



Surrey Autism Peer Project

Some tips and strategies you may find helpful



The aim of this booklet is to help autistic people better understand their needs, use their strengths to their advantage and develop strategies for aspects of life they may find challenging.

This booklet and the workshops were funded by The Surrey County Council Better Care Fund

Topics we cover in this booklet are listed below and strategies are based on autistic people's lived experiences



Common strengths of autistic people



Strategies for sensory differences



Communication tips and approaches



Managing social relationships



Helpful ideas for organising daily life



Managing your wellbeing



Disclosing that you are (or may be) autistic



Signposting to further information

Please feel free to share this booklet with anyone who may find it helpful

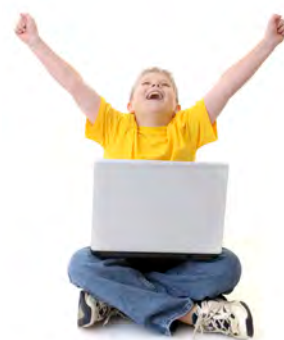
Common strengths of autistic people



Not every autistic person will have every strength we discuss

It's important to note that the autism diagnostic criteria focus on the difficulties a person experiences rather than their strengths. Common strengths autistic people have include:

- Being very good at noticing details that non-autistic people often miss
- Having a strong ability to focus and stay on task, even when the work is very repetitive
- Having intense and passionate interests that they become very knowledgeable about
- Having an intuitive ability to recognise patterns and understand logical systems
- Having an exceptional memory for facts
- Having an excellent visual memory and ability to think visually



It's important to recognise and value your strengths

Valuing your strengths

"I used to be really good at science when I was at school, and just thought that science was easy, and that everyone else also found it easy.

By recognising that I had a talent for science, and that it wasn't easy for everyone, led to me choose to do a degree that was science based."

It's so easy to get stuck just thinking about all the things we struggle with that we don't value our strengths.

Using your strengths

"In my workplace there are repetitive tasks that other staff really hate doing. I'm happy doing these tasks, and this also makes me popular with colleagues !"

"When I worked as a photographer I used to do very complex photo shoots working to tight deadlines.

I was always good at noticing the small details that other people missed. I was known for the high quality of my work."

Using your strengths

"I can remember facts from textbooks really easily, and even got accused of cheating in an exam once - which I would never do as I can't cheat or lie !"

"I have a natural talent for organising complex rotas for event bookings."

"I have a strong visual memory. If I have driven a route, I can remember it years later."

Other common strengths of autistic people are being very honest, impartial, reliable and loyal.

Sensory differences



Most autistic people experience the sensory world differently

Each autistic person will have their own sensory profile, but common experiences can include:

- Finding noisy and busy environments overwhelming at times
- Struggling to filter out background noises
- Experiencing certain tastes, smells, textures or touch very intensely, or being under sensitive to them
- Being slow to notice our internal body's sensory signals such as hunger, thirst and whether we're hot or cold
- Experiencing pain differently and struggling to describe symptoms when unwell



Strategies autistic people often find helpful

Identifying your needs

"In the past I didn't understand why I found certain environments like busy supermarkets so overwhelming.

I now realise that I experience all the noise, people and bright lights more intensely than other people, so don't give myself a hard time about it. I just avoid places at busy times."

"I set alarms to remind me to eat, as I don't always notice I'm hungry until I get light-headed."

Avoiding overwhelm

"I always take my noise cancelling headphones with me whenever I go out. They help to filter out the background noise like other people's conversations."

It helps to get used to new places in stages.

"I visited a leisure centre before I started classes there. This meant I was familiar with the sensory environment, and knew where the toilets were and how the lockers worked."

Asking for adjustments

"At work I have a card I can show my manager that says I need a short break. This prevents me getting overwhelmed."

"I ask for appointments at quieter times as a reasonable adjustment. At one hospital they found me a quiet waiting area after I said I was autistic."

"It's not noise that I struggle with. I like listening to loud music at home. Unexpected, unpredictable noise is the problem, especially when there are a lot of other distractions at the same time."

