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Autism

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About me & this project

Hi, I'm Abiola. I'm a nonbinary queer autistic person in my early 30s. I studied psychology and neuroscience in college and am currently in graduate school to become a clinical social worker/therapist.

I used to tell myself, "Everyone knows about autism now, surely, it's 2024." Turns out I was wrong. We sometimes complain that people are not accommodating autistic people, and autistic loved ones aren't helping much either. I believe that one of the reasons is the lack of information.

There are simply not enough resources from autistic people, so many people hold beliefs, myths, and opinions about autism and autistic individuals that are inaccurate.

I want to share this book with my friends, family, and hopefully, my future partner, so they can better understand me, my experiences, and how to offer support.

I hope that by reading this, you will learn how to better support and accommodate your autistic self or loved one.

The truth is that autism is disabling; it is a disability, and autistic people need support. There's no such thing as a high-functioning autistic person; we're barely functioning and have needs that require support and accommodations at work, school, relationships, in real life, and everywhere else!

Autism has no cure or medication, and it is a lifelong condition. What we need is support, understanding, patience, respect, compassion, and more kindness.

In this booklet, I aim to discuss certain autistic experiences, especially mine, and autistic traits as accurately as possible. While this resource may not cover every single detail you need, it is an excellent place to start. It can guide your research and help you learn more about autistic individuals. Just ensure you are gathering correct information from autistic individuals, not from experts who may not completely grasp the autistic experience.

I also provided people with the opportunity to ask me questions about autism and share myths, and beliefs, and I will be including responses in this booklet.

GET IN TOUCH

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What is Autism?



Most places describe autism as a serious and complex developmental and neurological disorder that affects how people socialize, communicate, and interact with others and the world around them.

I don't know how I feel about that definition, so I won't dwell on it. This is meant to be a simple cheat sheet for understanding autistic people.

A few things to note

1. Autism resides in the brain

It's how your brain develops. Some time ago, a therapist told me, "You are more than your autism." That's the worst thing you can tell an autistic person, as I am my autism; my autism is me. It's my brain, and without it, I wouldn't be the same person. My being autistic essentially defines me. It's what shapes my behaviours, personality, and how I perceive the world entirely.

2. Prefer to not be called "people with autism"

Autism isn't an accessory or a disease. I'm not a person with autism; I am an autistic person. It's my identity, and it's okay to be candid about that. The fear and shame surrounding it are fueled by ableism.

3. Impacted in ways you don't understand

There isn't enough accurate research because researchers don't engage enough with autistic individuals about their experiences.

4. Autism can be highly disabling

It's a disability because it affects one's quality of life and autonomy. Your brain essentially dictates all your decisions, and it's not about preference or choice. For instance, regarding introversion, I often explain that I'm not strictly an introvert or an extrovert. I fall somewhere on the scale in between because that's what my brain leans towards. Sensory difficulties and social challenges lead to emotional distress, making it easier and more comfortable to spend time alone. While I may desire to connect with others or explore, my brain imposes limitations.

Being autistic is not just missing social cues, literal thinking, inability to see the big picture and only focusing on the details, our need for routines, sensory processing issues, nonverbal phases, autistic burnout, meltdowns, shutdowns, special interests and so much more, being autistic is also what makes me a kinder person, it makes me extremely passionate about things and people, it makes me open/transparent in a world where people always have hidden motives, it makes me playful, very detailed and thoroughly, extremely consistent, dependable, trustworthy, observant, and an all-round intelligent person.

Everyone isn't a little autistic

One thing you're going to think as you read this is that "everyone's a little autistic" or "I might be a little autistic". First of all, there's no such thing as being a little or too autistic. Secondly, yes, these traits might be in everyone. The major difference is that for autistic people, these traits affect daily life (no special situation, just every single daily life activity), affect quality of life, and are so intense that it's very disabling, and cause so much physical and emotional pain.

It's important to understand that equating common traits to being "a little autistic" undermines the daily struggles and intense experiences of autistic individuals.

Making statements like "everyone's a little autistic" is as ableist and can seem disrespectful as making statements like "that's my OCD" just because you like being clean, or "Aren't we all a little depressed" when you're sad about missing your favourite show. OCD is a compulsive disorder that greatly affects the lives of people with the diagnosis. Depression, Autism, and OCD are not quirks and not jokes.

If everyone were a little autistic, the world would be better and sensory-friendly for autistic people, people would understand, accommodate, support, and accept autistic people. Autistic people won't be told to not be so honest, black and white, open, or sensitive.

If we all had a touch of autism, I guarantee the world would be a more empathetic and compassionate place.

It's fine to identify with certain traits and relate to some experiences, but not everyone is slightly autistic.

Let's be candid - there have been numerous instances in my life where I've acknowledged that autism has greatly impacted me and wished it was different. However, I understand that without my autism, I wouldn't be myself; it's an intrinsic part of who I am. I appreciate and accept myself, including my autism, as it significantly contributes to my identity.

