



Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the idea that brain differences, like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, are natural variations of human thinking rather than disorders that need to be "fixed." Autistic people experience the world differently, which can sometimes make social interactions challenging. If you want to be a supportive friend, it helps to understand and respect these differences.

WHAT AUTISM ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

Autism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), affects how a person communicates, interacts with others, and experiences the world.

No two autistic people are the same, but here are some common traits:

Social Communication Differences

They might struggle with reading facial expressions, understanding sarcasm, or knowing when to start or end a conversation.

Need for Routine

Unexpected changes can be stressful and disorienting.

Sensory Sensitivities

Loud noises, bright lights, certain textures, or strong smells can feel overwhelming.

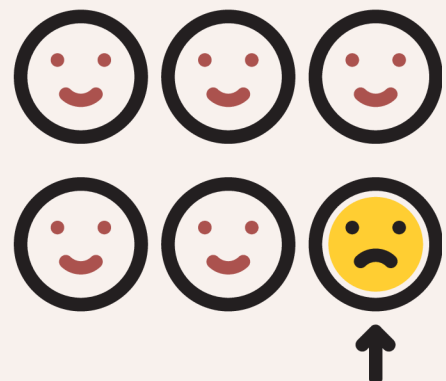
Repetitive Behaviors and Interests

They may have deep, focused interests in specific topics or engage in self-soothing behaviors like rocking or fidgeting.

WHY SOCIALIZING CAN BE HARD

Autistic people often experience challenges in traditional social settings. Small talk might feel pointless, group settings can be overwhelming, and social cues that come naturally to neurotypicals might not be intuitive.

If your autistic friend prefers one-on-one hangouts, avoids eye contact, or needs time to recharge after socializing, it's not personal. They just process things differently.



OUTDATED THERAPY APPROACHES THAT HARM AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Some therapy methods have historically tried to "normalize" autistic behavior rather than support autistic individuals as they are. These include:

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

This approach focuses on making autistic people appear "normal" by discouraging natural behaviors like stimming. Many autistic adults report it was stressful and harmful.

Social Skills Training

While learning communication strategies can be helpful, some programs teach autistic people to suppress their natural ways of interacting instead of fostering genuine connections.

Forcing Eye Contact

Many autistic people find eye contact uncomfortable or even painful, so expecting it can cause unnecessary stress.

Quiet Hands

Discouraging stimming (like fidgeting or rocking) removes a coping tool that helps autistic people self-regulate.

HOW TO BE A SUPPORTIVE FRIEND

Be Clear and Direct

Avoid vague language, sarcasm, or passive-aggressive hints. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Respect Their Boundaries

If your friend prefers texts over calls, doesn't like being touched, or needs alone time after socializing, respect that.



Be Flexible with Plans

Sudden changes can be overwhelming, so try to plan in advance and give a heads-up if something shifts.

Accept Stimming

Fidgeting, rocking, or other repetitive movements help autistic people regulate emotions. Don't shame or discourage it.

Choose Low-Sensory Environments

If you're planning a hangout, consider quieter places with less overwhelming stimuli.



BREAKING DOWN ABLEISM

Ableism is discrimination against disabled or neurodivergent people. It can show up in many ways, including:

Calling someone “high-functioning” or “low-functioning”

Autism is a spectrum, and these labels don't reflect a person's actual needs.

Treating Autism as Something to “Fix”

Discouraging stimming (like fidgeting or rocking) removes a coping tool that helps autistic people self-regulate.

Mocking Communication Differences

If someone struggles with sarcasm, small talk, or eye contact, it's not a joke. Be patient and meet them where they are.



BEING AN ALLY

Ableism is discrimination against disabled or neurodivergent people. It can show up in many ways, including:

Listening to what they need instead of assuming.

Adjusting your communication style if needed.

Standing up against ableism and speaking up when you see it.



If you're unsure how to support your friend, just ask. Chances are, they'll appreciate the effort more than anything else. True friendship isn't about making someone fit in—it's about making space for them to be themselves.