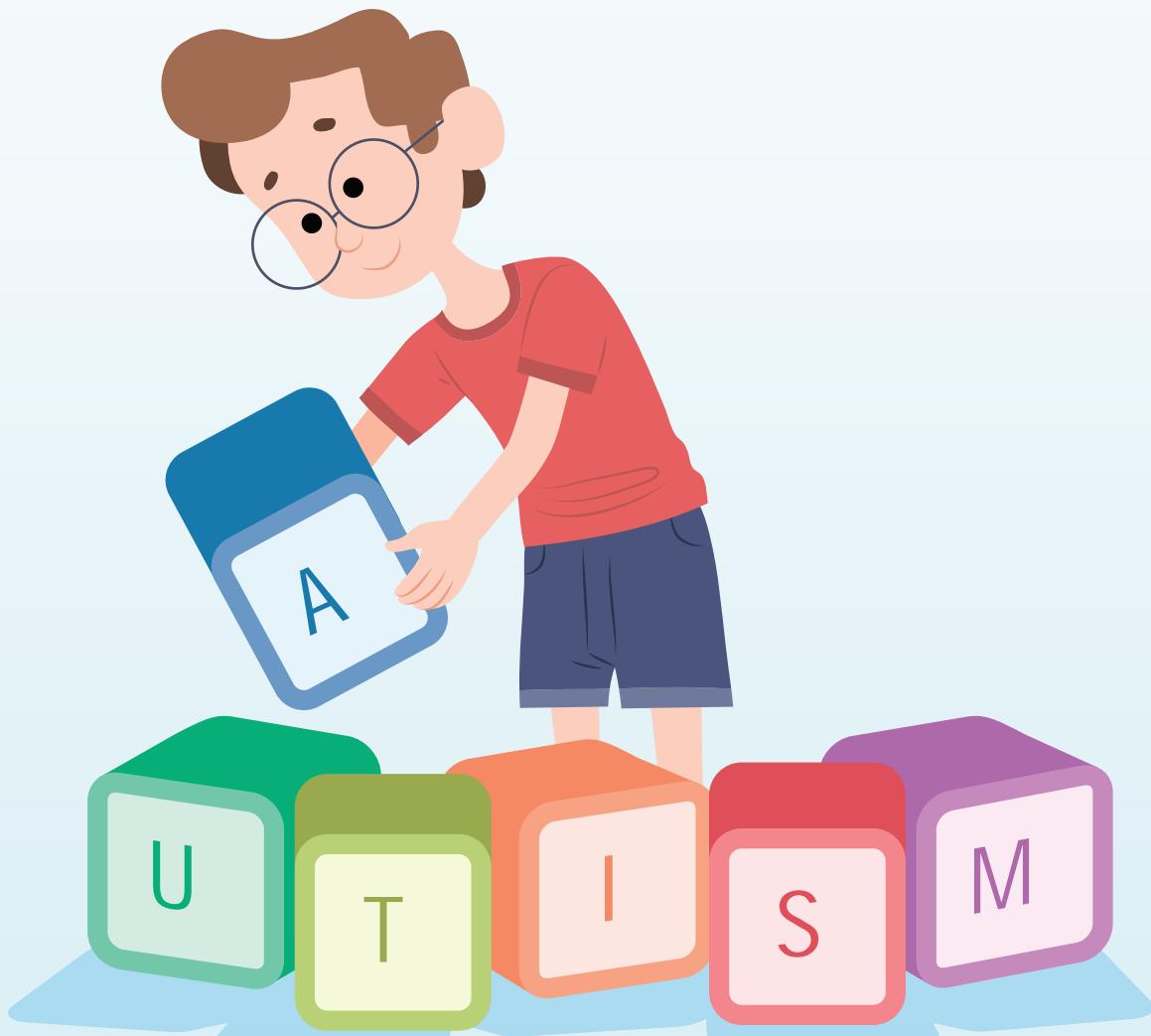




Autism and Autistic Traits

A Strengths-Based Perspective



1. WHAT IS AUTISM?



Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition. "Neuro" means that autism affects a person's brain in areas of thinking, learning, and experiencing the world. "Developmental" means that autism is a condition that is present from birth and persists throughout a person's lifetime, although characteristics of autism may change over time. There is no "cure" for autism, and in fact, we would not want to cure autism because it is a unique way of being human. People of all genders, races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds can be diagnosed with autism.

