

# What Is Autism?

Autism is a complex, lifelong neurodevelopmental disability that affects essential human behaviors such as social interaction, the ability to communicate ideas and feelings, imagination, self-regulation, and the ability to establish and maintain relationships with others. Although precise neurobiological mechanisms have not yet been fully established, it is clear that this disability reflects the operation of factors in the developing brain.

In the United States, clinicians use the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5th Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR) to diagnose autism. The DSM-5 is important because it provides the diagnostic labels that governments, insurance companies, and other institutions use to determine the services needed by each individual.



**To receive an autism diagnosis, an individual must show traits in two major areas:**

## Deficits in Socialization and Communication



Autistics don't socialize or communicate the same way as neurotypicals.

- Expressive language is our ability to communicate our wants, needs, and feelings. Receptive language is our ability to take in information. Someone with autism could have challenges with either or both of these.
- Autistics generally don't use nonverbal communication in the same way as neurotypicals. Many autistics find eye contact uncomfortable, struggle to interpret nonverbal communication, or use unusual gestures and nonverbals that fall outside neurotypical norms.
- Processing time is the length of time it takes to process information. Some people need more time than others. It could take five, 10, or even 20 seconds for someone's brain to comprehend the words they just heard. It's common for an autistic person to need more processing time when communicating with others.
- "Reciprocity" is the back-and-forth of socialization. It could be turn taking in conversation or the give-and-take in a larger relationship. Many autistics don't find this kind of interaction an easy way to socialize, and they may find success socializing when others appreciate or accept that they infodump, interrupt, or skip small talk.
- Autistics have trouble managing relationships the way neurotypicals would. They might struggle to make or maintain friends, have challenges picking up on red flags, or intensify relationships very quickly. It can also show in difficulties setting or understanding boundaries.

## Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behaviors



This criterion refers to stimming, special interests, challenges with change and flexibility, and sensory processing issues.

- Autistics tend to have interests that are incredibly intense and deep. We call these special interests. Sometimes the intensity of these interests can make it hard to do other things. Someone on the spectrum may have a special interest they can talk about at length and repeatedly.
- The neurotypical world can be hard for autistics to predict, so often it is more comfortable to keep routines that are predictable. This means autistics can struggle with changes, need extra support trying something new, or do things exactly the same each time.
- Many people on the spectrum find repeated behaviors (physical, vocal, or otherwise) comforting and useful for emotional regulation. Some people call these behaviors "stims." A classic example is autistic kids lining up their objects as a form of play.
- Autistics can be hyper (over) or hypo (under) sensitive to sensory inputs. Any given person may be hyper or hypo sensitive to different senses: someone might have a high pain threshold, but be very sensitive to loud sounds.

Many of these "deficits" or challenges are actually differences. For example, when communicating with other neurodivergent people, autistics often have functional social skills.

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Remember: these traits can look very different in different people. Each individual will have a different constellation of traits, and no single individual is guaranteed to have any of these traits. Individuals will have their own unique constellation of traits, as well as their own strengths, preferences, and identities. Different people will have different levels of challenges, and these challenges are based on supports and environment. Autism is diagnosed on observations of behavior, but no single behavior can be used to identify autism. If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. Autism knows no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries. Family income, life-style, and educational levels do not affect the chance of a person having autism. In addition to the criteria the DSM-5 lists out, there are some common features of autism that can make it easier to understand and support our community.



## SPLINTER SKILLS

Splinter skills are a pattern of development in autism. While a neurotypical tends to develop skills that they can generalize fairly evenly across an area, autistics may have very high skills in one specific area that don't generalize to another area. We call these differences splinter skills. For example, a person may be able to complete high-level calculus, but they have difficulty keeping a budget.



## EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

This is the part of the brain in control of strategizing, organizing, working memory, attention, and inhibitory control. People with autism often have difficulties in one or more areas of executive functioning. If an individual on the spectrum procrastinates, has difficulty with memory, struggles to make plans, or has poor time management skills, they may be experiencing executive functioning impairment.



## SENSORY PROCESSING

All of us receive sensory input from the environment and our bodies that our brains turn into understandable information. Many people on the spectrum have difficulty with the processing step. They can be over- or undersensitive to any sense:

- Vestibular: sense of balance (movement)
- Proprioceptive: sense of body position (pressure)
- Interoception: sense of your internal body (hunger, cramps, exhaustion, and more)



## EMOTION REGULATION

Emotion regulation is the ability to notice, identify, and respond to your emotions in a way that helps you achieve the outcomes you want. It can include skills to affect your emotions, tolerate the distress, or to decide how to behave in response to the emotions. Autistics may struggle with emotion regulation. Some autistics have alexithymia (difficulty identifying and communicating their own emotions). Some may have very intense emotions, and some may struggle to manage their emotions.



## MASKING

Masking is when an autistic person hides or suppresses their autistic traits in order to look more neurotypical. Most autistics have some ability to mask, and may choose to mask in particular situations to stay safe or navigate a difficult situation. However masking for an extended period of time is damaging to mental health and can lead to burnout.