

# Welcome to the Autistic Community!



*Above: An illustration by Anabelle Listic. A hand is drawing a line of green dots on a tablet screen. Both the tablet and the illustration have abstract blue backgrounds.*

A Project of the Autism NOW Center and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network



**Welcome to the Autistic Community!**

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**The Autism NOW Center is a repository of resources and information about Autism Spectrum Disorders and other developmental disabilities. They work to create and disseminate dynamic, interactive, and accessible information products to people with autism and their families, as well as to other key stakeholders.**

**The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) is a nonprofit organization run by and for Autistic people. ASAN was created to provide support and services to individuals on the autism spectrum, while working to educate the public about autism. They work in public policy advocacy, community engagement and culture-building, research, and education to these ends.**

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## How to Use This Book

If you are holding this book, you are probably curious about autism. So, if you are autistic, welcome to the autistic community! And if you are not sure, or want to know more about autism, then thank you for your interest! Either way, we hope this book will be helpful in your quest to understand autism better.

If you have just found out that you are or might be autistic, you may be feeling anxious. You probably have a lot of questions floating around in your head, about what this means for you. Don't worry! Being autistic isn't the end of the world. In fact, knowing you are autistic is the first step in learning more about



yourself.

This book is a crash course on what it means to be autistic, and an introduction to the community you now find yourself in. Our goal is to help you answer questions you have about autism, so that you can understand yourself better. Also, this book is a resource to help you better understand your options.

The first chapter, "What Is Autism" will discuss a bit of the history of autism, and what different people mean when they use the term.

The discussion progresses from this point from the general scope of the word to the specific scope in the next chapter, "What does it mean?" In this section we will examine what autism means to the community as a whole and also to you specifically as someone who is autistic or interested in finding out more about autistic people.

In the next few chapters, we will have a more in depth rundown of some of the most common questions people who are recently diagnosed with autism have. The chapter "Am I Disabled?" will further examine autism as a disability.

The following chapter, "Am I OK?" will discuss how you can come to terms with your autism and be OK with yourself as an autistic person.

From this point, the focus of the book will shift from questions to explanations. In the chapter "More Alike than Different" you will find that

autistic people have similar challenges and experiences to non-autistic people. In addition, we will explain some ways that we are like our non-autistic peers, both neurodivergent and neurotypical, drawing on common goals to show that our diversity can be useful.

Next, in the chapter "Positives", we will further discuss the reasons why autistic experience, advocacy, and people are important to the world as a whole.

In the next three chapters, we will return to the questions at hand, namely questions about community. In the chapters "Am I the Only One?" and "Where Are the Other People Like Me?", you will find information about autistic community. These sections will explain the history of the autistic community as a whole, as well as how to become part of that community yourself.

The next chapter, "What Are My Rights?" follows into advocacy, and how we as a community have and continue to work together to gain rights for ourselves and the disabled community as a whole.

The next chapter, "Resources", is a list of organizations and contact information for parts of our community where you can get more information or become involved.

The final chapter, "What Does My Future Look Like?" will talk about what you may expect and the different paths your journey might take you on.



Overall, we hope that this booklet will help you understand autism and yourself better. We would like it to be a resource for you to use to determine how best to navigate the world as an autistic person and a portal into the autistic community. So, once again, welcome to the autistic community!

# What Is Autism?

The autistic brain develops differently from non-autistic brains. These differences affect how we communicate, think, sense, move, and interact with other people. Although all autistic people are different, the similarities in our differences from non-autistic people make up what we call “autism.”



One of the biggest ways autism affects us is how we process and use our senses. We can sense things more intensely, making things hard to understand or manage. They can also be less intense, making them hard to use. Some common problems are not

being able to understand conversation over background noise, or not being able to handle loud noises or bright lights. We are often sensitive to particular things like smells, tastes, or textures, when other people are not sensitive to those things. Some of us might like deep pressure, light

pressure, or no pressure at all.

We often use repeated motions, like rocking or flapping our hands/arms, to help us handle our sensory over- or under-load. These are often called stereotypies, self-stimulation, or “stimming.” Stimming can make it easier to calm ourselves, understand our environment, and think more clearly.

Many of us develop the ability to speak. Often this is later in life than most of our non-autistic peers. Although most of us develop the ability to speak, between 15-20% of us do not<sup>1</sup>. Those who cannot use oral speech often use augmentative and alternative communication such as typing, sign language, picture exchange, gesture, electronic devices and other non-oral methods. Many autistics that can speak also use these methods. Even if we can speak sometimes, we may not be able to in other situations.



Even those of us who can usually speak often have differences in our speech. We might use scripts, unusual vocabulary, or strange grammar, be very literal, or sound accented.