Moving forward, it's essential to recognize that autistic individuals require support.

The autistic spectrum isn't a simple linear scale; there's no such thing as being "less" or "more" autistic. Regardless of the intensity or combination of traits, all autistic individuals need assistance.

Dispelling the notion of "high-functioning" autism is crucial. We are barely functioning, and labelling someone as "high-functioning" disregards their needs and impedes the necessary support. Moreover, this label can lead more autistic individuals to mask their true selves, which isn't conducive to their well-being.

**AUTISTIC PEOPLE
REQUIRE SUPPORT.**

**AUTISTIC PEOPLE ARE
DISABLED.**

Autism traits



Autistic individuals experience emotions very intensely due to scientific reasons, which I won't delve into. The autistic brain processes things differently compared to Allistic people (non-autistic individuals).

Let's look at some of the key differences between Autistic and Allistic people:

Excitement is overwhelming

I get physically ill, experiencing stomachaches and migraines. This heightened response occurs with various emotions like happiness, sorrow, and anxiety.

Emotions are way more intense

We are inherently sensitive beings.

Crush seems like love, but it's not

Developing a crush intensifies emotions to the point where it feels like love, presenting significant challenges in processing such intense feelings.

Autistic individuals often encounter difficulties with emotional regulation, finding it challenging to manage emotional distress triggered by seemingly minor issues, such as sensitivity to light, temperature, or bright environments.

As an autistic person, I experience heightened sensitivity to stimuli.

While something might mildly irritate non-autistic individuals, it can trigger intense anxiety for me.

We perceive and process everything intensely. Background noises that Allistic people easily ignore are as loud as direct conversations for autistic individuals. Our brains struggle to filter out stimuli efficiently, leading to constant processing and, consequently, perpetual fatigue.

Autistic people tend to experience confusion frequently. They also often face various communication challenges.

We inhabit a world that isn't just black and white; there are no clear rules on many matters. Allistic individuals rely on social norms, which are like a rule book that everyone seems to have except for autistic individuals.

As an autistic person, I crave information.

We require a wealth of information. Personally, I seek to understand the why, where, when, what, how, and other aspects, so I ask numerous questions until I feel satisfied with the information.

I find it difficult to respond to hypothetical questions when there's insufficient information available. When there are too many variables to consider, and I don't possess all the necessary information, providing a response becomes challenging. That's why I tend to give detailed explanations.

Many people have criticized me for being overly verbose, for over explaining essentially, but it's solely because I want others to comprehend clearly. I need a substantial amount of information to grasp concepts and people, that's why I tend to provide extensive explanations and write in detail so that the other person can truly understand.

Next time your autistic loved one sends you a lengthy message, appreciate their willingness to be vulnerable with you because many times, we fear being too much for others and worry about not being accepted. This fear leads us to mask our true selves as well.

As an autistic person, I think in black & white.

Autistic individuals often have a tendency towards black-and-white thinking and take things literally. I've missed jokes, sarcasm, and even simple figures of speech numerous times. For instance, a former coworker once mentioned "I hit a wall" after a meeting, and I started looking for bruises because I thought she was being literal. It turned out she meant she was feeling overwhelmed. This is just one example of how my daily life unfolds.

Communication difficulties also make socializing challenging for autistic individuals. Allistic individuals engage in small talk effortlessly, which can be beautiful to witness. They meet someone and immediately strike up a conversation, easing into interaction. At times, I wish I could do the same. The struggle to socialize and form friendships is a significant issue for autistic individuals because we communicate in a vastly different manner.

Some people have labeled me as a snob, rude, and weird/strange in the past. I'm none of those things, well, maybe a little strange—but these misconceptions arise due to communication disparities.

As an autistic person, I experience dysregulation frequently.

Changes in temperature, sensory challenges, communication difficulties, social issues, and more can trigger emotional distress.

Numerous factors contribute to my emotional distress, but one of the most challenging situations is when I cannot discern someone's thoughts or intentions, particularly when they choose not to communicate verbally. Autistic individuals often find it difficult to interpret body language and other nonverbal cues.

Lacking social awareness, I often worry that I might unknowingly say or do something that hurts or upsets someone, with no opportunity to rectify the situation because the other party doesn't address it directly and expects me to pick up on subtle cues.

In the past, situations arose where I believed my actions or words were appropriate, such as being too literal and speaking my mind straightforwardly. People would become upset, leaving me perplexed and questioning, "Why are you angry with me?" It's not that I believe I did nothing wrong, but rather that my intentions were misunderstood, leading to others becoming upset. This is why I strive to assume good intent, and seek clarification instead of jumping to conclusions.

As an autistic person, I struggle to maintain relationships.

Allistic individuals often do not communicate enough, causing significant challenges for me. I crave information, and a substantial amount at that. This difficulty in obtaining necessary information is one reason many autistic individuals struggle in relationships.

