

How Neurodiversity can be a hidden disability at work

1. Short overview of Neurodiversity

What is Neurodiversity? Jargon, appropriate language and overview.

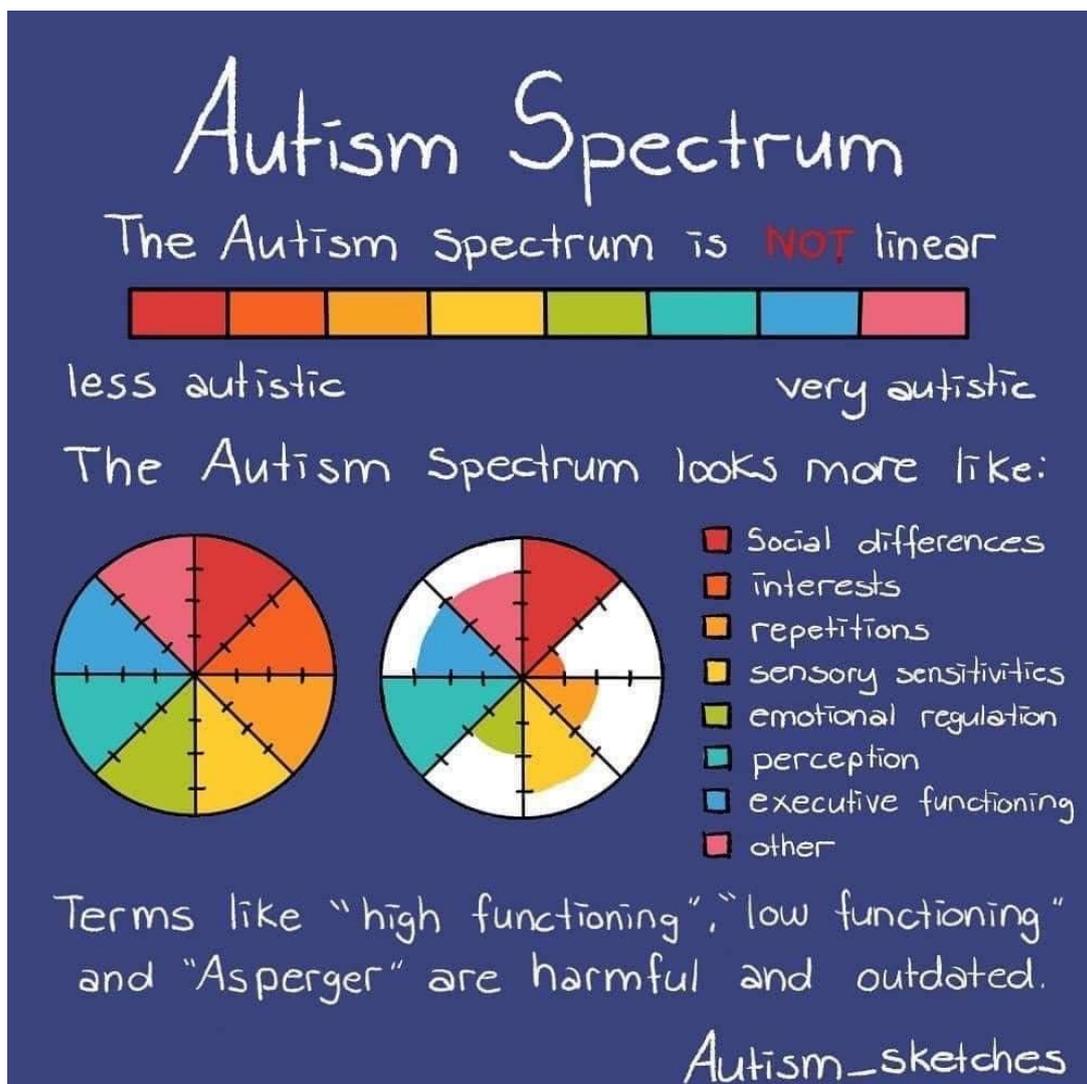
Autistic Person, vs person with Autism - ask

Asperger's no longer diagnosed - it's just Autism now - Type 1, 2, 3

(You may still hear people refer to themselves as an Aspie or having Asperger's because that was their diagnosis and they prefer to keep that term.)

We also don't use high functioning or low functioning labels

Autism Spectrum is not linear.