Most of us also have a hard time understanding language and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sfari.org/news-and-opinion/news/2013/study-of-nonverbal-autism-must-go-beyond-words-experts-say>

communication. Sometimes this can be as simple as not hearing the words a person is saying to us. It can also be because the language they are using is too abstract or metaphorical, or simply because they are using too many words at once. Also, many autistic people can only understand one person speaking at a time, or may have an easier time understanding people that they already know.

Although some of us have a diagnosis of intellectual disability or a learning disability, autism is not the same as those. Some autistic people have both autism and an intellectual disability or learning disorder, but this is not always the case. Most traditional IQ tests rely on skills like oral communication that may not accurately reflect our intellectual abilities.

Many of us are uncomfortable with uncertainty and change. We are often very bothered by changes in routine and environment. Sometimes non-autistic people have a hard time understanding why changes they consider insignificant can be so important to us. Part of this is because many of us have problems with executive functioning—the ability to stay on task, pay attention, switch between and initiate new tasks, use our memory effectively, and control impulses. We often have difficulty sequencing the parts or steps of tasks ideas, sentences, words, or even physical movements. This can make it difficult to adjust our existing routines and learn new ones. It can also make many things seem difficult to us even if we don't understand why.

We also commonly focus intensely on particular subjects. This is often called “perseveration” and the subject may be referred to as a “special

interest.” While this can often be extremely positive and provide us with a lot of joy, sometimes our fixations can cause us anxiety. Although some of us only have one, or one primary, special interest, many of us have a variety of special interests. Like all people, our interests can change over time. Developing these interests can be a great way to develop new skills and make new friends. Many of us even study or work in fields related to our interests.

Many of us have delays or difficulties with motor skills and coordination. Some of us may have additional diagnoses of dyspraxia (difficulty moving in certain ways, like talking or walking) or apraxia (being incapable of moving in certain ways, again, like talking or walking). This can make oral speech impossible. It can also make it difficult to start and stop motion. This can make it difficult or impossible to do things that many other people take for granted, such as tying shoes or locking and unlocking doors.

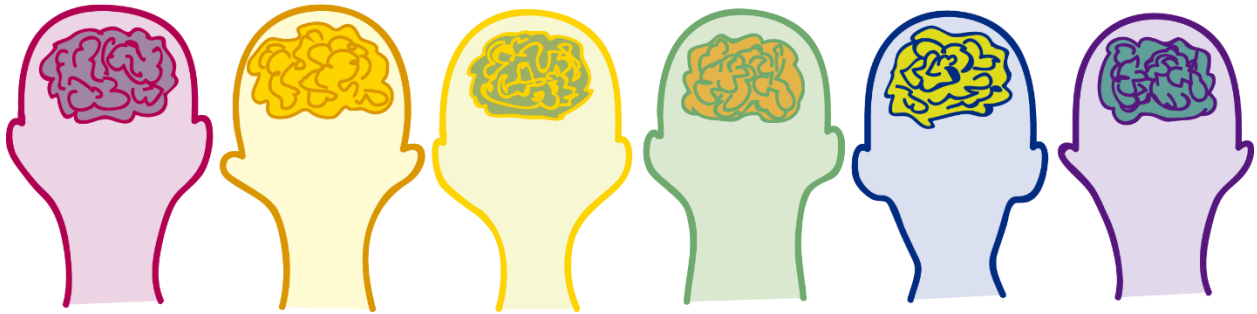
All of these differences can make social interactions very difficult. Perspective is important to social interactions. Many people rely on their own intuitions about how they would act, when trying to take the perspectives of others. We tend to have very different perspectives from non-autistic people, though. This means that they often have trouble empathizing with our behaviors and motivations. It can also mean that we have a hard time understanding why people do the things they do. For example, non-autistic people often rely on eye contact to guess whether or not the person they are talking to is listening. Many autistic people cannot always handle eye contact. We may also make eye contact in ways that are different from non-autistic people’s expectations. This can mean that

people think that we aren't listening even when we are. This can be especially frustrating because many of us have to choose between listening and making eye contact.

It's important to remember that, like all people, the skills and abilities of autistic people vary a lot. Things like sickness, hunger, stress, fatigue, being in a new environment or with new people can all make it difficult to do things that might otherwise be possible.

## What Does It Mean?

# NEURODIVERSITY



Being autistic means that you see the world in a different way than most people do. Because you see things differently, things that make sense to you might not make a lot of sense to the people around you, and things that make sense to them might not make very much sense to you. Because the way you focus your attention is different, you notice things that other people miss out on, and you overlook some things that they think are "obvious." Your autism diagnosis is an explanation for why this happens so often.

It also explains why it can be difficult for you to fit in with groups of other people. Because you see the world very differently from the people around you, it isn't easy for you to understand them, or for them to understand

you. When the world doesn't make sense to you in the same way as it does to them, it can be frustrating, and lead to a lot of problems.