Regulate your senses

When feeling very over-stimulated, weighted blankets and weighted clothing can have a calming effect.

Stimming can be a good calming strategy, so it shouldn't be discouraged. If a stim could be harmful it helps to try to find an alternative type of stim.

Stimming can include rocking, pacing, flapping and repeating phrases.

Some people may need to move to help them focus, for example:

- Going for a short break to walk or run around
- Using a fidget spinner



Plan carefully

Factor your sensory needs into decisions you make.

For example:

- Choosing the same meal each time at a restaurant to avoid any sensory surprises
- Arranging to meet friends and family in small groups or one to one in quieter environments
- Taking the breaks you need during social events and leaving early if you need to

Enjoy your senses

You may find certain tastes, smells, textures and sounds uplifting or relaxing - make the most of your sensory world.

You may even find your heightened senses can be useful in noticing details, noises and smells that others miss.



Recovery time

If you have sensory differences your brain will be taking in and processing more information than other people's. This can be exhausting.

It's important to factor in recovery time, often time alone in a quiet, calm environment where you can relax. You may need more quiet time than many other people.

Bring a supporter

You may need support at a health appointment to explain your symptoms, or when having to go to a new place or make an unfamiliar journey.

Websites we find useful

Sensory Direct

This is a website that sells a wide range of sensory equipment and aids such as weighted blankets, fidget toys, lighting and clothing.

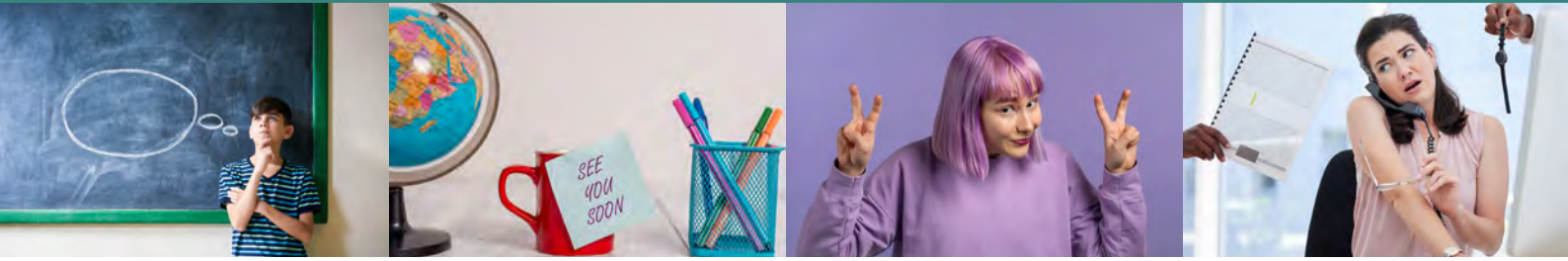
- www.sensorydirect.com

Griffin OT

Kim Griffin is an Occupational Therapist who runs online training on Sensory Processing. Whilst aimed at those supporting children her courses are relevant to adults too.

- www.griffinot.com

Communication differences



Autistic and non-autistic people have different communication styles

This can lead to confusion and misunderstandings. Common issues for autistic people include:

- Needing more time to process verbal communication
- Finding communication challenging in groups and in busy and noisy environments
- Struggling to read non-verbal clues such as body language and tone of voice at the same time as listening to the words a person is saying
- Non-autistic people can use language very vaguely which can be confusing
- An autistic person may seem direct without intending to appear rude

Strategies autistic people often find helpful

Visual/written information is often easier for an autistic person to process than verbal information.

Ask for more time

"I used to be nervous about asking people to slow down, or to put lists or instructions in writing."

Unexpected phonecalls can cause a lot of stress. It's okay to ask people to phone back at an agreed time.

It may be them not you

"I used to always assume I hadn't understood what someone said due to my autism. I now realise that other people haven't really understood either."

Ask for clarification

Non-autistic people use their body language and tone of voice to communicate as well as the words they use.