Language:

Neurodiversity - noun - abbreviation ND

the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population (used especially in the context of autistic spectrum disorders).

Neurodivergent - adjective - abbreviation ND

differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal (frequently used with reference to autistic spectrum disorders); not neurotypical.

neurodiverse - adjective abbreviation ND

displaying or characterized by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behaviour; not neurotypical.

Neurotypical - adjective Abbreviation: NT

relating to or showing typical neurological behaviour and development:

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. Surveys have shown that one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. The reality is it's probably more like 1 in 10. There are so many undiagnosed adults over 30.

Autism is a spectrum condition and affects people in different ways. Like all people, autistic people have their own strengths and weaknesses. Below is a list of difficulties autistic people may share, including the two key difficulties required for a diagnosis.

Gifted - usually academically, musically, or in the arts, but struggle with socialising/relationships/appropriate language/

Pathological Demand Avoidance

Sensory Processing disorder

Highly sensitive person

Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia

ADD/ADHD

IDD, intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder)

GDD global developmental delay,

Social communication disorder

Prosopagnosia (face blindness)

Alexithymia is a broad term to describe problems with feeling emotions. In fact, this Greek term used in Freudian psychodynamic theories loosely translates to "no words for emotion." While the condition is not well-known, it's estimated that 1 in 10 people has it.

Often Autism comes with other challenges, including mental health and physical disabilities.

2. 5 hot tips for improving Team Communications, so the whole team benefits

- 1. Agree team email etiquette** – or else can be one way ticket to confrontation or conflict, misunderstandings, and wasted time playing email tennis
Think about why you are cc'ing someone, Who is the action actually for? Have you mentioned a deadline? Have you expressed your expectations? Are there clear instructions or a clear request? How is the tone? Do you need confirmation they have received the email and have agreed to take on the task and confirm they can deliver by the deadline? (Did you tell them?)
Agree as a team how you will use your subject line e.g. INFO ONLY, FOR ACTION, URGENT (TODAY), MEETING PREP, BOOKING REQUEST, etc
- 2. Find out how you like to communicate and tell others**, email, phone, text, zoom, teams, in person. Also what times of the day are you free to communicate? - are you at everyone's beck and call or can you protect a couple of hours a day so you can get some work done uninterrupted? Do you need to use headphones to block out the noisy office so you can concentrate?
- 3. Discuss what you need to be most productive with your line manager** (flexitime, headphones, seated at a quiet desk, working from home, spreading your lunch break over 4 x 15 mins breaks so you can graze and pace yourself, or taking 90 mins lunch so you can go to the gym and working 30 mins linger at the end of the day. Moving your 40 hours into 4 x 10 hr days so you get 3 days off. - great to reduce absenteeism and better for mental health.) These might also be called reasonable adjustments, accommodations or adaptations. It's important to be transparent with the rest of the team
- 4. Find out how the team likes to be rewarded** – Many studies have shown that recognition is incredibly important for retention, loyalty and work ethic. It's ranked number one above all other reasons for someone leaving their job (Lack of recognition/appreciation). It could be as simple as a 79p thank you card, or a £10 Amazon voucher towards something they want, or even a personal email from the big boss thanking them for their valuable contribution. It matters more than you think.
- 5. When giving instructions or requests for work, be as clear as possible** - step by step, no assumptions, ask them to repeat it back to you. If someone is not 100% certain what they are supposed to do, they might put it off and even miss a deadline because they are ashamed or embarrassed to ask for help, especially if they are new. You can help support them by taking a bit longer to check they are confident about the task asked of them.

3. The 3 golden rules of effective feedback, to reduce conflict and difficult conversations

1. Be specific and factual - what happened, when, who was there, what was said or done? What was the observed impact? Why is this good/undesirable? (Always start with the good so the individual does not feel like they are just being told off – it will keep their inner child quiet and reassure them that some things are going well.). Ask them what they think is going well too so you can see if they are oblivious to things that might not be working, and then address them.
2. Remove emotions and ego and what you think was going on. No assumptions, only questions and listening. You just want to have the truth and honesty in the conversation. Leave pauses between speaking and listening so there's no escalation of volume or interruptions.
3. If required give suggestions for any desired improvement (training, mentor, buddy, PIP, secondment, change in behaviour for a trial period then reassess) Don't leave it for them to figure it out, or find relevant training, this is when they need your support.