You may have noticed that some things you like doing, other people find boring. You might enjoy spending hours doing things that most other people would give up on after a few minutes. Some people might consider the things you focus on to be a waste of time, but others may value your ability to maintain such an intense focus. But what's important to you is what counts.

Your senses may work differently than those of the people around you. You probably enjoy some kinds of lights or patterns, sounds, or textures that other people around you don't notice, and there may be other kinds of noises, feelings or smells that you can't stand, that don't seem to bother anyone else.

Sometimes, your different way of seeing the world can help you solve problems more quickly or efficiently than other people would be able to. And problems that are simpler for most people to solve may take you a lot of time and effort. Your different way of seeing and processing the world around you means that you will be good at different kinds of things. But because your abilities, strengths and weaknesses are unusual, some people will try to convince you that your way of seeing and doing things is the wrong way, and theirs is the right way. This should not be the case.



The differences in how you see the world may make things harder for you sometimes, and it may make it harder for you to understand other people and harder for them to understand you, but that doesn't make you wrong and them right. Just because most people see the world in a particular way doesn't make their way the right way. Sometimes, your perspective will be more accurate and lead to more direct, efficient solutions than theirs.

Despite this, there will be times when other people try to force you to do things or look at things in the "normal" way. When people don't have the patience to try and understand the way your own brain naturally works, and try to force you to think and behave in a way that is alien to you, this leads to conflict. There is a reason that your brain works the way that it does, and trying to force it to behave like a "normal" brain is not helpful, and can often be quite harmful.

Because a lot of things that are easier for most people can be very challenging for you, sometimes it might work out that the advice or perspective of someone who is not autistic may help you understand something that had been confusing you, and make things easier for you. But if the advice they offer just won't work for you, then it's ok to decline it. When others respect and understand that your brain works differently and you have different needs, your life will be a bit easier. When others disrespect your differences and try to force you to do things their way, life will be a lot harder for everyone involved.

As an autistic person, you will often need to find your own unique way to get things done. And because your way might seem unusual or strange to

others, you may be called upon to defend your right to do things your own way. An official diagnosis of autism can be used to help show people why you need to do things differently. “Autism” is a simple word for your many differences that helps people understand why you might have different needs, interests or ways of being than they do.

When people understand and accept your autistic differences and needs, this creates an opportunity for you to be accepted for who you are, and to contribute your own unique ideas and perspectives. It may turn out that your different way of experiencing the world can help solve a problem in a way that no one ever thought of before! Sometimes, the autistic perspective is exactly what is needed to solve a challenging problem, complete a difficult task, or make the world a better place.

## Am I Disabled?

Yes. In today's world, autism is a disability, because society does not always provide enough support to autistic people. There are not enough safe, quiet places for us to retreat to when our brains and senses get overwhelmed. Not enough people understand autism. Many people will not give us the things we need, or let us get to the places we need to go, because we seem strange to them. As long as society fails to support autistic people in these and other ways, autism will remain a disability.

“Disability” is a social construct. It is something that society uses to categorize us, not something that is part of our bodies or brains. Society *disables* a particular group of people when that group cannot access things the rest of society takes for granted. Because most people are not autistic, and do not understand our needs, society disables autistic people.

For example, people who use wheelchairs are disabled by society because many buildings do not have ramps or elevators. Deaf people are disabled by presentations without sign language interpreters, shows without captions, and instructions that are spoken but not written down. Blind

people are disabled by buildings that do not allow guide dogs, signs without Braille writing, and when spoken instructions are not provided. People are disabled by society when they are not given the supports they need, or not allowed to use the supports they have, and when they cannot get to things they need to do or places they need to go.

Deafness is a disability because most people can hear. If deaf people were in the majority, society would be set up to support their needs. Things would be written down instead of spoken or recorded, and almost everyone would know sign language. Hearing people would be disabled in such a society, because most people would not understand, for example, hearing people's need for others to speak quietly indoors.

Similarly, if most people had no legs and used wheelchairs to get around, they would not be disabled because society would be set up to serve their needs. Access ramps would be everywhere, and furniture, vehicles and everything else would be designed for wheelchair users. A person with legs would be disabled in such a world, because they would not fit into small spaces that were designed for people without legs.

This is how disability is created by society. The majority sets up and designs the buildings, vehicles, services, etc. that work best for *their* bodies and brains. People with very different brains and bodies don't get to access things that other people take for granted. This is how ableism--discrimination against the disabled--is built into our communities.

Autism is a disability, but this doesn't mean that autistic people are damaged or broken. It means that we live in a world that wasn't designed for us. It was designed with other people in mind, people who don't have the same needs that we do. Because not many people understand or accept autism, most places don't provide support for autistic people. But that can change.

It takes a lot of work to get society to provide accommodations for people with disabilities, but it can happen when groups of disabled people work together. Many places have wheelchair ramps and elevators, video captioning and Braille signs, because disabled people along with many people without disabilities worked together to demand the supports that they needed. Someday, this can happen for autistic supports, too.