Repeated experiences of being misunderstood can lead autistic individuals to withdraw from relationship-building efforts entirely, as a form of self-preservation.

Many autistic individuals struggle with people-pleasing, often stemming from the lack of proper communication. Deep down, all humans crave love, acceptance, and understanding. Autistic individuals may find it challenging to convey their thoughts in a neurotypical manner, yet the desire for acceptance remains strong. Consequently, many autistic individuals resort to masking their true selves and engaging in behaviors aimed at being understood and liked to navigate the non-autistic world.

While people-pleasing may temporarily ease the challenges faced by autistic individuals, it can take a toll on mental health. The constant need to mask and adapt can lead to autistic burnout and even trauma.

Practical tip 1

When an autistic individual says something, take it at face value.

There's often no hidden meaning or subtext. We tend to be straightforward and frank, without much of a filter. Most of the time, what we say is precisely what we mean. This transparency can foster trust and eliminate the need to second-guess or infer hidden intentions from our words.

Autistic individuals often see the world in black and white and can sometimes be overly trusting. Unfortunately, this trusting nature can make it easy for others to exploit and deceive them, as many may believe in the inherent goodness of people, particularly in their younger years. As a result, many autistic adults carry deep emotional scars from past harmful experiences, leading them to become cautious and may choose to distance themselves from others as a means of self-preservation.

Throughout my upbringing, even into my twenties, I always tried to see the best in people. Consequently, my friends often found themselves frustrated, constantly trying to shield me from those looking to take advantage of my trusting nature. I faced numerous instances of being exploited and hurt. Luckily, I learned the importance of setting boundaries & prioritizing self-protection, all while still maintaining a belief in the good intentions of others.

Practical tip 2

Communicate openly and consistently with your autistic loved one.

For autistic individuals, clear verbal communication and reassurance are essential to fostering emotional safety. Leaving them to interpret non-verbal cues or guess intentions can be challenging, so expressing oneself verbally and reinforcing affirmations is crucial in promoting understanding and comfort.

Anxiety is a common experience among many autistic individuals, although not all may have generalized anxiety disorder. Triggers for anxiety can vary widely, from social interactions to sensitivity to caffeine, hunger, and disruptions in routine like midday appointments. Situations such as communication difficulties and sensory challenges can also contribute to anxiety and potential meltdowns.

Autism often leads to a literal interpretation of communication and fosters traits like analytical thinking and diligent planning. While these traits can be beneficial, it's important to recognize that autistic characteristics manifest differently in each individual, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to support and understanding.

Interoceptions



A lot of autistic people have Interoception difficulties. This is like your body's internal messenger letting you know what you are feeling, what is happening around you and you should respond to it. Unlike Allistic individuals who can easily discern this messages, those who are Autistic find it difficult.

Let me tell you a story:

One day, I noticed I was getting very irritable at work and then eventually went to use the bathroom and immediately felt better right after. I did not realize I had to use the bathroom, I started getting irritable and anxious because my brain and body were mixing up signals, so I did not know the bathroom was what I needed. This is my daily life. I have a friend who reminds me to use the bathroom and have a snack when I start getting irritable, we love safe buddies.

Interoception difficulties in autistic people can be like having a fuzzy radio signal between the body and the brain! It might be harder for us to understand messages from our body, like feeling hungry, tired, or even in pain.

Practical tip

If your autistic friend seems irritable and can't tell why, ask them to use the bathroom, drink water, eat a snack, and/or do a physical activity (as they might be understimulated and not even know it).

Routines



Autistic individuals exhibit a strong preference for structure, routines, and familiarity, which often underlies their repetitive behaviours.

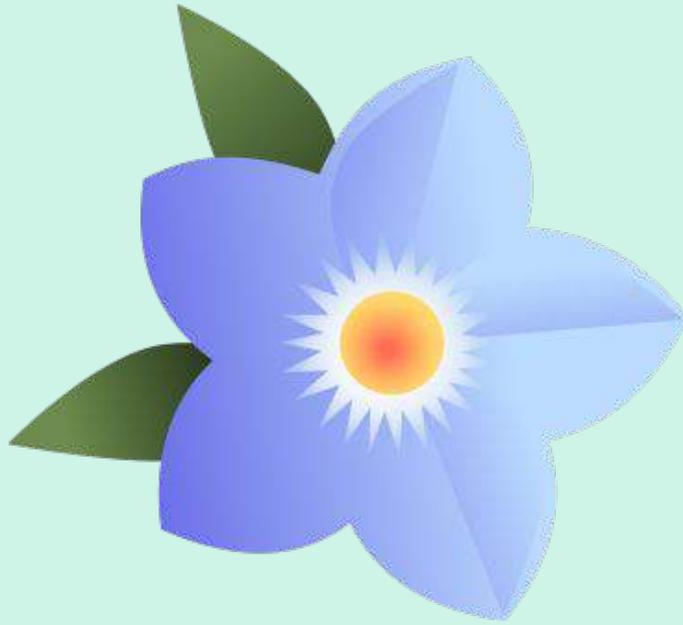
For example, I try to consistently park in the same spot at work each day, knowing that any deviation from this established routine could potentially disrupt my entire day. When someone started parking there, it started causing me some emotional distress at the start of my work day

Any disruption to an autistic person's routine can lead to significant emotional distress, highlighting the vital importance of providing them with the necessary time and support to navigate changes effectively.

