

Autism 101

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Overview

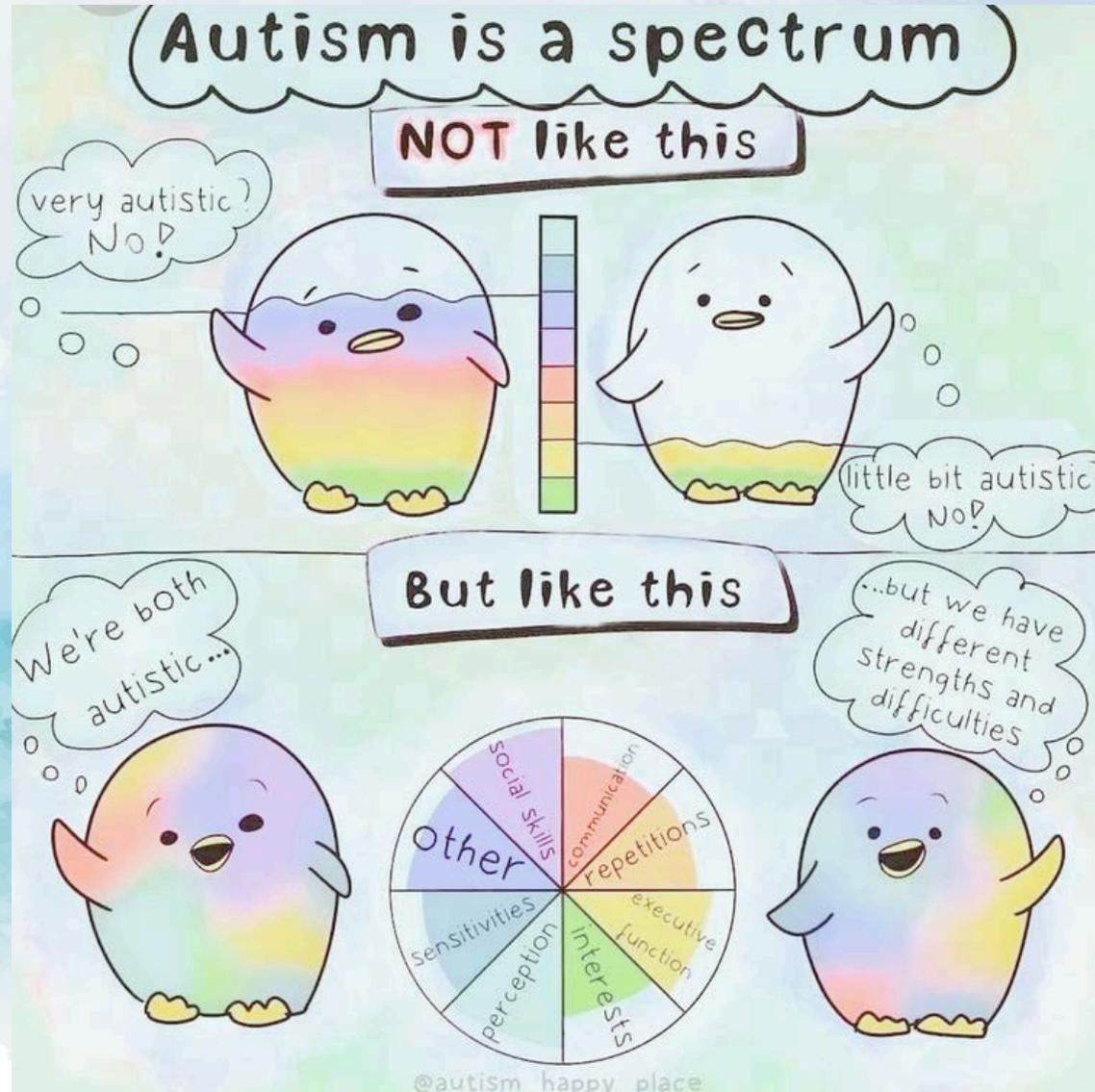
- What is Autism?
- Autistic traits:
 - Cognitive processing
 - Communication styles
 - Social interaction
 - Sensory processing
 - Emotional processing
 - Masking
- Autism in girls
- Autism and ADHD
- Strengths
- Take aways

What is Autism?