In the meantime, we can improve our own lives by setting up our own homes and workplaces with the supports that work best for us. We can keep stim toys around for when we are understimulated, and have quiet, dark places to escape to for when we are overstimulated. We can decorate our spaces with things that help our thoughts flow more freely, and use whatever kinds of lists, calendars or devices that help us organize our thoughts.

We can educate the people closest to us about how autism affects us. We can find ways to explain how they can help us meet our needs when we can't meet those needs on our own. We can find ways to tell them how to not hurt us. Not everyone will understand, and when we need to go out beyond our support circle into unfamiliar territory, life can still be pretty

hard. But with the support of our loved ones, and with spaces that we design to meet our own needs, we can make it more difficult for society to disable us from doing what we want to do with our lives.



# Am I Okay?

AM I OKAY? AM I REALLY *THAT* DIFFERENT?  
SOMETIMES I STRUGGLE. DO OTHERS STRUGGLE?  
WEAKNESSES? STRENGTHS?  
EVERYONE HAS THEIR  
STRENGTHS AND  
WEAKNESSES.  
WHAT MAKES ME  
DIFFERENT? ARE  
THERE OTHERS  
LIKE ME? I  
WANT TO BE  
ME, AND FIND  
WHAT WORKS  
FOR ME. I AM  
UNIQUE, AND  
THAT IS OKAY. I  
MAY HAVE  
DIFFERENT NEEDS, BUT I AM NOT A BURDEN.



Albert Einstein once said, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” No one is perfect; people don’t work that way. Flaws are much of what makes us ourselves.

Autistic people view things differently. We can see things that people without autism rarely notice, or see differently. Different people with

different ways of thinking can work together to cause big change in the world. Without many different styles of thinking, some of the world's biggest problems will never be solved. Autism is just another way of thinking that can be used to make the world a more beautiful, diverse place.

You are, at times, struggling in a world that does not think about some of your needs. You are also struggling with people who do not understand your needs. Whatever your needs are, you are not a burden.

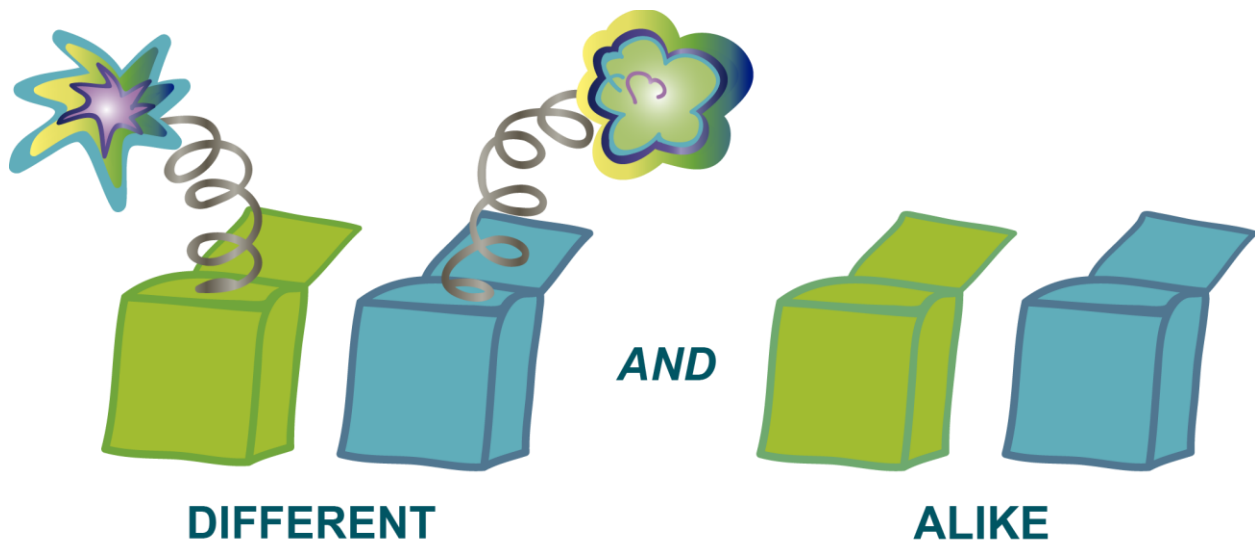
You have your strengths and weaknesses, and these weaknesses will sometimes get in your way. You need to find what works for you.

You are different, and that is okay. You are a unique individual, made up of your experiences and perspective in life. You are also an individual who is able to have a wonderful and meaningful life.



## More Alike Than Different

Many Autistics may seem different than other people, but we are actually more similar to others than you might think. Autistic people can have the same hopes, dreams, wants and needs as others. Sometimes we have the same interests as non-autistic people. But there are also a few differences between us and others.