Throughout my daily life, I adhere to a set pattern of behaviours and activities, consciously avoiding any deviations from these routines. In a world that can feel overwhelming and uncertain, familiarity serves as a comforting anchor.

Contrary to common misconceptions, engaging in repetitive tasks doesn't bore me; in fact, it brings me a sense of comfort and security. I don't seek out ways to "spice up" my routines because the predictability and stability they provide are inherently satisfying to me.

Meltdowns



Meltdowns serve as intense responses to situations that overwhelm autistic individuals, often triggered by sensory issues, routine changes, anxiety, and communication difficulties.

Preceding a full meltdown, there typically exists a rumble stage characterized by visible signs of distress.

In my case, the rumble stage manifests through heavy sighing, excessive eye-rolling, aggressively shaking legs, pacing with urgency, vigorously shaking wrists, and a sense of brewing frustration seen through fuming.

If left unsupported, a meltdown may ensue, marked by actions such as head-banging, hitting or banging objects, reacting sharply towards others, and emitting aggressive grunts or growls (yes, I happen to be a growler and a grunter).

To mitigate the escalation of such moments, what often proves helpful for me is creating physical and sensory space by temporarily removing myself from triggering environments. This may involve lying down on the floor, engaging in stimming behaviours, seeking deep pressure input, or interacting with cold water or ice.

As an autistic individual, it is advisable to identify personal coping strategies and recognize the unique indicators of your rumble stage. Doing so not only aids in preparing oneself but also provides insights for loved ones and caregivers.

Moreover, it's essential to acknowledge that some autistic adults may experience feelings of shame following a meltdown, shutdown, or burnout, as it can be mistakenly perceived as a tantrum. Patience and understanding in these moments are key.

Practical tip

When supporting an autistic individual during distress, refrain from offering pep talks, as rational discourse may not be effective at that time. Instead, focus on guiding them to utilize their coping mechanisms and prioritize providing a comforting presence while minimizing overwhelming stimuli.

Masking & Identity crisis



Due to the environment not being sensory-friendly or accommodating for autistic individuals, many feel compelled to conceal their autistic traits, a phenomenon typically referred to as masking. It is common for most autistic individuals to engage in masking behaviour at some point in their lives.

In the past, I personally engaged in high levels of masking. I would push myself to maintain eye contact and engage in small talk, leading to feelings of dysregulation and physical discomfort. Reasons for masking can vary and may include the desire to fit in, past experiences of bullying, the need for acceptance and love, and the drive to please others, among others.

The issue with masking lies in the long-term emotional distress it can inflict on autistic individuals, often leading to severe identity crises. In my own experiences of extensive masking, attempting to conform to perceived norms and act in a "normal" manner resulted in significant mental anguish, triggering what I identified as existential crises or periods of profound identity loss. This repetitive cycle of masking eroded my sense of self, leaving me feeling adrift, distressed, and deeply confused.

For many autistic individuals, the ability to exist in environments where masking is unnecessary is a precious privilege that fosters a sense of authenticity and relief. Creating a space where autistic individuals can freely express themselves without fear of judgment or rejection is immensely valuable to their well-being.

It is crucial to recognize that autistic individuals should not feel compelled to change or mask their natural traits. Instead, they deserve support and accommodations that embrace their authentic selves. While masking behaviour may initially seem beneficial to those around the autistic person, the long-term costs in terms of mental and physical health are significant and unsustainable.

Masking behaviour often contributes to autistic burnout and challenges in emotional regulation, yet it remains a topic that is not widely discussed. Encouraging autistic individuals to engage in stimming behaviours and express themselves openly and intensively, without judgment or restraint, can foster a more inclusive and understanding environment.

Practical tip

It is entirely acceptable for friends and loved ones of autistic individuals to prioritize their own well-being by taking breaks as needed, as long as boundaries are communicated respectfully and honestly. Everyone deserves love, space, and understanding in their relationships.

Sensory issues



As an autistic person, I experience sensory processing issues that can cause physical pain. Daily sensory information overwhelms me. I mentioned to my psychologist that leaving my house feels like an assault on my senses. I experience heightened hearing, touch, sight, and smell.

Setting aside sensory processing, it's essential to note that being autistic means I have general brain processing challenges. My brain works slowly and differently at times. During a comprehensive psychological evaluation, a test assessed my processing speed to determine my optimal learning style. Notably, the test did not consider my autism.