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD THE FOLLOWING:

If you've met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism.

-Stephen Shore

This saying is often used when teaching others about autism. It emphasizes that autism is a spectrum condition with a wide variation of traits, both in terms of strengths and challenges. One must not make assumptions when supporting an autistic individual. (If you want to understand more about what is meant by the "autism spectrum", check out this explanation: <https://the-art-of-autism.com/understanding-the-spectrum-a-comic-strip-explanation/>)

BUT YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD THIS (YET!):

If you've met one autistic person,

that person has a lot in common with other autistics.

@NeuroClastic

This saying is becoming increasingly popular in the autistic community. It highlights the reality that autistic people also share many things in common with other autistic people. It is important to recognize this in order to support an individual's sense of community and belonging.

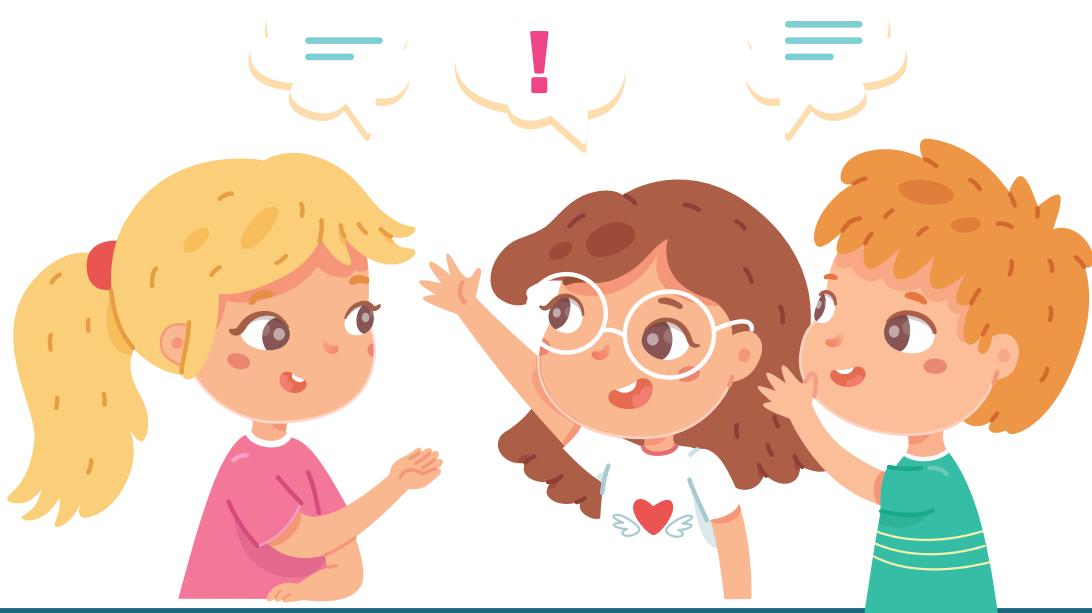
2. WHAT ARE AUTISTIC TRAITS?

- Autism is often described using a diagnostic-driven, deficit-based framework. However, autism is much more than a collection of impairments! When viewed from a strengths-based perspective, autism can be understood as an essential part of an individual's identity. Every autistic person experiences autism differently, but there are some characteristics that many autistic people have in common. These are sometimes known as "autistic traits." Let's take a look at some traits that many autistic people have in common:



- **Unique social interaction style**

Autistic people demonstrate a variety of interaction styles and preferences that may be different than those among neurotypical people. Autistic social preferences could look like, but aren't limited to: a preference to engage in their interests on their own, a preference to be in the same room with another person with minimal talking but engagement in similar or different activities, discussing special interests in extensive detail, or sharing deeply personal events and bonding over highly personal experiences (Dorsey & Proctor, 2021). Many autistic people find direct eye contact uncomfortable when interacting with others. In the past, many believed that autistic people were not interested in others or did not want friendships. This is a harmful myth! Autistic people have a deep desire for friendship and connection with others. Many first-hand accounts of autistic people describe greater comfort and ease interacting with other autistic people compared to non-autistic people.