Autistic people have some of the same hopes and dreams as non-autistic people. We may want to go to college, to have a job, or to live on our own. Autistics sometimes need help from others, either in typical ways (like

needing help to reach a high shelf) or unusual ways (like needing help from an iPad to speak). Autistic people want respect, too, like everyone else.

Autistic people share the same kinds of interests as non-autistics. Some Autistics enjoy arts and crafts, writing, fashion, riding bikes, TV, reading, dancing, or swimming. Autistics can also prefer one topic, the same way non-Autistic people do, but sometimes more so.

However, sometimes an autistic person might not like to talk with large groups of people, or might be afraid of talking to people they don't know very well. Another thing that can be difficult for Autistics is learning to understand jokes, sarcasm, and "figures of speech". We can get confused when people don't use words in a way that we are able to understand.

There can be a lot of things alike between kids who are non-Autistics and others who are Autistic. There can also be things that make us different from each other. Non-Autistics and Autistics alike can have the same or similar goals, dreams, wishes, or hopes as each other. Autistics and non-autistics have more similarities than differences. Just because Autistics are different does NOT mean that we are "abnormal". We are simply another kind of normal.

## Positives



Being autistic is not always easy. Sometimes, sights or sounds are too intense. Other times, being in groups of people can be really scary. However, even though autism can make some parts of life harder, it can make other things wonderful!

For example, I think being autistic has allowed me to think ideas through more thoroughly.

Other autistic people may think this as well. Also, contrary to popular belief, many autistic people learn empathy and compassion *because* of our autism and not in spite of it. When I was younger, many of my friends had developmental disabilities too, and I believe that being autistic let me understand them better. Other autistic people feel this way, too.

In medical terms, autism is a “neurological disability.” This means that autistic minds are unusual. Our brain cells connect to each other in different

ways than they do in non-autistic brains. In other words, being autistic affects how we experience everything. We learn, see, and have feelings in ways most people do not. We can see things and talk about things in a way that only autistic individuals can.

Autistic people can also enjoy some sensory inputs more than our non-autistic peers. Many autistic people also have “sensory processing disorders.” This means that while some autistic people hate certain sounds or textures, we may also find other sounds or textures exceptionally pleasing.

For example, the feeling of soft fabrics touching my skin is something I find exceptionally pleasing. I am also able to use music to play over unpleasant noises, and to stop paying attention on purpose when socializing becomes too stressful for me. Some autistic people also like specific things a lot: these things can be flavors, smells, sights, touches, or sounds. Because of this, some autistics enjoy and experience things that other people rarely notice.

Also, autistic people can have “special interests”: this means that some autistic people have a really big interest in a topic that non-autistic individuals would not care about as much. For example, I love gymnastics. I enjoy watching it, but I also like learning facts about it and learning how it has changed over time. I also learn about the best gymnasts who have ever lived. I love gymnastics with unusual focus because I am autistic.

I wish when I found out about my autism diagnosis I knew there were good things about being autistic. I wish I knew that being autistic allows me to view things differently, and that this difference is a beautiful thing. I wish I knew that my “nervous habits” were just things I did to calm myself down. I wish I knew that being autistic gave me my passion for gymnastics. I wish I was able to embrace my autism from the moment I first learned about it, and that is why I want to help people who read this do the same.

# Am I The Only One?

In a word, no. The generally accepted statistic is that 1 in 88 people are autistic, and it's recently been suggested that the true number might be as high as 1 in 50<sup>2</sup>. You may feel like you're the only one right now, but in fact, there are many autistic people all over the place.

Many autistic people lead similar lives to the people around them. It's a common myth that you can tell by looking if someone has autism. More often than not, that's not true. Some autistic people once diagnosed tell people about their diagnosis and learn that some of their friends are autistic, too.



Unfortunately, the media usually profiles autistic children, leading people to think that autistic adults do not exist. Some people may have heard of Temple Grandin, but it's uncommon to hear about other autistic adults. In fact, studies suggest that adult autistics are just as common as child autistics.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr065.pdf>

Autistic adults have started to use the internet to call attention to themselves. If you spend some time looking online, you'll find blogs and online pages by adults all over the autism spectrum. Many adults discuss their own experiences and autism in our culture.

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Karlas-ASD-Page/155369821204141> and <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Rethinking-Autism/393857571292> are just two of the many Facebook pages written by autistic adults. In short, there's plenty of us out there!

## Where Are The Other People Like Me?



You might want to connect with other Autistic people; if so, there are lots of places where you can find us.

You can look for a local Autistic Self Advocacy Network chapter if one exists in your area (you can find out if there is one at <http://autisticadvocacy.org/chapters/>). If one is close enough to you, contact them about meetings or events. There are also more general organizations for disability advocacy, like ADAPT ([www.adapt.org/](http://www.adapt.org/)), and it is good to be involved in the broader disability community.