My psychologist conveyed that, unlike typical visual or auditory learners, I exhibit similar low scores across the board, indicating slower-than-average processing. It was amusing in a professional way, essentially stating that my processing speed is slower.

When someone recites a list to me, I struggle to recall it unless it's written down due to inadequate time to process the information. Multiple conversations simultaneously overwhelm my brain, rendering me unable to comprehend anything.

Because of my brain's processing issues, I avoid multitasking. If I try to watch a movie while using my phone, I inevitably miss crucial details. I prefer concentrating on one task at a time, allowing me to maintain a laser focus that leads to success.

I am a quick learner, excelling at work and in school, but my autistic brain processes information slowly. Given sufficient time to fully process and apply information, it tends to stick in my memory long-term.

While my memory is excellent, it's challenging to recall something I haven't thoroughly processed. Often, people mistake this delay for forgetfulness when, in reality, the information hasn't transitioned beyond my short-term memory due to incomplete processing.

Transitioning to sensory processing in autistic individuals, our brains interpret sensory input differently from neurotypical individuals. We may find sensory input overwhelming or insufficient, leading to sensory-seeking or sensory-avoidant behaviours. For instance, some autistic individuals thrive in brightly lit environments, while others, like myself, experience migraines in such settings.

In the past, I used pain medication frequently, assuming everyone did the same until a nurse pointed out that it wasn't common. My migraines tend to occur during sensory overload, under-stimulation, exhaustion, or autistic burnout. The lack of understanding about autistic needs often leads to chronic migraines, as accommodations are not tailored for autistic individuals.

As a result of sensory challenges, I'm more prone to irritability and reaching autistic burnout, particularly in the summer when environmental factors intensify sensory experiences. The bright, humid, and loud aspects of summer exacerbate sensory overload, leading to meltdowns and quicker burnout.

Heat sensitivity can have severe consequences for some autistic individuals, potentially triggering suicidal thoughts. This emphasizes the critical need for appropriate accommodations and understanding of sensory differences in autism.

My interoceptive sensory issues further complicate matters, as my brain struggles to differentiate between hunger, fullness, and fatigue, impacting my overall well-being.

This topic is so vast that I may not be able to cover every aspect. I am typically sensory avoidant for most senses, except for my vestibular and proprioceptive senses, which I actively seek to stimulate. I have a strong urge to move, swing, jump around, and struggle to stay still. When barefoot, I tend to walk heavily, almost stomping rather than walking. I find myself wanting to do cartwheels frequently. Without engaging in sufficient activities, I risk becoming under-stimulated and dysregulated unless I find ways to stimulate myself. I find comfort in stimming, which involves self-stimulatory behaviours and helps regulate my sensory experiences. Daily exercise helps me fulfil my vestibular and proprioceptive sensory needs effectively.

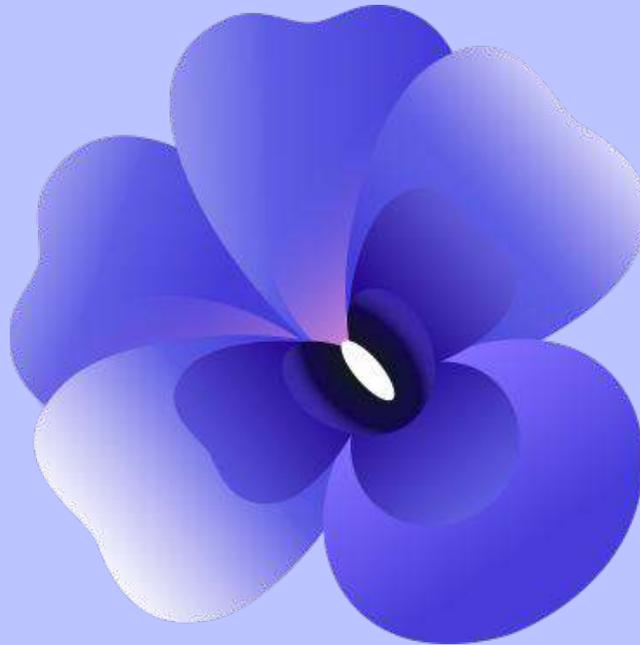
Certain clothing choices can trigger headaches for me, particularly tight jeans or fabrics that are not sensory-friendly, leading to migraine episodes.

To conclude this section, I'll share a story with you.

One day, I arranged to meet someone at a coffee shop (which happens to be one of the most sensory-unfriendly places). The environment was brightly lit, filled with loud chatter, and bombarded me with excessive sensory input. It took me two days to recover from a mere two-hour meeting at that coffee shop. For those two days, I was unable to function properly, experiencing severe burnout, migraines, and struggles with executive functioning. I had to retreat to a dark, calming space to soothe my senses for a full two days before finally beginning to recuperate. The experience was so draining that it felt almost like facing death - both physically and mentally exhausted and unwell.