Neurodiversity traits and how to support them

Questionnaire on Neurodiversity to gain insight

Autistic masking can conceal a person's struggles.

"Autistic masking" is the practice of hiding one's own autistic traits, sometimes to the detriment of mental health. Autistic people do it consciously or unconsciously to "fit in" with the non-autistic world and avoid mistreatment. Autistic masking can also make it harder to get a diagnosis. If you spend years learning to mimic non-autistic behaviour, other people (even professionals!) might assume you're non-autistic.

So if you're looking for diagnosis and support, what do you do?

Autistic writer and artist Steve Asbell came up with an impressive set of questions to help identify autistic masking. With permission, I'm sharing them here in an easy-to-read format. They have been lightly edited and reorganized into sections.

Please note that this is not an official diagnostic resource. It's here to help you consider whether an autism evaluation would be worth it. Score one point for each "yes".

You can also gain valuable insight into people who are not neurotypical by reading this.

Masking and compensating behaviours

Do you bottle things up in order to avoid being "weird" or "too sensitive?"

Many autistic people, regardless of whether they realize they're autistic, learn ways to "blend in" or "get by" in a confusing and difficult world.

1. Have you ever felt as if you were missing the built-in instruction manual that everyone else seemed to possess?
Did you spend an inordinate amount of time learning to copy the behaviour of other kids so that they wouldn't realize you were different?
2. Are you able to make eye contact, but would much rather NOT make eye contact?
Have you taught yourself to "cheat" by looking between the eyes or at the eyebrow?
Does eye contact make it harder to think clearly?
3. Have you purposely chosen interests that fly under the radar as "normal," yet you still prefer to enjoy peripheral aspects of that interest, such as studying the stats of baseball players or making elaborate backstories for your Barbie dolls?
4. Have you developed coping mechanisms such as lists, schedules, stacks of paper, alarms and reminders to help you function as an adult?
Would you still be able to get by without them?

Subscore: ___ / 4

How other people see you

Being autistic in a non-autistic world frequently means being misunderstood.

Are you often misunderstood or judged when you're trying your hardest?

5. Do people refer to you as a "space cadet" or a "day-dreamer," even though those terms make no sense to you?

Do you appreciate unusual things like constellations in the popcorn ceiling, tricks of light, numbers and textures?

6. Do people jokingly call you "OCD" for your organizational strategies or list making, even though there are perfectly rational reasons for your behaviour?

Does this "obsessive" behaviour also bring you a sense of calm and order when you're allowed to see it through to completion?

7. Do people assume you're angry at them when you're not? Do you smile or laugh inappropriately, upsetting others? Have people told you that you have a "resting bitch face?"

8. When you get happy and excited, do people say you're "too much" or tell you to calm down?

Are you unusually animated when genuinely excited, yet find it hard to fake this enthusiasm on demand for others?

Have you ever been misdiagnosed with bipolar disorder or borderline personality disorder?

Some of this will depend on whether other people are jerks. Give yourself points if other people comment on it, regardless of whether they're judgmental.

Subscore: ___ / 4

Secret struggles

Do people think you're overreacting when you're really underreacting?

9. Do your anxiety levels spike when there is a change of plans, or when somebody calls, rings a doorbell or sends an email/text?

Do people perceive you as rude and antisocial for being unappreciative of their surprise attacks?

10. Do you have social anxiety, but only because you have a hefty track record of rejection due to missed social cues, difficulty navigating conversations and an inability to understand what other people are thinking?

11. Is keeping and maintaining relationships difficult for you, even if you're loyal to them?

Do you suddenly remember a good friend or relative that you literally forgot about for months or years?

Is it hard to initiate conversations without a prompt, even with friends?

12. Do you find it inordinately difficult to listen to someone when other people are talking?

Do you have a hard time carrying on a conversation in a loud or crowded place?

13. Do you avoid places because of the overwhelming noise, visual clutter, bright lights or overwhelming smells?

Do you avoid busy stores and do your shopping when things aren't as busy?

14. Is driving a stressful and exhausting experience for you?

Do you tend to take the same familiar route every time and even go so far as to avoid stressful intersections and fast highways?

Do you struggle making quick decisions behind the steering wheel?

Was learning to drive unusually difficult for you?

