

behind the
smiles

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

- THE BASICS -



THE 'GOLDEN' GLOSSARY

What is ASD?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a **lifelong** condition that affects how an individual **perceives and interacts with the world**. As a **spectrum** condition, it **impacts each person differently**, with **unique strengths** and **varying support needs**. Many people view autism as a **key part of their identity**. It's important to note that autism is not an illness and doesn't require a 'cure'.

Identity-First Language

Many autistic people see autism as a fundamental part of who they are and how they perceive the world - **it's their normal**. As a result, most prefer **identity-first language**, like "**I am autistic**", rather than person-first language, such as "I have autism." It's similar to saying "I am British," not "I have British." That said, preferences vary, so it's always best to **ask the individual** how they prefer to be addressed.

Autism Spectrum

Visualising autism as a **web**, with traits on the outer edges, helps show how each individual's **unique combination of strengths and challenges** forms a personalised pattern. This highlights the **diversity** of autistic experiences.

Instead of using terms like 'low functioning' and 'high functioning,' which can invalidate both struggles and achievements, it's more accurate to refer to '**low support needs**' or '**high support needs**'.



HISTORY and GENDER DIFFERENCES

Autism, first documented in the 1940s, was long thought to be predominantly a **male condition** and thus initially **studied mainly in males**. Early male-to-female diagnosis ratios were believed to be as high as 10:1. Recent research suggests a closer ratio of 3:1, revealing that **autism in females has been historically underdiagnosed and misunderstood**. Over the last decade, advances have shown how autism presents differently in females, with **biological differences** and **diagnostic biases** contributing to this shift, improving recognition in females today.

MASKING



Autistic females more often engage in **masking** - consciously hiding their autistic traits by **mimicking neurotypical behaviours**. This includes rehearsing social interactions, suppressing stimming, and mimicking expressions and body language. While masking can help them fit in socially, it can be **exhausting** and lead to **burnout, anxiety, or depression**. This practice is also a key reason why many autistic females remain **undiagnosed longer than males**.

DIAGNOSIS

In the UK, the autism diagnostic process starts with a GP referral, followed by **screening** and a **detailed assessment** by a multi-disciplinary team using tools like **ADOS** and **ADI-R**. Given the **severely long NHS waiting times** - over 187,000 waiting as of mid-2024 - many face delayed support, **impacting education, employment, and mental health**. Although the **Right to Choose** scheme allows faster assessment through private providers, awareness, complexity, and costs limit its practicality for many.





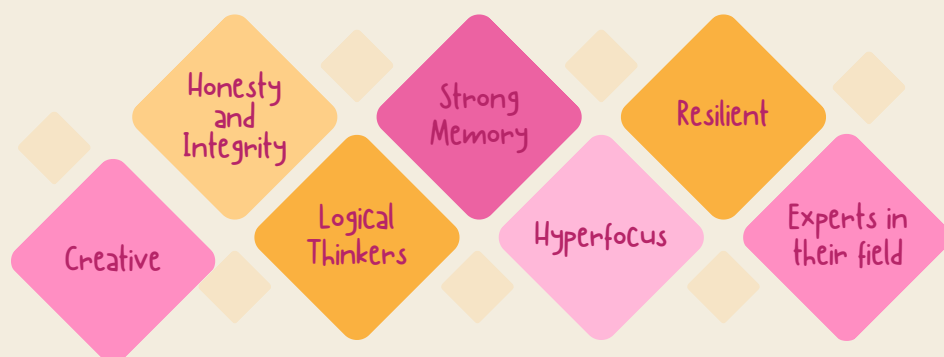
TRAITS



Each autistic individual possesses a **unique** set of traits, strengths, and quirks. According to diagnostic criteria, these may include **differences in social communication and interaction**, as well as **repetitive patterns** of behaviour, interests, or activities. Other common traits include **sensory sensitivities**, challenges with **emotional expression and processing** (including hyper-empathy), and **executive dysfunction** (like time-blindness). Recognising and valuing these characteristics can foster a more inclusive and understanding environment.

STRENGTHS

While ASD can present challenges, it also comes with unique **strengths**.



COMORBIDITIES

Autism often coexists with other conditions, known as **comorbidities**. **ADHD** is one of the most common, with estimates suggesting that 30-50% of autistic individuals also have ADHD. **Sensory processing differences** are also frequent, where individuals can be overly sensitive or under-responsive to stimuli like sound, light, or touch. Additionally, many autistic individuals experience **mental health challenges** such as anxiety and depression.

SUPPORTING AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS

01. Listen and Learn

Take the time to understand each individual's unique needs, preferences, and experiences. Actively listen without judgement or assumptions and educate yourself on neurodiversity to become a more supportive ally.

02. Provide Structure and Clarity

Autistic individuals often thrive with clear expectations and structured environments. Support them by offering consistent routines, visual schedules, and direct, explicit communication to reduce ambiguity and enhance understanding.

03. Harness Strengths

Understand an individual's strengths and create an environment that allows them to leverage these skills in both work and personal life. This support can help them thrive by aligning tasks with their natural talents, such as creativity or problem-solving, and providing flexibility to maximise their potential.

03. Advocate for Acceptance

Promote acceptance and understanding, not just awareness. Encourage others to see the strengths and perspectives neurodivergent individuals bring to the community, and work towards creating an inclusive, supportive culture.



LEARN MORE

To learn more about ASD and neurodiversity, visit **Behind the Smiles** - a community built to educate, support, and empower, regardless of neurotype.

We provide **resources**, **share experiences**, and offer **guidance** to foster acceptance of all ways of thinking. By raising awareness and breaking down barriers, we create a **safe, non-judgmental space** for growth.

Behind the Smiles **empowers** individuals to build **confidence**, **embrace** their neurodivergent identities, and **connect** with a supportive, inclusive community.

Explore our content and join us in supporting all minds at **BehindTheSmiles.co.uk**.