Therefore, it's not merely about preference; it's about the crucial act of self-preservation.

Stimming



Stimming is a fascinating and unique part of the autistic experience. Short for self-stimulation, it refers to the repetitive movements, sounds, or behaviours that many autistic individuals engage in. It's a way for them to express themselves, self-regulate, and find comfort in a sometimes-overwhelming world.

Autistic individuals may engage in stimming in different situations. Stimming can occur when they face sensory overload, experience intense emotions, seek sensory input for sensory-seeking purposes, or need to redirect their attention and focus. It can act as a coping mechanism and a way to self-soothe, allowing them to regulate their arousal levels.

I stim pretty much all the time. I have a ton of fidgets and still have other ways to stim. I colour or do some other stim activities in class or meetings. It helps me focus and self-soothe.

Stimming can feel calming, relieving, or enjoyable for autistic people. It provides a sense of control in environments that may feel overwhelming or unpredictable. Engaging in stimming behaviours can bring a sense of comfort, predictability, and familiarity which can help navigate the world more effectively.

Stimming plays several important roles:

It helps manage sensory overload.

Imagine being bombarded with bright lights, loud noises, and strong smells all at once; it can be a lot to handle! Autistic people often have heightened sensory experiences, and stimming provides a means to cope and regulate their sensory input.

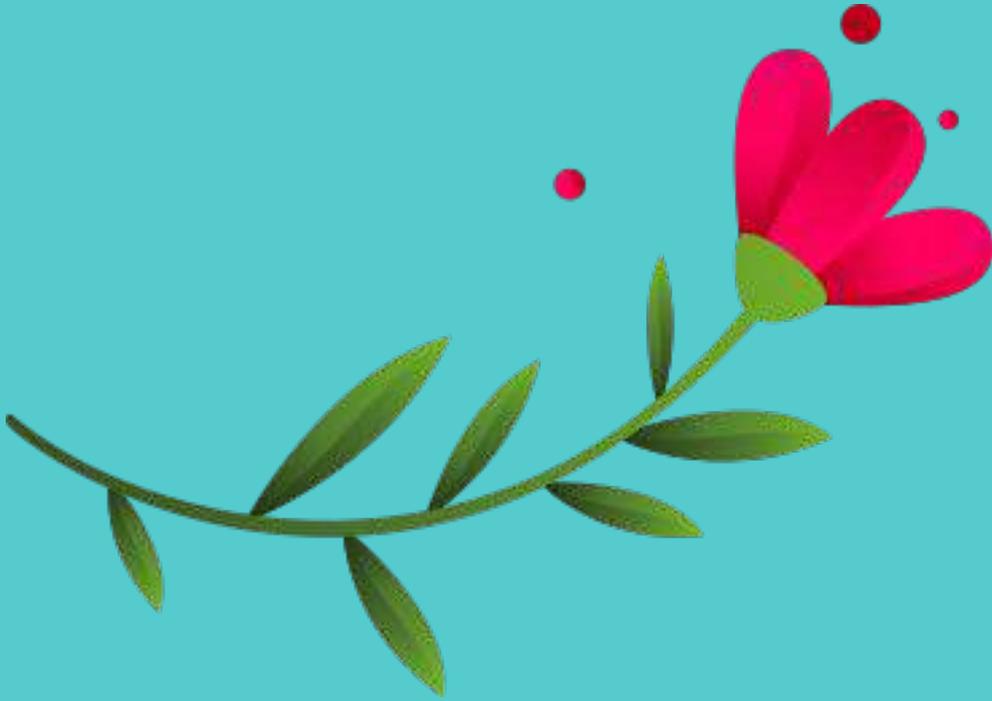
It helps with emotional expression.

It allows autistic people to release stress, anxiety, or excitement. Think of it like a pressure valve, helping them navigate their emotions. It also helps self-soothe and self-regulate.

In certain situations, autistic individuals may suppress or avoid stimming due to societal expectations, sensory overload, or social pressures. This suppression can be challenging and can lead to increased anxiety, stress, or difficulty regulating emotions. This can bring on a meltdown. It's important to create inclusive environments that allow autistic individuals to stim comfortably and without judgment.

Stimming is a natural and beneficial means of self-expression and regulation for autistic people. Being able to stim freely is essential for us.

Autistic burnout



Autistic burnout differs significantly from the typical burnout experienced by neurotypical individuals. During my last episode, my friends struggled to assist me. The situation deteriorated, leading to severe depression and thoughts of suicide. Although I recognized what I was going through, my mental fog prevented me from articulating it clearly to them. Their attempts to help, although well-intentioned, only exacerbated the situation.

Autistic burnout entails chronic exhaustion, heightened sensory challenges, and difficulties with executive functioning. This often results in a decline in skills, further memory impairment, increased irritability, and heightened emotional dysregulation.