If you are in college, check to see if your school has a disability club. Clubs and student organizations are a pretty good place to start. Some schools have chapters of Autistic or disability organizations. Also, there is the option of starting your own.

In the last decade, social media has been important for connecting the Autistic community. Many organizations and interest groups have appeared online. We recommend that if you use social media, you should connect with people online. It also has the benefit of allowing you to be basically anywhere in the world with an Internet connection, and still be in contact with the community.

Another potential option is to attend a conference, though this has its limits, as most conferences about autism tend to be for professionals. Also sensory and social issues may come into play in a conference environment. That being said, there is a conference called Autreat.

Run by Autism Network International (ANI), Autreat is an Autism conference designed for Autistics. It does its best to be an Autistic friendly conference. ANI attempts to limit things that would make a conference a horrible experience to some. What it offers is:

- *Small college campus with plenty of outdoor space to get away and be alone or with friends.*
- *Smoke-free, perfume-free environment*
- *Opportunity to explore autistic social contacts, if desired*
- *Respect for the choice to be left alone, if preferred*

- *Focus on positive aspects of autism*
- *Child care for autistic and non-autistic children ages 4 and up*
- *Three days of continuous immersion in an autistic-friendly environment*

(Source: <http://www.autreat.com/autreat.html>)

If you are interested and feel you can afford to go, Autreat is good place to go connect with others.

Last but not least, the Autism NOW Center website ([www.autismnow.org](http://www.autismnow.org)) features blogs, webinars, videos and newsletter articles written by autistic individuals.

# What Are My Rights?

As an autistic adult, you have legal rights protecting you. Your rights let you be a full part of society, as much as neurotypicals take for granted.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is one of the first pieces of legislation to guarantee rights to people with disabilities. It states that no program receiving federal money is permitted to exclude people with disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was passed into law in 1990, is a civil rights law that covers employment, public services, public accommodations and telecommunications.

“An individual with a disability is defined by the ADA as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment. The ADA does not specifically name all of the impairments that are covered.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>

The ADA ensures the access and usability of telecommunications. People who make telephones have to make sure that people with disabilities can use them. These amendments are so that people with disabilities will be able to use telephones, cell phones, pagers, call-waiting, and operator services that were often inaccessible to many users with disabilities.

The ADA also ensures access and usability of public transportation; it further ensures that people with disabilities get a fair chance at being hired for jobs they are capable of, that they will be able to understand public announcements, and that they will be able to access public accommodations (like restaurants, hotels, and taxis).

The Fair Housing Act (1988) protects your right to own a home or rent an apartment, by making discrimination “on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, disability, familial status and national origin” illegal. The Act makes landlords accommodate tenants with disabilities: if you are an autistic adult, and need accommodations to move into a new residence, you may request accommodations from the landlord.

You shouldn't simply assume that others will understand right away that you have autism, nor can you assume they understand your routines or way of doing things. If you have communication difficulties, you understandably might hesitate before asking for an accommodation, but that accommodation will help you when rules or instructions are given out in the future.

If you need an accommodation, you must make that clear to the relevant person: your employer, your teachers, or your landlord. If you do not ask for an accommodation, then other people won't know what you need. If you are discriminated against, you have the right to file a lawsuit with the Equal Employment Opportunity Coalition (or EEOC), an organization that enforces anti-discrimination laws.

A good further resource on disability rights law is “A Guide to Disability Rights Laws” at ada.gov: <http://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>



## Resources



There are many websites and organizations that provide information for children, adults and families, ranging from practical suggestion to research articles.

Some organizations focus on a cure for autism. We believe that accepting autistic people for who we are and focusing on supports and services is most effective; therefore, we recommend you focus your time on these websites, instead.

Some non-autistics advocate for a cure for autism. Some believe that the existence of autism is a tragedy. Some conclude that autistic people should not be born. If you encounter a person or organization that holds this view, we believe there is no reason to give them a second look. There are plenty

of organizations that can provide help and information while still respecting Autistic rights and dignity.

One of the best websites on which to find general information is Autism NOW (<http://autismnow.org/>). Autism NOW has information that can be used in many parts of life, from employment to home life to social interaction. One resource, “An Autistic View of Employment,”<sup>4</sup> focuses on the good and challenging parts of being an autistic working adult.

Another good informational website is the Autism Society (<http://www.autism-society.org>). The Autism Society has an advisory panel with 100% Autistic members, and their website written in plain language is very helpful. The section on legal rights should not be missed.

The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) is an excellent advocacy organization for Autistic adults. ASAN is a strong voice for disability rights, meaning that it believes autistic people should always have a voice in any decision that affects them - ASAN’s mission statement is “Nothing about us, without us”. ASAN has written several publications to help Autistic people deal with employment discrimination, isolation, and sexuality.