"Given time I can read body language and non-verbal clues, but I struggle to do this at the same time as listening to the words they use. I can miss the meaning of the message as I haven't 'read between the lines'."

"I ask for clarification if I'm unsure, rather than stressing about whether I've misunderstood."

Ask people to be direct

Non-autistic people can be overly polite. "One colleague of mine always used to ask me whether I'd like to help her with a task and was upset if I said "no thanks."

"We worked it out and now she says "Will you please help me with this task." To her this sounds rude, but to me it's simply clear and direct."



Autistic people often find the communication style of other autistic people less confusing than the communication style of non-autistic people.

Multiple demands

It's common for an autistic person to find it hard to manage multiple demands. This can include:

- Listening to what someone is saying whilst also giving them eye contact
- Holding a conversation whilst doing something else like driving

Many autistic people find it much easier to focus on one thing at a time, which is one reason why group conversations can be challenging.

It can help to make other people aware of this.



Figurative language

Non-literal language can be very confusing and cause misunderstandings.

For example:

- Idioms - such as 'that put the cat amongst the pigeons'
- Metaphors - such as 'he has a heart of gold'

Many autistic people can learn these, but may not interpret the meanings as quickly or intuitively as non-autistic people, and rely more on the literal meaning of the words.

Irony and sarcasm

Non-autistic people use irony and sarcasm, and usually this is just a bit of fun. It can be hard to tell when this becomes abusive. If the sarcasm is always aimed at you then it is a concern, and you should seek support from someone you trust.



Visual communication

Autistic people often find visual information really helpful (this includes written information).

Visual communication gives you time to process the information at your own pace, and is also a permanent reminder.

Many autistic children and autistic people with a learning disability find pictorial information easier to understand.

Things like visual charts, timetables, to do lists and calendars can be really helpful for many people.

Websites we find useful

National Autistic Society - Visual supports

This section of the National Autistic Society website has lots of advice and tips on using visual supports and communication tools.

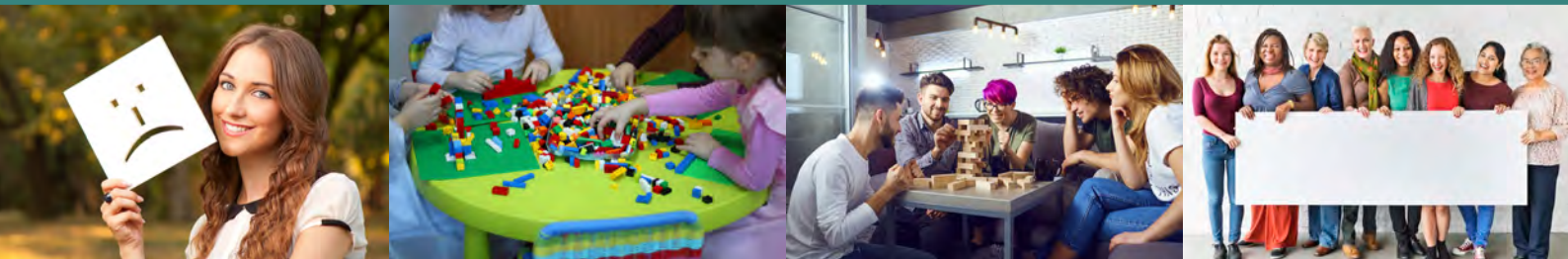
- www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/visual-supports

Autism by Experience - Communication handout

There is a range of handouts on our website, with one handout specifically exploring issues related to autism and communication.

- www.autismbyexperience.co.uk

Social relationships



Autistic people often want to be social, but can find this difficult

Autistic people often describe developing friendships as 'playing a game without knowing the rules'.