15. Do you go through periods where you can't even remember how to make dinner or get ready for work, and even the easiest of tasks seem insurmountable because you can't fathom completing the steps to completion?

16. Do emotions and sensory overload build up into a thunderstorm of rage, panic, or despair that you have no choice but to ride out until it passes? This might be a meltdown.

Alternately, does the build-up result in you retreating from the world and "zoning out?" This would be a "shutdown."

Subscore: ___ / 8

Different experiences

Do “odd” things make you truly happy?

17. When you’re alone, do you make random noises or repeat interesting words to yourself?
Do you move your hands or feet because staying still feels “wrong?” Bonus point if you do this around other people.
18. Do you have a hard time recognizing or remembering faces? While not all autistics are “face blind,” many of us are.
Do you fail to recognize people outside of the usual context, such as meeting a teacher in the grocery store?
Have you ever tried to purposefully teach yourself how to identify someone?
19. Do you have a hard time understanding why people feel the way they do without a personal point of reference?
Are you able to relate much more once you’ve tied their experience to something that’s happened to you?
20. Do you have a built-in “BS detector” & despise playing along with things that infantilize you?
Have people said you’re “not a team player” for complaining about pointless gift exchanges or parties?
Do you need to understand the purpose of a task?
21. Do you abhor the idea of making conversation with people who share nothing in common with you?
Would you happily go out of your comfort zone to talk with others about a shared hobby or passion?
22. Do you have an unusually monotonous or singsong voice?
Do you have a hard time modulating your volume and speak with inappropriate volume for the situation?
Have people commented that your pitch, tone, volume, or other aspects of speech are unusual?
23. Do you feel so closely connected to your hobbies that you can blissfully engage in them for hours and have a hard time stopping for anything else?
Does losing interest in them make you feel as if you’ve lost a part of yourself?
24. Do you find it easier to do things when they’re a passion or “special interest?”
Were you good at cooking/gardening/organizing when it was interesting, but find it impossible to start once the passion has abandoned you?
25. Do you feel as if you relate to animals more than other people?
As a child, did you secretly suspect that you were from another planet or species than that of your classmates?
When meeting someone similar to yourself, do you feel like you’re “home,” so to speak?
26. While not officially criteria, this is something that many autistics will relate to:
Do gender, romantic and sexuality norms seem arbitrary and fake?
Even if you don’t identify as LGBTQ+, do you hesitate when referring to yourself as cisgender or heterosexual?
27. Lastly, do you get emotional and feel “seen” when reading the above tweets and other content by autistics? There might be a reason for that.

Subscore: ___ / 11

Total score: ___ / 27

Understanding your score

There is no definitive cut-off for whether this means you're autistic. This is because:

- Autism is really complicated and can manifest in many different ways. It's normal to have some traits more than other traits.
- If you're anything like me, you'll overthink it and be unsure whether to give yourself points in specific areas.
- It's also possible that you'll realize later that more of these apply to you than you thought.
- A high score could mean autism... or it could mean a similar condition or a combination of them.
- A high score means that you might want to look into getting an evaluation.
- Results are variable.
- On Twitter, many people who knew they were autistic scored in the 19 to 27 range
- On Twitter, many of the people questioning whether they were autistic scored 14 or higher. Some of these people are probably autistic.
- A few people with conditions similar to autism (like ADHD) scored in the teens.
- My neurotypical sister-in-law scored about 2.5, I scored 24
- Please keep in mind that the Twitter scores are based on the original (un-revised) edition, and that I haven't read all of them or conducted a statistical analysis.

Mythbusting Neurodiverse Traits

Do you Know anyone who.....

- Is a perfectionist, takes too long to complete tasks
- Is Someone who Self isolates, pulls away from team, seems to not listen, listens to music on headphones a lot
- Notices everything, Finds refining focus difficult, gets distracted, asks lots of questions that might not seem to others to be related
- Seems to Know it all, appears compelled to tell people the right answer, has a lack of timing, is not aware or careful of other people's egos/feelings
- Can struggle with audio/verbal only instructions. Might need to see it written down.
- Only wants to be a Specialist, often doesn't want to broaden knowledge and skills in other subjects
- Can be seen to "check out" whilst analysing, might take longer to analyse a report
- Is Disruptive, eccentric, has unusual communication or behaviours, is excitable, enthusiastic, out of step with the team vibe, can't wait to blurt it out/takes over
- Has Wild or outrageous ideas, might find it difficult and frustrating to explain to others, can be very innovative but ahead of their time
- Could be seen as aggressive, confrontational, abrasive or combative when expressing passion or challenging something or frustrated
- Cannot understand why others don't share their values, just expects others to do so
- Is gullible & trusting. Takes everyone on face value and takes them to say what they mean and mean what they say. Logical thought doesn't take into consideration societal rules, game playing, politics, nuance, hints, suggestion etc.
- Sings songs or tunes out loud, talks to themselves, rocks or swings in their chair
- Is often late, has trouble keeping time throughout the day
- Has a rigid routine and gets very stressed out if it changes suddenly