Similar to depression, autistic burnout brings about feelings of profound emptiness and diminished motivation. When caught in an episode, I'm overwhelmed with a desire to cry, overwhelmed by intense feelings of sadness and loneliness, leaving my brain feeling incapacitated and unsure of how to perform basic tasks.

The crucial distinction lies in understanding that while depression is a symptom of autistic burnout, it is not the root cause. Addressing the primary issues alleviates the depression as a secondary effect.

Various factors contribute to autistic burnout, such as prolonged masking, significant or minor life changes (which can trigger emotional distress due to difficulties in processing changes), disruptions in daily routines, the inability to engage in stimming, sensory overload, inadequate recovery from social interactions, and the overwhelming demands and pressures of daily life.

The cumulative effect of unchecked stressors, unmanaged sensory overload, ongoing masking, and other stressors can have detrimental impacts over time.

Embracing one's autistic identity entails acknowledging the need for rest and recovery after every experience.

Recognizing that seemingly minor stressors can lead to severe emotional distress, especially for individuals already grappling with emotional regulation challenges, is a crucial aspect of autistic self-care.

Understanding why autism is a disability underscores the essential support and accommodations autistic individuals require, irrespective of perceived functionality levels. Existing as a neurodivergent individual, particularly as an autistic person, demands a considerable amount of energy. Unfortunately, there are no medications, cures, or treatments for the neurological aspects of autism; it is inherent to our being and cannot be altered.



Q: Why does autism present so differently in so many different types of people, not just female vs male, but different races as well and how do they handle it on top of that?

Autism has always been portrayed in a specific way, and I blame the media for that. Autism doesn't have a specific look; the spectrum isn't linear but consists of different categories of traits. It presents differently because we are all unique individuals.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning it can appear in a wide range of behaviours, traits, and challenges. The varied ways autism shows itself in individuals can be influenced by many factors like genetics, environmental influences, personal traits, upbringing, cultural differences, and more.

Q: How can people know someone with autism is enjoying something especially if they are non-speaking?

This is a great point. Non-speaking autistic individuals do communicate; you just need to understand how they do so. When I become nonverbal, I resort to writing or using my speech app (there are many available for autistic and non-speaking individuals). Additionally, there are numerous nonverbal forms of communication, like body language and facial expressions.

Q: How can someone know they are in pain if they are non-speaking/ or speaking?

This can be challenging. Because of interoceptive sensory challenges, some autistic individuals may not realize they're experiencing pain. It might manifest as discomfort or even anxiety. Many autistic people also exhibit a high pain tolerance. Being attentive to your autistic loved one and understanding their characteristics can be beneficial in addressing this issue.

This might show in behaviours and body language. I get irritable when I am in pain. Sometimes I do not know it is pain, I just know that I am anxious and irritable.

Q: Why do people with autism have little eye contact?

Many of us find eye contact to be quite distressing. It can overwhelm us with sensory input, making it challenging to concentrate. Eye contact may seem perplexing, intrusive, and overly intimate. While there's a scientific rationale for this, I won't delve into it. When autistic individuals engage in eye contact, it's typically a conscious choice that demands an incredible amount of exertion and mental stamina. In close relationships, I may make limited eye contact, focusing on "some" rather than prolonged gazes.

Q: Why do autistic people like routine and if you get out of routine, they completely have a hard time regulating?

This is extremely accurate. Many autistic individuals face challenges in self-regulation when their routines are disrupted. If my routine is disturbed, I experience a meltdown. Routines offer us a sense of security. The world can be bewildering to many autistic individuals, and routines serve as a stabilizing force. They allow us to exert some influence over our lives, providing predictability and structure. We thrive on consistency and stability, both of which routines offer. Following a routine helps us cope with daily anxiety. Autistic individuals require consistency and reliability from both things and people, making routines crucial in this aspect.

Q: Can autistic people be affectionate?

Very much so! A lot of autistic people feel things intensely. When I have a crush on someone, it can feel so overwhelming that I want to cry, so I try to avoid these feelings as much as possible (LOL). Many autistic people express affection differently, but yes, we can be extremely affectionate. We might just not show it like non-autistic people.

Q: I am curious about special interests and similarities between autism and ADHD.

Many autistic individuals have special interests. For me, it's movies, mental health, autism, piercings, and all forms of physical exercise. I don't just love these things; I spend every free minute reading up and researching about them. Movies and mental health have been my two most enduring special interests since childhood.

Special interests are highly specific and intense fascinations, almost akin to obsessions that individuals with autism have.

When I watch a movie, I delve into it, exploring all facets such as characters, related films, production details, soundtracks, and much more. I watch over 400 to 600 movies yearly.

A special interest can also revolve around a person; it's not always limited to objects or topics. I could easily spend an entire day sharing information about my special interests, exuding pure autistic joy. Autism and ADHD traits often intersect, with many individuals experiencing both conditions (AuDHD), presenting unique challenges due to their differences.