Common issues for autistic people include:

- Struggling with small talk, not knowing what to say and worrying about saying the 'wrong thing'
- Feeling confident talking about things they are passionate about, and not always realising that other people may not be so interested in the topic
- Working out how to develop relationships further. For example, progressing from being a work colleague to a friend
- Finding busy unstructured social situations such as parties exhausting

Strategies autistic people often find helpful

Having a role

At social events it's often helpful for an autistic person to have a role, such as being the person who serves the drinks, or even tidies up during the event. Interactions with others become much more predictable.

It's okay not to go

Some autistic people find unstructured events like parties so stressful that they choose not to go, or just go for a short time and have regular breaks.

An ideal life

An ideal life for an autistic person may not be a typical life.

A person may not always enjoy the things that most people enjoy.

It's important to take care of your needs rather than always trying to please others.

You may need more alone time than many other people.

You may need to visit a new environment in advance of going there for an event.



Finding your tribe

Many autistic people find getting to know other autistic people, perhaps by going to an autism social group, really helpful.

It can be empowering to meet and interact with people who experience the world in a similar way to you. People often describe that they can be their true selves.

It's quite common for a person to cope at school, college or work and then 'let it all out' when they get home and feel safe. There's a risk people may assume the problem is with home.

Empathy

An autistic person may not recognise how other people are feeling from their body language.

This is not the same as lacking empathy. Once an autistic person does recognise how another person is feeling, they may experience intense emotional empathy, and feel the other person's emotions very strongly.

Some autistic people may not be sure how to respond to other people's emotions. "My boss was crying, and as I just want to be left alone when I'm upset, I left her alone. I didn't realise she wanted to be comforted."



Camouflaging

Camouflaging is a term to describe ways an autistic person may change their behaviour to try to fit in with others.

It includes:

Masking – hiding their autistic characteristics, such as stimming.

Imitating – copying how other people behave and communicate.

Situational mutism - not talking so that people don't notice them.

This can be very tiring and you may need alone time to recover.

Developing social skills

Many autistic people are keen to develop their social interaction skills.

These things can help:

- Prepared lists of conversation starters
- Asking people about themselves - e.g. what they do for work, what their hobbies are?



Vulnerabilities

Autistic people are more likely than non-autistic people to believe what other people tell them.

This can make autistic people more vulnerable to things like scams and manipulation.

It's important to be wary, and to get support and advice from trustworthy people. If you are not sure who to contact, Citizens Advice have offices across Surrey, and contact the Police if you are concerned about potential criminal behaviour.

As well as phoning 101 you can contact the Police through their website:

www.surrey.police.uk

Websites we find useful

National Autistic Society Surrey Branch

The NAS Surrey Branch is a volunteer-run support group founded by parents to support other parents. The website links to support and activities for autistic adults and their families.

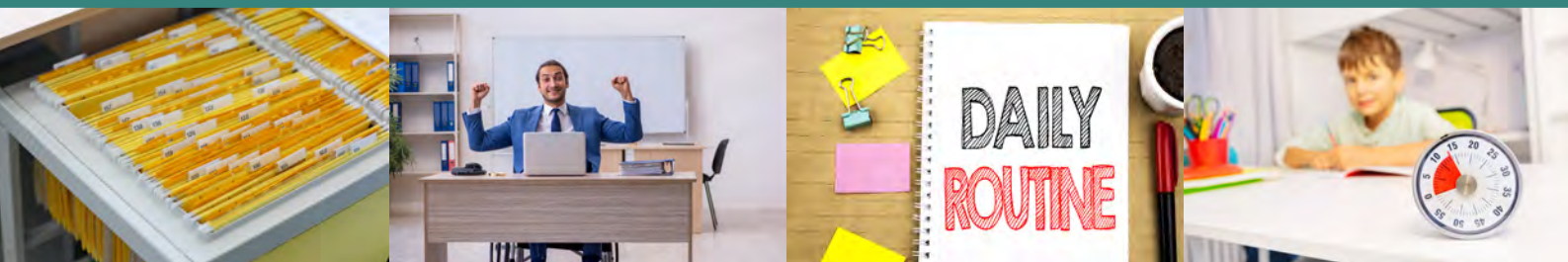
- www.nassurreybranch.org

Surrey Autism Partnership Board

This website has information about support, advice, and information available for autistic people in Surrey. Some of these are autism specialists, and some are suitable for autistic and non-autistic people.