Just because you might say "Yes, me!" to one or more of these – doesn't mean you are Autistic. Lots of people share these traits. The difference is that Autistic people will have most of these traits all the time, and that is what can be disabling. Trying to juggle all of these things and fit in with "normal" society can be exhausting and difficult to maintain. Often Autistic individuals will "crash" when they get home – completely spent of all energy as if they had been on stage all day acting the entire time.

The world is designed for neurotypical minds and consequently anyone who does not fit into that group have to adapt and bend to "fit in" with everyone else and it's very draining. Imagine acting ALL day on stage. Being someone else, rehearsing what you say in your head, analysing what you did say, worrying you've talked too much or not said enough. Concerned you haven't picked up the hints or nuance that everyone else seems to understand.

How traits can present in different ways

ASC Positive Traits	ASC Challenging presentations
Attention to detail • Thoroughness • Accuracy	Perfectionism, takes too long to complete tasks
Deep focus • Concentration • Freedom from distraction	Self isolates, pulls away from team, seems to not listen, listens to music
Observational skills • Listen, look, learn approach • Fact finding	Notices everything, refining focus difficult, gets distracted, asks lots of questions that might not seem to others to be related
Absorb and retain facts • Excellent long term memory • Superior recall	Knows it all, compelled to tell people the right answer (not ego driven), possible lack of timing, not aware or careful of other people's fragile egos
Visual skills • Visual learning and recall • Detail-focussed	Can struggle with audio/verbal only instructions. Might need to see it written down so they can refer to it - not necessarily as a picture.
Expertise • In-depth knowledge • High level of skills	Specialist, often doesn't want to broaden knowledge and skills into other subjects
Methodical approach • Analytical • Spotting patterns, repetition	Can be seen to "check out" whilst analysing, might take longer to analyse a report but findings are superior
Novel approaches • Unique thought processes • Innovative solutions	Disruptive, eccentric, unusual communication or behaviours, excitable, enthusiastic, out of step with the team vibe, can't wait to blurt it out/take over
Creativity • Distinctive imagination • Expression of ideas	Wild or outrageous ideas, might find it difficult and frustrating to explain to others, can be very innovative but ahead of their time
Tenacity and resilience • Determination • Challenge opinions	Could be seen as aggressive, confrontational, abrasive or combative when expressing passion or challenging something
Integrity • Honesty, loyalty • Commitment	Cannot understand why others don't share values, expects others to do so
Accepting of difference • Less likely to judge others • May question norms	Gullibility. Trusting. Takes everyone on face value and to say what they mean and mean what they say. Logical thought doesn't take into consideration societal rules, game playing, politics etc.

Mckinsey research clearly shows that companies that are more diverse are more productive, more efficient and give better returns to shareholders. This benefit comes from a number of sources.

1. Diverse companies are happy companies

When diversity is celebrated and inclusivity is mainstreamed, your best employees stay. They contribute more, perform more effectively and enjoy their work more. Happy workers tend to lead to happy investors.

2. Diverse companies are more creative

Companies that can bring a wide range of perspectives to the challenges of modern business are more likely to find innovative, creative solutions. That diversity of perspective can only come from a diversity of workforce. A group of white men from Ivy League Universities, who go to the same golf club, is more limited in the resources it can bring to the table.

3. Diverse companies are more agile

We like people like us. If your marketing department represents only a tiny segment of your customer base, your campaigns will not reach the majority of people who have diverse backgrounds and are looking for different approaches and products. As markets change, a company with a single voice cannot be sure that their solutions are robust; a monotone company is reactive, not proactive. Secondly, diversity is inevitable.

This is the last page.