One disparity is that autistic individuals typically prefer sameness and routines, finding comfort in familiarity. We thrive on repetition and can engage in the same activities daily without boredom. In contrast, ADHD tends to embrace change and spontaneity. Autistic individuals cherish routines, while those with ADHD might display more impulsivity than autistics.

Many autistics excel at maintaining focus and regulating attention. Personally, I struggle to procrastinate; if I receive a task due in four months, I'll complete it immediately and persist until it's finished. Conversely, ADHD is characterized by difficulties in attention and focus.

Common traits shared between autism and ADHD include challenges in emotional regulation, limited eye contact, executive functioning impairments, difficulties in initiating and switching tasks, special interests, remarkable focus on preferred topics, and stimming behaviours.

These examples highlight some distinctions and similarities, though they may not apply universally. It's essential to remember that each neurodivergent individual is unique in their experiences and traits.

Q: How does co-occurring mental health diagnosis affect people with autism differently than people without autism?

Oh, this is a significant topic, and I'm not sure where to begin.

Due to challenges like communication difficulties, sensory sensitivities, and alexithymia, co-occurring mental health issues can exacerbate distress for autistic individuals and complicate accessing necessary support.

Firstly, it's important to note that due to autism being still inadequately researched and frequently underdiagnosed, many autistic individuals receive misdiagnoses such as anxiety, depression, BPD, OCD, and CPTSD. It's worth mentioning that an individual with autism can indeed experience one or more of these disorders, as it's entirely plausible.

Over eight years ago, I endured a severe autistic burnout triggered by multiple life changes and disruptions to my routines. Following this, I was hospitalized and diagnosed with general anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, personality disorder, and possibly BPD.

Interestingly, all the factors mentioned in my medical records were directly linked to my autistic traits, such as struggling with changes and social interactions. Surprisingly, the healthcare professionals did not associate it with autistic burnout or my autism since autistic burnout remains significantly under-researched even today.

In recent years, after undergoing multiple psychological evaluations, I haven't received diagnoses of anxiety or depression; this progress is partly attributed to meeting my needs effectively and addressing the root causes of my emotional dysregulation. Additionally, I've worked through past traumas using various trauma therapy approaches, although that's a different conversation altogether.

Due to challenges like communication difficulties, sensory sensitivities, and alexithymia, co-occurring mental health issues can exacerbate distress for autistic individuals and complicate accessing necessary support.

Furthermore, the presence of other mental health conditions may impede the diagnosis of autism for some individuals and vice versa, as symptoms of one condition can mask those of the other.

Many mental health interventions may not align well with the neurodiverse needs of autistic individuals, highlighting the necessity for personalized and tailored mental health treatments.

Our unique cognitive processes underscore the importance of having more autistic or neurodivergent therapists and training more professionals in providing care for autistic individuals with mental health concerns.

Q: The behaviors that the autistic kids had at my old job, they didn't have them because they were autistic, they had them because the adults in their lives did not respect the way they communicated or they did not give their children the tools they needed to do so. In conclusion, I think people with autism are just people see the world differently, and sometimes communicate differently.

Many times, parents do not harbor ill intentions. They often struggle to comprehend their autistic children, which poses a significant challenge for caregivers.

Therefore, it's not only a matter of failing to respect their communication styles but also a lack of understanding. During my upbringing, my family had no knowledge about autism, making life challenging—not because they intended to harm or punish me but simply because they didn't grasp my unique perspective and thought process.

Furthermore, there is insufficient research and insufficient resources available for caregivers to adequately support their autistic loved ones.

Regarding the behaviors exhibited by autistic children, assuming you are referring to meltdowns, they typically stem from various factors such as sensory sensitivities, communication difficulties, disruptions in routine, avoidance of demands, and more.

It is not solely the responsibility of the adults in their lives; rather, it reflects the unfortunate fact that our world is not currently designed to be accommodating to individuals with autism.

Autistic individuals do not just perceive the world and communicate differently; our brains process information in distinct ways, leading to substantial challenges in navigating a predominantly neurotypical world.

We have reached the end of my project, at least for now. If you've made it this far, I want to express my gratitude. I dedicated a significant amount of work, effort, and time to this project, and it means a great deal to me that you've taken the time to read it.

Reaching this point also indicates your interest in the autistic experience.

I extend a heartfelt thank you to all those who submitted questions; I genuinely appreciate your time once again.

I also want to extend a special thank you to my friend, Zuliat of The XYZ Creative who designed and helped bring this book to life in a way that I didn't expect.

I would love to hear from you. Let me know if you found this resource helpful. Share any further questions you may have or simply drop by to say hi to me via email at hi@abiolaadebayo.com.

To all wonderful and queer neurodivergent humans out there, “what I hope most of all is that you understand what I mean when I tell you that even though I do not know you, and even though I may not meet you, laugh with you, cry with you, or kiss you: I love you.

With all my heart.
I love you.