- www.surreycc.gov.uk/adults/care-and-support/disability/spb/apb/services

Organising everyday life



Some autistic people can struggle to organise daily life

This can be due to challenges with what is called Executive Functioning. Examples include:

- Keeping track of time, for example missing deadlines and being late for things
- Organising things like paperwork and bills
- Working out priorities and getting started on tasks
- Breaking down tasks like 'sort out the kitchen' into manageable steps
- Staying focused and overriding impulses to get distracted
- Switching between tasks, and dealing with interruptions



Strategies autistic people often find helpful

Help getting started

Some autistic people really benefit from someone helping them to break tasks down into small steps in the right order, and having these written down.

Make it visual

"I use my phone calendar to remind me about things I need to do and also things I want to do - I use a lot of alarms to stop me forgetting about things."

Don't take on too much

Some autistic people recognise that reducing the demands in their life and doing less is hugely helpful. They try to avoid using up all their mental energy too quickly and getting overwhelmed.

Routines

In a world that can often feel overwhelming, having familiar routines can make life easier to manage.

Some people may need support to set up their routines initially.

Keep it simple

If you struggle with multiple demands it can be easier to do one thing at a time.

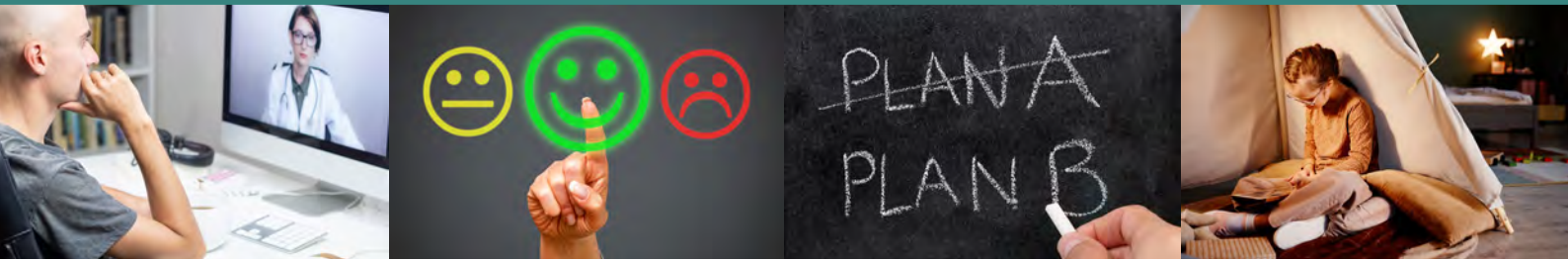
For example, when cooking pasta and sauce, cook the sauce first and then the pasta.

People who have difficulty organising everyday life often have other strengths.

The most helpful support for an autistic person is often help to structure how to do a task and create a visual reminder of the steps involved.

It's common for a person with a neurodivergent condition such as autism and/or ADHD to have Executive Functioning challenges. This includes people of all intellectual abilities.

Managing your wellbeing



Autistic people often experience high levels of anxiety

This is understandable as the world can often be overwhelming, and other people's behaviour and communication can be confusing.

- It's important to note that autism is a neurodevelopmental condition and not a mental health condition
- An autistic person may struggle to identify and describe their emotions which can cause anxiety
- Many autistic people have experienced bullying which can cause social anxiety
- Many autistic people may struggle with sleeping, and fatigue can make anxiety worse
- It's very common for autistic people to worry a lot, sometimes about things other people tend not to worry about. It can be hard to switch off

Strategies autistic people often find helpful

Rumination

Rumination is when you have repetitive thoughts about something that happened or may happen. Autistic people can be vulnerable to rumination, which can be draining.

Some people may find the 'worry tree' logical flowchart helpful.