Some local chapters of ASAN can help with hearings. Chapters are all over the country, from California to New York. Some chapters focus on holding meetup groups to create Autistic space, while others are more focused on advocacy.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://autismnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Autistic-View-Of-Employment-Edited.pdf>

There are also federal and state entities designed to help autistic adults, such as your state's developmental disabilities council. You can find your state's council here: <http://www.nacdd.org/about-nacdd/councils-on-developmental-disabilities.aspx>. Some state councils may be able to assist in extreme situations; however, councils are not expected to provide individualized services to people.

There are more services for Autistic adults than ever before. However, with our advocacy efforts, more and better services can exist in the future.



## What Does My Future Look Like?

**H.O.P.E.F.U.L.**

Receiving an Autism spectrum diagnosis as an adult can provide you with a great sense of relief and understanding. It can also bring to mind many questions as to what you should expect in your future. The good news is that your future is positive.

Your full participation and pro-active approach toward your own life path can ensure a promising, **H.O.P.E.F.U.L** future!

Be **H**onest.

What do you *want* your future to look like? Are you happy with your life as it is, or would you like to make changes?

Where would you like to see yourself?

- In six months?
- In one year?
- In five years?
- In ten years?

Being upfront about your particular needs, seeking help where help is needed, and taking control of your own success, health, and well-being can only help you to create the future you desire.

## **Observe Yourself in Your Environment.**

Experiencing sensory overload or too much sensory input - sights, sounds or other feelings that are overwhelming - is a common problem for Autistic people. Check in with your body on a regular basis by asking, “*What works for me in this moment?*” and/or “*What isn’t working for me in this moment?*”

**Helpful Exercise:** Stop, take a deep breath, and observe the senses, one by one, in order to find the cause of discomfort.

- Hearing: are sounds in my environment causing me anxiety?
- Sight: are flickering fluorescent bulbs distracting me from my work?
- Taste: are the foods I’m eating supportive of my health and goals?
- Smell: is the smell of a co-worker’s perfume overwhelming?
- Touch: are the fabrics I’m wearing causing my skin irritation?

## **Be *Pro*-active.**

The more you practice being in touch with your body and discovering your own needs in each moment, the quicker you’ll become at meeting those needs or having them met. *Empower* yourself by taking pro-active steps toward your environment being acceptable.

Try to: keep earplugs or headphones handy. Replace overhead lights with inexpensive floor lamps. Find pleasant foods to eat for breakfast. Ask your office manager to enforce a scent-free environment. Only buy clothing that suits your skin. These are all examples of pro-active steps to ensure a happier you.

### **Educate Yourself and Others.**

The misconceptions attached to the Autism spectrum are simply due to a lack of awareness. Who better to voice the truth and promote understanding than those in our own community? We can all be advocates.

### **Focus your energy on your strengths and talents.**

Autism has given many of us the gift of dedication. Personal success is promising when our dedicated focus is placed on our personal strengths, talents, and special interests.

### **Utilize Available Resources.**

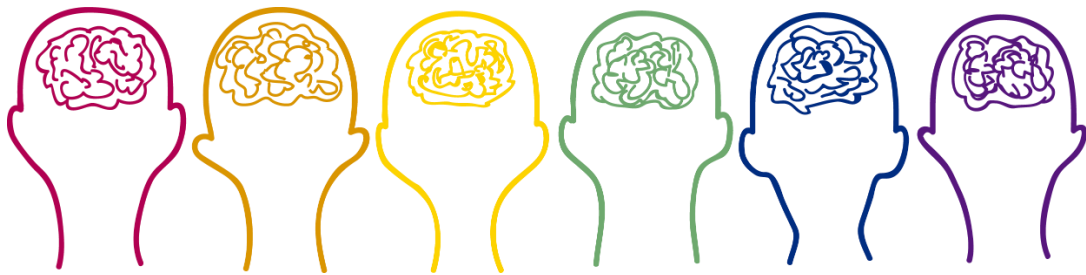
Do you prefer group outings? Informative books? Online forums? Conferences? Explore and find what options work best for you, then utilize those resources for your advantage.

If you have an idea, share it! Many of us in the Autistic community are good at 'thinking outside the box'. Just as there are many resources available to us, we can also create our own to share with the community.

**Live!**

Bottom line: your life is yours to live, so *live it!*

Only you can know what is best for you. By being **h**onest with yourself and others about your needs, **o**bserving yourself in your environment and being **p**ro-active about meeting your own needs, **e**ducating yourself and others on autism and what it means to you, **f**ocusing on your strengths and talents, **u**tilizing available resources, and **l**iving your life to the fullest, you gain the power of creating a successful, fulfilling, **H.O.P.E.F.U.L** future!



## Glossary:

Neurotypical: A person is *neurotypical* (NT) if the way her brain works is basically the same as the majority of people around her, or is regarded as more or less “normal” by the standards of the society she lives in.

