Eye contact can be difficult for a lot of Autistic people, so try not to expect or force them to make eye contact with you).

## ∞ Other Areas and Ways to Support your Friend ∞

- ∞ Your friend may be a real perfectionist, which means they want to do something right or faultless the first time. If something goes wrong it might lead to an emotional reaction (meltdown or shutdown) as they really struggle with this failure (perceived or real). Your friend might also feel embarrassed or ashamed if they've misinterpreted something or answered incorrectly (like they've taken something literally) and it might even be made worse if it happens around people they like, respect or trying to impress.
- ∞ Your friend might struggle when being corrected or criticised (because of their high standards) and they might have an emotional reaction (meltdown or shutdown) to this.
- ∞ In addition to the negative feedback, your friend may also struggle with compliments and being complimented not knowing how to appropriately respond.
- ∞ Try not to be offended if your friend doesn't find your jokes funny as it may be they've not fully understood it. They might still laugh at the end of your joke as they've learnt to copy others in these situations (by mimicking), but it doesn't mean they've understood it. It's polite not to challenge your friend on their understanding of the joke as it can be quite distressing for them to be caught out, especially in front of others.

## ∞ Other Areas and Ways to Support your Friend ∞

- ∞ If your friend doesn't want to go to an event, don't force them to. It might be because they don't want to experience the sensory overload that they know will encounter, like the movies, or they need some downtime or rest time feeling exhausted or burnt out, from school or too many social interactions.
  - Knowing your friend struggles in large groups and loud environments, you could ask if they'd like to sit in a quieter place or spend time in a smaller group.
- ∞ If your friend looks a bit hot or sweaty and is wearing a jacket or jumper, you could perhaps mention that they look warm and might need a drink of water. Perhaps this will help them make the connection that they need to take their jacket or jumper off to cool their bodies down.
- ∞ Loud noises can be really annoying or distracting, so try not to yell or scream at your friend - even if for fun - as they're unlikely to hear what you're saying. They also might not be able to hear you in places where there's a lot of background noise.

## ∞ Supporting your Friend when they're in shutdown ∞

- ∞ After you've experienced your friend shutting down, you might want to ask them how you'd be able to help them next time it happens.
- ∞ Having these conversations can be really beneficial, both for when your friend is distressed and for your friendship as a whole, as you're showing your friend how important they are to you.
- ∞ It's important for you to know that when your friend's in a state of shutdown they're not being mean, rude or ignoring you; they're distressed or overwhelmed and just need to do what they need to calm or regulate themselves.
- ∞ If your friend is unable to talk when in shutdown, ask if they can let you know they're unable to talk by giving you a hand signal or gesture.
- ∞ Your friend may have told you they like to have a fidget toy or plush toy with them when in shutdown, so if you see they don't have one or have access to one, you can help them by getting something for them.

## ∞ Supporting your Friend when they're in shutdown ∞

- ∞ Ask your friend if when they're in shutdown whether they want you to stay with them. (This can be another hand gesture). Even though they might not be able to talk at the time, it may not mean they want to be left alone.
- ∞ The hand gesture is a good idea as there might be times they're ok or prefer being alone.
- ∞ It might be a good idea to stay close to your friend so you can let others know (if they start approaching) that your friend & that they're ok and that they just need their space.
- ∞ Ask your friend if they would like you to check in on them, for example in 5 minutes, by arranging a hand gesture/sign for this too. It's important when you arrange a 5-minute check-in that you set your timer and be there on time as it's likely your friend will be timing this (not as they're checking on you or as a test but because being on time and timing is linked to knowing what's going which has been mentioned in previous sections). Checking on your friend shows them that you care about them.
- ∞ You might think that giving your friend space when they're in shutdown is what they want, however, they might think you walking off and/or leaving them alone means you don't care about them.



# So, what's the point of this guide?

You now know what Autism is and the many ways it can affect and/or impact your friend, or peer.

Knowing some of the social communication, emotional and sensory difficulties that your friend is likely to experience will help you to understand why they find some social settings and interactions more challenging than your neurotypical friends or peers. You now also know why your friend might do some things, why they may behave or seem 'strange', why they may say certain things that feel out of place, say the same things over and over, and also why they may react in particular ways during your social interactions or in class.

## BUT

After all the information you have read and all the things you've learned about your Autistic friend/peer, it would be a real shame if this guide didn't highlight, or remind you, all the incredible strengths and characteristics your Autistic friend brings to your life and friendship.



Source: @autieselfcare

Autistic adolescents/teenagers have many qualities to offer friendship that are not unique to Autism but tend to accompany it. These qualities include loyalty, honesty, acceptance of difference and diversity, having a sense of humour, kindness and deep compassion.

## So, what's the point of this guide?

This knowledge and insight means you'll be able to provide your friend with gentle reminders or instructions, check in on them when they seem uncomfortable and also think about what you might do or change to make them feel more comfortable and included. You'll be also able to confidently stand up to anyone being disrespectful or cruel to your friend, especially when they've not realised it.

You might also explain situations, reasons for doing or saying certain things, reasons for not doing or saying certain things, reasons why we behave a certain way in a particular situation and also why we don't.

For example, you friend might blurt out, 'who cares about any of this anyway'? during a group conversation. You can respond by saying, 'we care about this, so that's why we're talking about it'? Not answering this question won't be helpful as your friend still doesn't understand why you're talking about this topic (they're literally asked, so you can literally tell them), which means it's likely to happen again.

**All of these things can really help your friend and will strengthen your friendship too.**

## So, what's the point of this guide?

What's really cool about you doing all of this learning is that you're able to educate other classmates, students, peers, other friends, and even adults in your life if you come across someone that doesn't understand your Autistic friend's, or any Autistic person's actions, behaviour or 'strange' ways of communicating.

Your peer/friend may have very few friends and may express feelings of loneliness and being isolated. Not having friends also makes them vulnerable to being teased and bullied. The 'predators' at high school target someone who is alone, vulnerable and less likely to be protected by peers. Having more friends, or someone like you, can mean having fewer enemies, being protected and having someone to repair or refute derogatory comments and restore a sense of trust.

Thanks so much for reading this guide.  
You've already demonstrated what a Literally  
Ausome friend you are.