For example, if you are worrying you may have caused offence, it prompts you to check it out with them.

www.gmbneas.org.uk/the-worry-tree/

Emotions

It's thought that around half of autistic people find it hard to understand and describe their own emotions.

This is known as Alexithymia, and is different to not having emotions. "Just because I struggle to put how I feel into words it doesn't mean I don't feel things. In fact, the worse I feel, the more I struggle and often default to saying, 'I'm fine.'"

A good therapist will help an autistic person to identify their emotions.

Emotional regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage our emotions.

If we learn skills to regulate our emotions, we can avoid acting impulsively (driven by our immediate emotions) and make calmer choices.

Many autistic children (and adults) will need support with this.



Many autistic people have very high standards and tend to be very critical of themselves - more critical than they are of other people. If you wouldn't say it to a friend, don't say it to yourself.

Meltdowns / shutdowns

Sometimes an autistic person becomes so overwhelmed that their brain simply cannot process any more information.

This may express itself as a meltdown which is an outward expression, and someone may become upset, tearful or angry.

Alternatively, this may express itself as a shutdown which is an inward expression, and someone may simply not be able to communicate.

It is important to note that a meltdown is not the same as 'a tantrum'. A person will need time to recover in a calm, quiet place without any demands.



Autistic Fatigue

Autistic fatigue is likened to workplace burnout, and can cause increased meltdowns / shutdowns.

Sensory differences, social interaction, masking autistic traits and feeling you're not meeting other people's expectations can all contribute to fatigue.

Sleep is very important and some people find blackout blinds helpful, or even a white noise generator to block out background noise.

Some people find that listening to music or a podcast helps them sleep as it distracts them from their worries.

Contingency plans

Many autistic people find contingency plans helpful to avoid the overwhelm caused by unexpected change.

For example, having a Plan B in place if a train you were expected to travel on is cancelled.



Mental health services

Autistic people have the same rights as other people to access mental health services like Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

Some autistic people find it hard to access these therapies, but for some autistic people CBT can be very helpful.

An autistic person can be affected by mental health conditions such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders or depression.

Your GP should help you to find the right support, and specialist mental health services should recognise that autistic people may experience these conditions.

Websites we find useful

National Autistic Society - Anxiety

This section of the National Autistic Society website has lots of advice and tips on managing anxiety

- www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/anxiety

National Autistic Society - Autistic fatigue and burnout

This section of the National Autistic Society website has lots of advice and tips on autistic fatigue and burnout

- www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/mental-health/autistic-fatigue

Telling people you are autistic



Telling people you are (or may be) autistic is a personal choice

At work there is no legal obligation to tell your employer that you are autistic. Even if you do disclose you are autistic you can choose who to tell and who not to tell.

- Your employer is not allowed to tell others that you are autistic without your consent
- Many people disclose their autism diagnosis after a problem has arisen at work
- Some people never feel the need to mention they are autistic
- It's important to be aware that many people have limited understanding of autism
- It helps to be prepared if you choose to disclose, to have worked out what you might tell them about your strengths and challenges, and how they can be supportive



Disclosing that you are (or may be) autistic

Disclosing at work

"I chose to disclose on my application form. I asked if I could have more time to answer the interview questions and have them written out for me."

"I was really worried about being treated as less able if I told people I was autistic straight away, so I did the job for a few months first and then told people that I was autistic.

This helped as people already knew me."

Workplace adjustments

Disclosing your autism diagnosis at work means you can ask for workplace adjustments. These can include:

- Flexible working hours to avoid rush hour travel
- Being able to have a designated desk with screens to block out distractions
- Having a written summary of key tasks a manager wants you to do
- Having a workplace buddy to go to if you're feeling confused

Positives and negatives

Some colleagues are more understanding if they know you are autistic. For example, they understand that you are not being unfriendly if you don't join in with the small talk.

Many people find their friends are supportive and understanding, though not everyone is as supportive.

There is a risk that some people may treat you differently if you tell them you are autistic.

The Autism by Experience team have found that in most cases telling people they are autistic has been a positive experience.