Neurodivergent: A *neurodivergent* person is someone whose brains functions in some way that is significantly different from the brains of the majority of people in their society.

Overstimulated: When someone senses something that is too much, or very unpleasant – like a bright light, a disgusting smell, or a repetitive noise – they can become *overstimulated*. This means that they have trouble focusing on other things, because the experience is too attention-catching.

Stimming: *Stimming*, short for *self-stimulatory behaviors*, is something everybody does. To *stim* means to do something with your body because it feels good, is calming, or makes it easier to focus on other things. Some common *stims* include tapping your feet, feeling your face or head, and flapping.

Understimulated: When someone is not experiencing enough sensory input – when they are not seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, or touching enough things – they can become *understimulated*. This means that they have trouble focusing on other things, because they are bored or unhappy.

## Contributors:

Iliana Rotker-Lynn

Jessica Hatch

Lucas

Marcie

Madeline Jarboe

Anabelle Listic

Connor Haas

Allison Kimball

Catherine M.

Nathan Goodman

Justin McLaughlin

Hayes Kaufman

Brandy

Nightingale

Samantha Lee

Matt Young

**Iliana Rotker-Lynn** is a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a double major in Theater and Women's Studies. She was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in middle school but prefers to identify as simply being on the autism spectrum. She enjoys theater, dance, writing, and playing with her cats.

**Jessica Hatch** is a philosophy major at Tulane University. She was diagnosed with autism as a child.

**Lucas** is a student at the Macaulay Honors College at Lehman College majoring in Computer Graphics and minoring in Japanese. He was diagnosed with Autism in infancy. He was a participant in the first Autism Campus Inclusion project.

**Marcie** has been involved with the on-line autistic community since 2003 and is a two-time presenter at Autreat. Her interests include natural history, neuroscience, gardening, and cats.

**Madeline Jarboe** is an LGBTQ and disability activist who lives in Tucson, Arizona.

**Anabelle Listic** is an autistic freelance graphic designer, professional photographer, artist, and visual accessibility advocate. She creates stylish, functional advocacy and life tools for autistic, visually inclined, people who are searching for creative, quick, alternative ways to communicate. Anabelle is also a mentor, blogger, and has a video series encouraging stimming, titled "Way To Stim Wednesday". She works to be a part of positive change to help make this world a more accessible, visual, sensory friendly place for autistic people. You can visit Anabelle's website, [anabellelistic.com](http://anabellelistic.com) to learn more.

**Connor Haas** is a 22 year old fifth year senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, majoring in history and political science. He was diagnosed with Asperger's as a young child and has other people in his family with autism. Connor interns for a United States Senator for the state of Wisconsin and his interests include politics, sports, weight lifting, and playing guitar.

**Allison Kimball** is a 16 year old sophomore in high school. She was diagnosed with Autism when she was 3 years old. One of the things that set her apart when she was younger was the fact that she barely spoke, but could hear every word spoken. Now she loves to write because it helps her understand and imagine what happens in the real world around her "NOW"!

**Catherine M.** is a married ex-doctor and social worker with a cat. She figured out she had autism while she was reading about her nephew's diagnosis. Autism made sense of past relationship struggles and the loss of her profession due to not being able to deal with workplace politics.

**Nathan Goodman** is a senior fellow and Lysander Spooner Research Scholar in Abolitionist Studies at the Center for a Stateless Society. He is also an undergraduate who studies mathematics at the University of Utah. Nathan was diagnosed with Asperger's as a young child.

**Justin McLaughlin** is a college graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. He is still looking for work, preferably in the journalism field, but for now contributes work to



ASAN. He was introduced to ASAN by a family friend who runs a local autistic support group.

After being diagnosed with Autism in 2003, **Hayes Kaufman** has made great effort to involve himself in the Autistic community and to be a source of advocacy for those still struggling with their own diagnosis. He considers his Autism a strength and hopes to one day be able to successfully combine it with his professional life. Working with the Autistic Self Advocacy Network has only helped to further that goal.

**Brandy Nightingale** was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder, in 2010 at the age of thirty-five. An entrepreneur, visual effects coordinator on feature films, retired stand-up comedian, and writer, she recently penned a book, *Everything's Hunky Dory: A Memoir*, and resides in beautiful Ojai, California with her husband, three rescued dogs, and two happy hens.

**Samantha Lee** was diagnosed with PDD-NOS when she was three years old. She is currently a junior at Auburn University pursuing a degree in Biomedical Sciences with minors in Spanish and Psychology. In the future, Samantha hopes to become a pediatric occupational therapist who specializes in working with children with developmental disabilities.

**Matt Young** is an Autistic adult originally from Davis, California and now living in Seattle, Washington. He was diagnosed in adulthood, in 2005, and found tremendous support and community through the neurodiversity movement. He currently serves as chapter leader of the Washington State Chapter of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network.