“Autism is a condition that affects how a person thinks, feels, interacts with others, and experiences their environment.. Every Autistic person is different to every other. This is why autism is described as a ‘spectrum’.”

Aspect Australia

“We’re all somewhere on the spectrum...right?”



Varying support needs

'Levels' of Autism:

- Level 1: Requiring support
- Level 2: Requiring substantial support
- Level 3: Requiring very substantial support

Supports needed change depending on the environment, sensory input, level of stress etc.

Support needs change throughout the years.

A watercolor-style background with soft, blended colors of light blue, teal, and lavender. The colors are more concentrated in the center and fade out towards the edges, creating a dreamy, ethereal atmosphere. The text is centered over this background.

Artistic traits

Cognitive processing - black and white thinking

- Everything is either right or wrong, good or bad, correct or incorrect..there is no room for shades of grey.
- There is only one way to do things. Changing how things are done can cause anxiety.

Strengths:

- Clear, strong opinions
- A firm sense of justice and fairness

Cognitive processing - literal thinking

- More concrete and literal thinking.
- Metaphors and common sayings may be confusing
- So much of our language is not literal!
e.g. "What's up?"
- Non-autistic people often imply things rather than saying them directly.

Strengths:

- Honesty and saying what they mean
- Logical thinking

Routine and structure

- Being black and white, literal, concrete thinkers make routine and structure very important.
- Routines are consistent and reliable even when the rest of the world is not.
- Anxiety around change: liking things to be done a certain way (black and white thinking) can mean anxiety when things don't look how they 'should'.

Cognitive processing - Theory of mind

“Theory of mind is the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others, understanding that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one’s own.”

- Simply Psychology

Cognitive processing - imagination

- Some Autistic people have difficulty with imagination.
- Difficulty role playing

“Imagination doesn't come with a 'correct' answer. It's like sitting in an exam with minimal information and no time to prepare, then never getting your results back.”

- I am Autistic (Chanelle Moriah)

Strengths:

- Scripting and acting out things they have seen before
- Recognition and generating patterns

Cognitive processing - special interests

- Many autistic people have really strong interests and can fixate on something for hours at a time.
- 'Info dumping' talking about a topic of interest regardless of context or social cues in the environment.

Strengths:

- In-depth/expert knowledge of topics of interest
- Strong memory of facts and figures
- Ability to focus deeply on areas of interest

Cognitive processing - Executive functioning

Executive functions are a set of skills that help you to get things done.

- Organisation: Planning, prioritising
- Initiating tasks
- Managing time
- Flexible thinking
- Self regulating emotions and impulses

Strengths:

- Thrive in a structured, routine based environment
- Strong visual processing skills: using visual supports

Communication styles

Lots of variation in skills:

- Non-speaking autistic people
- Very large vocabularies and exceptional expressive language skills.
- 'Classic' profile: expressive language skills are stronger than receptive language skills.
- Speech may have a unique 'flow' or 'rhythm' of speech and contain pauses in unexpected places
- Speech may have less changes in tone

Communication styles

Echolalia: Repetitions of words and phrases that has been previously heard. Can be immediate or delayed (hours/days/weeks later).

Gestalt Language Processing: learning language in 'chunks' first before learning the individual meanings of words.

75%-85% of Autistic children are Gestalt Language Processors.

Social interaction

Differences in non-verbal communication:

- Body language
- Facial expression – often less variations
- Eye contact

- Difficulty understanding sarcasm

There is emerging evidence to show that people of the same 'brain-type' communicate well together. Autistic people tend to communicate more naturally and comfortably with other autistic people.



What are the top three needs
of your body at any given
moment?

Sensory processing

“Sensory processing is the way that a person perceives, processes and organises the information that they receive through their senses..This sensory information comes from one’s own body and the environment around you.”

Aspect Australia

Sensory processing



Sensory processing

Hypersensitive - A small amount of sensory input is too much

E.g.