○ Unique communication style

There are many ways to communicate, and all ways are valid! Some autistic people do not use spoken language to communicate but rely more on non-spoken forms of communication (i.e., gestures, facial expressions, body language, vocalizations, etc.) or learn to use augmentative/alternative modes of communication (i.e., voice output devices, written text, picture boards, letterboards, etc.). Some autistic people use echoed or scripted phrases to communicate. Some autistic people may use highly verbose language, whereas others may use less complex language to communicate. Familiarity and trust with communication partners or the setting may impact the type of communication that is used in different contexts and situations.

○ Ability to remember, store, and digest large amounts of information on a specific topic of interest

These topics of interest are often referred to as “special interests”, “intense interests”, or a person’s “hyperfocus.” Not all autistic people have an intense interest. If they do, interests range from a variety of topics from person-to-person, however, research shows that autistic females are more likely to intensely engage in more “typical and gender-stereotyped interests” compared to autistic males (Hiller et al, 2014).



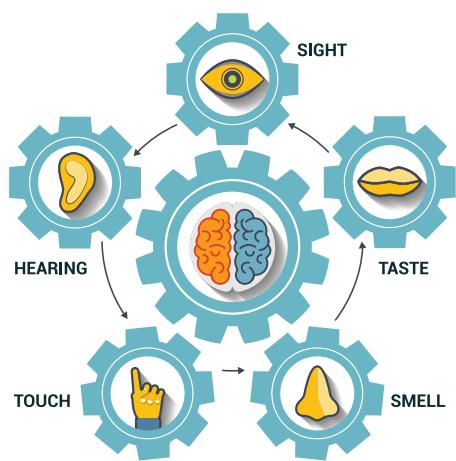
○ Use of repetitive movements to self-regulate

All humans engage in various behaviours to regulate their emotions and energy levels across the day. Many autistic people use repetitive movement as a way to self-regulate, commonly referred to as “stimming.” For example, in moments of frustration or excitement, an autistic person may engage in physical stimming (i.e., hand flapping, body rocking), object stimming (i.e., using objects in an repetitive manner), or verbal stimming (i.e., repeating words or phrases).



○ Demonstrate less “majority-conforming” tendencies

Many autistic people prefer to do things on their own terms and/or have particular ways of doing things such as completing activities, tasks, or routines. Because of this, autistic individuals may find changes to routines or taking direction from others to be difficult and may require support and patience in these areas.



○ Unique sensory processing system

Many autistic people experience hypo- or hyper-sensitivities in one or more of the sensory systems (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, proprioceptive, or vestibular). Some autistic people may not recognize their own internal body signals or identify sensations in order to understand and feel what is going on inside their body (this is known as “interoception”).

○ High likelihood of being diagnosed with another condition

Many individuals who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, will have a diagnosis of another condition (or sometimes multiple conditions).

Common secondary diagnoses include:

- Neurodevelopmental conditions such as intellectual disability, developmental language disorder, attention deficit disorder (ADHD)
- Medical conditions such as epilepsy, sleep conditions, gastrointestinal conditions, feeding or eating challenges
- Mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder



STRENGTHS-BASED AUTISM RESOURCES

Check out the following resources to learn more about autism for yourself or to teach others about autism from a strengths-based perspective:

BOOKS

PICTUREBOOK: "Nathan's Autism Spectrum Superpowers" by Lori Leigh Yarborough (2018)

PICTUREBOOK: "I See Things Differently" by Pat Thomas (2014)

PICTUREBOOK: "All My Stripes" by Danielle Royer and Shaina Rudolph (2015)

BOOK FOR KIDS: "The Survival Guide for Kids with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Parents" by Elizabeth Reeve and Elizabeth Verdick (2021)

BOOK FOR KIDS: "The Spectrum Girl's Survival Guide: How to Grow Up Awesome and Autistic" – Siena Castellon (2020)

BOOK FOR KIDS: "The Awesome Autistic Go-To Guide: A Practical Handbook for Autistic Teens and Tweens" by Yenn Purkis and Tanya Masterman (2020)

BOOK: "Welcome to the Autistic Community" by Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (2020)

VIDEOS

Sesame Street "Meet Julia"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKCdV20zLMs>

