

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

through the autism lens

While working in a harm reduction service, you might find that it's mostly focused on reducing one specific harm, while forgetting the depth and complexity of all the issues that affect people using, and working in, harm reduction services. One area that is often overlooked are the unique needs and strengths of **autistic** people (and **neurodivergent** people in general).

NEURODIVERGENT

Having a brain that is built significantly differently from most others.

I am one of those autistic people that is, every day, trying to exist in spaces that are unnecessarily painful and overwhelming for me to be in. The settings of harm reduction services, due to their nature, can be especially challenging. Although this is written from my own personal perspective as an autistic peer worker working in a harm reduction setting, these perspectives can also be useful in better supporting autistic service users in many other health care settings.

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

I am one autistic person and we are all different. The best way to help me is not to assume, but to approach me with respect and genuine curiosity, and to ask what I need in order to be comfortable. A little understanding goes a long way to helping me flourish. This is something I am personally very open and comfortable talking about (only if I have the energy to do so at that moment) but this might not be true for every autistic person. Sometimes we are just trying to survive the day with enough energy to make it back home to recharge!

MY AUTISM STRENGTHS

- Autism gives me a strong sense of fairness and justice and the tenacity to fight against injustice
- I can absorb and retain huge quantities of information which allows me to learn new skills quickly, and repeat them consistently in the future. I can also pull parts together from all of this information to help me solve new problems
- My creativity allows me to pull from all this information to come up with novel solutions to problems (out of the box thinking)
- Being able to absorb and recall information on a broad range of topics gives me a lot to talk about, so I can more quickly build relationships with clients and coworkers with diverse backgrounds and interests
- I am very honest and straightforward so people know where they stand with me, and they can trust me not to gossip, which also helps to build positive relationships
- I enjoy trying to figure out how things work, and I can see underlying patterns and systems, which helps me find ways to improve our services that might have been overlooked
- Being able to hyperfocus in an emergency allows me to perform critical life-saving tasks without having my attention drawn away by the surrounding chaos
- I am excellent at dry-humour because of my ability to deadpan. At the very least I can make myself laugh!

THINGS THAT ARE DIFFICULT FOR ME	THINGS THAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP
Hypersensitive (more sensitive) to bright lights and especially lights that are cooler (more white) colour temperatures.	Dim lighting or use task lighting rather than brighter overhead lights. Use bulbs with warmer (more yellow) colour temperatures if possible. Understand that I need to wear tinted lenses indoors.
Too much talking or people talking too fast will cause sensory overload and make it more difficult to process information.	Talk a bit slower and pause between phrases so I have time to catch up and absorb what you are saying. Breaks allow my brain to process.
Prolonged eye contact causes me a great deal of discomfort. I can usually manage quick glances.	Understand that if I am looking away, it's because I am really trying to listen. I will verbally demonstrate understanding.
I don't have the best short term memory (but I have great long term memory!)	Write down clear, step-by-step, instructions for me, rather than giving them to me verbally if possible.
Filtering out what is an important sound from background noise is challenging.	Reduce the amount of ambient noise if possible (for example turning music down or off, if there are other noises happening at the same time).
I get stuck on questions or tasks that are too open-ended or vague.	Be specific when asking questions or giving me a task.
Despite best efforts I will sometimes get to a state of sensory overload which can end in a shutdown or meltdown .	If possible allow me to move to an area that has less sensory input (less bright, less noise, less talking etc). Having a break helps me avoid shutdown or meltdown .
It can be difficult for me to infer the meaning behind what people are saying if they are being vague or there is subtext to what they are saying.	Be direct and clear and remember that I take things more literally than most. Be open and honest and direct with me and know that I will do the same for you.
Sometimes I can hyperfocus on a task. During those times it might be difficult to get my attention.	Starting by saying my name. This will usually help shift my attention back to you.
I need to be able to move around and stim to self regulate. Sometimes this may look or sound odd or cause people to think that I'm fidgeting and not paying attention. Some stims you won't even notice because they are so subtle.	Allow me to keep doing these things as I need them for various functions such as regulating my anxiety or to concentrate on a task. If I am stimming while we are talking or during a meeting it is because it is helping me to pay close attention and process what you are saying.
I am hypersensitive to touch.	Don't touch me unexpectedly as I get very startled. I do like a tight hug though as long as we both consent to it first.
I am hypersensitive to texture.	Certain textures are very uncomfortable to me. Those might not seem like a big deal to you, but understand that touching these things affects me very negatively even if they are barely noticeable to you.

Knowing more about autism will in itself raise awareness of potential difficulties for autistic people in the environment of the service. Increased awareness will also help staff focus on the strengths of autistic service users. These are a few helpful things that can be done for autistic (and other neurodivergent) people using the service:

- Design spaces with sound dampening in mind
- Design spaces so they have fewer sources of ambient noise
- Avoid strong scents in the environment
- Avoid bright lighting and make lighting dimmable if possible. Use warmer bulbs in light fixtures
- Don't use too many bright colours in the space or on printed materials. Still have colour because it is fun! Just use more muted (pastel) colours
- Have spaces for individual people that are further away from groups that offer more privacy and fewer distractions
- Have a designated private calming space (sensory room) where service users can go if they feel overloaded

Again please don't assume that what I have provided here will work for everyone, it's still best to tailor to individual needs as much as possible!

RESOURCE LINKS

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY GUIDE FOR AUTISM

<https://www.yorku.ca/health/lab/ddmh/am-help/>

This guide was written to provide information about the mental health needs of Autistic adults. It was developed in consultation with Autistic adults and parents and siblings of Autistic adults.

EMBRACE AUTISM (SUPER POWERS)

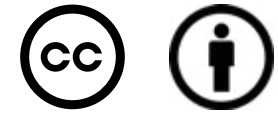
<https://embrace-autism.com/super-powers/>

This website is created by autistic people and has a lot of useful information and research. This page describes the unusual talents, skills, qualities, and advantages that set autistic people apart in positive ways and allow us to make unique contributions to society.

DIFFERENT MINDS (GLOSSARY)

<https://differentminds.scot/glossary/>

This is the Scottish Government's excellent website about autism, which was written in partnership with autistic people. This page lists definitions of all the **bolded** words in this document, plus additional terms and their definitions.



This tool is part of the **Where We Are At:
Provincial Peer Support Worker Training Curriculum**

Please visit <https://peerconnectbc.ca> to learn more

Graphic design by Jeseye Tanner

Written by Millie Schulz

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