- The smell of certain foods make you feel sick
- Bright lights hurt your eyes
- You need silence when you are working
- No spicy food for you! Big flavours are a no!
- Certain fabrics feel itchy
- You get travel sick
- You are clumsy

Sensory processing

Hyposensitive – You need bigger amounts of sensory information to feel regulated.

E.g.

- You like wearing strong perfume/cologne
- You like bright lights and fluro colours
- You want music playing all the time
- You chew gum all the time or bite your nails
- You twirl your hair
- You bounce your leg
- You loved going on the swing as a kid

Sensory processing

Everyone's sensory system is different.

You can be **hyposensitive** in some senses and **hypersensitive** in other senses!



Sensory processing

An autistic person may have some teeny tiny cups and some giant buckets!

It's really common to have giant buckets for the vestibular system and the proprioceptive system.



JUST KEEP STIMMING

JUST KEEP STIMMING



Sensory overload

"Sensory overload is when your..senses..take in more information that your brain can process. Overwhelmed by all the input, the brain responds as it would to a life-threatening situation and enters fight, flight, or freeze mode."

- Queensland Health

This can result in:

- Loss of balance, changes in skin tone, a racing heart
- Loss of spoken communication or excessive echolalia
- Becoming agitated, angry, hysterical or crying
- Excessive stimming

Emotional processing

When your brain is no longer able to process the information it is being presented with:

- Meltdown: an uncontrollable outward explosion of emotion as a reaction to built up stress. They can be very distressing for the individual experiencing them.
- E.g. yelling, kicking, hitting, self-harming behaviours
- Shutdown: inward withdrawal as a reaction to built up stress.
- E.g. Hiding, curling up, not being able to communicate

Masking

Masking is the act of hiding autistic traits in order to blend in with others in the environment.

E.g. Being conscious of:

- The tone of voice used
- What they are doing with their body
- The amount of eye contact used
- The words used, leading to creating of 'scripts'

Masking takes up a lot of brain space and is exhausting!

Autism in girls

The Diagnostic criteria was written with boys in mind!

In girls:

- Special interests may be more in line with interests of other children/teens their age e.g. certain bands, movies, animals
- Higher levels of masking - autistic traits hidden
- More imaginative in play
- Advanced vocabularies (but limited conversation)
- Often experience co-occurring anxiety and people pleasing tendencies

Autism and ADHD

- Prior to 2013, you could not be diagnosed with both Autism and ADHD
- Many Autistic individuals also have ADHD traits
- Studies are not conclusive, but somewhere between 30-80% of Autistics are estimated to also be eligible for an ADHD diagnosis.

Autism and ADHD

ADHD-I

- Primarily inattentive type

ADHD-H

- Primarily hyperactive/impulsive

ADHD-C

- Combined type
- Inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive traits

Autism and ADHD

Inattentive traits:

- Distractibility
- Daydreaming
- Starting tasks, but not finishing them
- Difficulty remembering things
- Difficulty with organisation
- Not following instructions
- Not paying attention to details

Autism and ADHD

Hyperactive/impulsive traits:

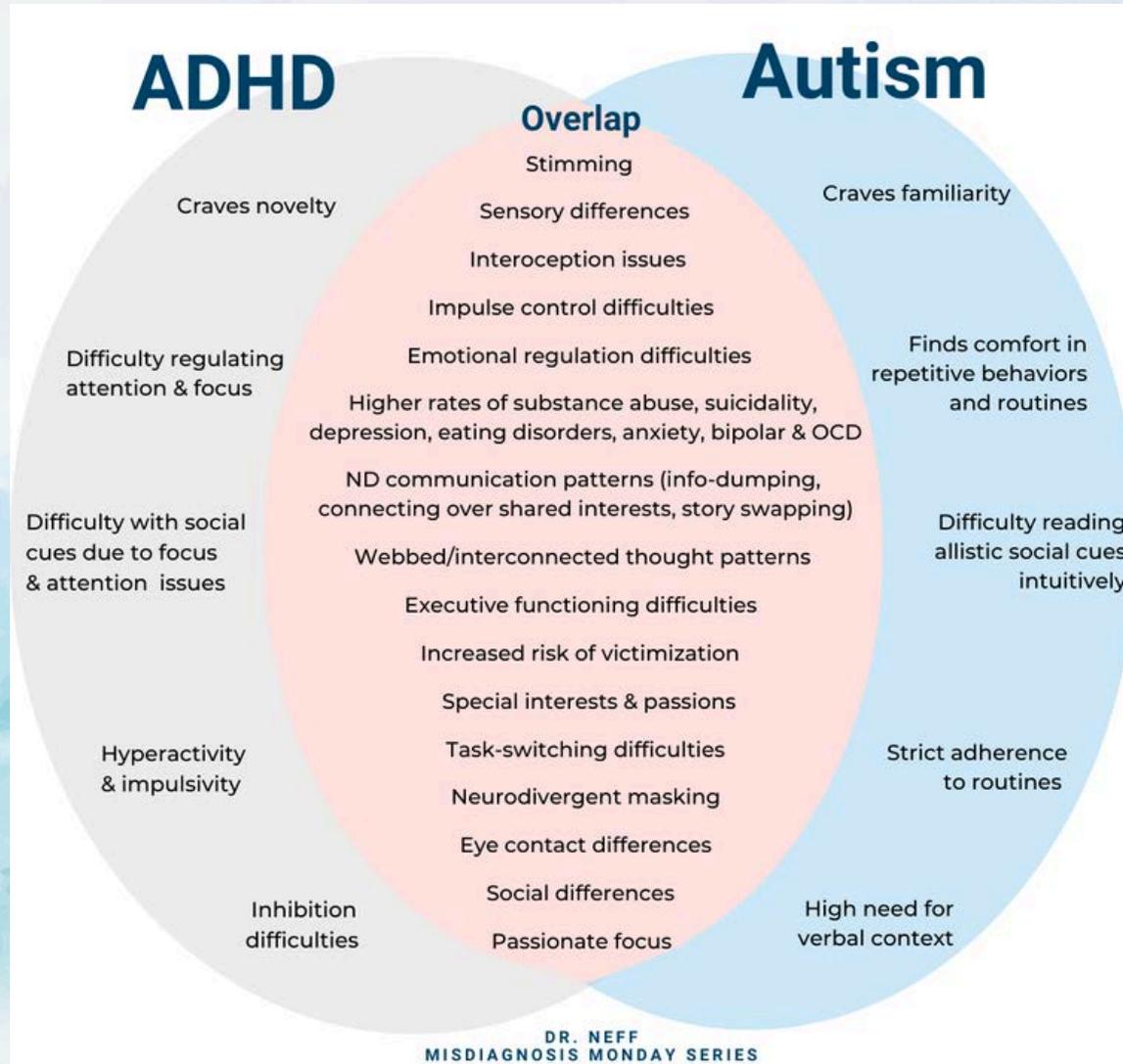
- Fidgeting and squirming (needing a lot of sensory input!)
- Talking a lot
- Interrupting and calling out
- Difficulties with waiting and boredom
- 'Act first, think later'

Autism and ADHD

TWO SIDES, SAME COIN



Autism and ADHD



Disclaimer: This diagram represents common patterns or trends associated with autism and ADHD. However, these are generalizations & will not resonate with everyone's individual experiences. There is a lot of diversity among Autistic and ADHD people & each person's journey is different. For more information and full write up please see www.neurodivergentinsights.com



Additional strengths associated with Autism

- Can be highly intelligent
- Strong long term memory
- Determined and resilient
- Independent
- Loyal
- Great in 1:1 situations
- Attention to detail
- Integrity
- Accepting of difference :)

Take aways

- Learn about Autism (like you are doing!)
- Listen to Autistic voices (and their families)
- Recognise that different doesn't mean less than - it just means different.
- Be understanding, accepting and inclusive
- Consider adopting changes that can be helpful for the Autistic people in our community.