"Amazing Things Happen!"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezv85LMFx2E>

"Five Questions About Autism"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IApo5TBR7jc>

"You Can't Ask That – Season 1, Episode 4: Autism" by CBC Gems

<https://gem.cbc.ca/media/you-cant-ask-that/season-1/episode-4/38e815a-010f385fad1>

"Ask an Autistic" Series – Amythest Schaber

<https://www.youtube.com/user/neurowonderful>

ONLINE CONTENT

Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN)

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

Neurodiversity Resources for Students

<https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/student-resources>

Kits for Kids - Organization for Autism Research (OAR)

<https://researchautism.org/resources/kit-for-kids/>

Peer-to-Peer Handouts - Center for Secondary Education for Students with

ASD (CSESA) <https://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/resources/peer-to-peer>

REFERENCES

Dorsey, R. & Proctor, M. (2021, June 2). Reframing social differences for autistic kids [Audio podcast episode].
In Two Sides of the Spectrum. Learn, Play, Thrive LLC.
https://two-sides-of-the-spectrum.simplecast.com/episodes/reframing-social-differences-for-autistic-kids-with-rachel-dorsey-autistic-slp-XTG_rQxp

Hiller, R. M., Young, R. L. & Weber, N. (2014). Sex differences in autism spectrum disorder based on DSM-5 criteria: Evidence from clinician and teacher reporting. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 42, 1381-1393.

AUTISM TRAITS SELF-QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is intended for autistic secondary students to complete. It could be a useful self-reflection tool, and be shared with school staff, family, and other important people to create increased understanding of a student's unique profile.



Autism is a *neurodevelopmental* condition.

Neuro = affects the brain in area's of thinking and learning.

Developmental = present from birth and lasts throughout life.

Every autistic person experiences their autism differently, but autistic people do have many things in common with other autistic people. These are called *autistic traits*. Autistic traits can change over time. Here are some common autistic traits:

UNIQUE SOCIAL INTERACTION STYLE		
I like to engage in my interests totally on my own.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I like to hang out with others but with minimal talking.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I like talking with others about things I am really interested in.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes I have trouble understanding other's emotions.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes I have trouble controlling my emotions.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I find eye contact uncomfortable.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I find socializing awkward.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I wish I had more friends.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

UNIQUE COMMUNICATION STYLE		
I mostly use my own spoken words to communicate.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I prefer to use ways that are not spoken words to communicate (writing, symbols, gestures, facial expression, body language).	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes I have trouble using my preferred method of communication to express myself.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes I have trouble understanding spoken words of others.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes I have trouble understanding gestures/facial expressions of others.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes I have trouble understanding the intent of others.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

HIGH INTEREST AREA (“HYPERFOCUS”)

There is something in particular I know a lot about and enjoy thinking about and talking about with others

Yes No

There is something in particular that I seem to know a lot more about than my peers.

Yes No

REPETITIVE MOVEMENT (“STIMMING”).

I move my body repetitively when I am stressed or excited.

Yes No

I use objects repetitively when I am stressed or excited.

Yes No

I repeat words or phrases when I am stressed or excited.

Yes No

DOING MY OWN THING

I like to do things on my own terms (in my own way, on my own time).

Yes No

I don't like being told what to do.

Yes No

I don't like asking for help – I would rather figure it out on my own.

Yes No

Sometimes, I get stuck on my own ideas or ways of doing things, and can't see others' perspectives.

Yes No

I do not like changes in my schedule or routine.

Yes No

UNIQUE SENSORY SYSTEM

It bothers me when things are too bright or too loud.

Yes No

I like it when things are really bright or really loud.

Yes No

It bothers me when places are too busy.

Yes No

I like background noise when I am working.

Yes No

Certain smells or certain tastes really bother me.

Yes No

I really like certain smells or certain tastes.

Yes No

I don't like being touched by others.

Yes No

I really like the feeling of being hugged or squeezed tightly.

Yes No

I sometimes don't realize when I am hungry/thirsty, hold/cold, or need to use the washroom.

SOME OF MY STRENGTHS ARE:

(Large empty box for writing)

SOME THINGS I AM WORKING ON ARE:

(Large empty box for writing)