

How to talk about autistic ways of being

If the autistic person you are talking to expresses specific preferences, then please use those. In all other cases, choose the following.

TRY TO AVOID



Autism Spectrum Disorder
or ASD or ASC

Person with autism

High-functioning or Low-functioning or functioning levels

Treatment of autism or interventions

Severe or profound (or mild) autism

You don't look autistic

SAY INSTEAD



Autism
or just talk about being autistic

Autistic person

Talk about their specific needs for support, access, and/or accommodation

Support services or therapies or strategies to improve quality of life

They are autistic and [insert specific support needs]
or They are autistic and have [insert a condition]
or They are autistic and have a learning disability
or They have complex support needs or access needs

There is no autistic 'look'

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PART 2

If the autistic person you are talking to expresses specific preferences, then please use those. In all other cases, choose the following.

TRY TO AVOID



Special needs

Challenging/disruptive/
problem/maladaptive
behaviour

Symptoms

At risk of ASD

Suffering from autism

Restricted/narrow/
special interests
or obsessions

Restricted, repetitive
behaviours or
stereotyped behaviours

SAY INSTEAD



They need [insert specific
support needs]

Describe the specific
behaviours e.g., self-
injurious behaviours
or the person is in
meltdown or distress

Traits or characteristics

They are likely autistic

They are autistic

Passions or hobbies or
passionate interests or
focused interests

Stimming ('stim' or 'stims')
(these are self-regulating
behaviours)
or they enjoy or benefit
from [describe their stim]

PART 3

How to talk about autistic ways of being

If the autistic person you are talking to expresses specific preferences, then please use those. In all other cases, choose the following.

TRY TO AVOID



SAY INSTEAD



Normal person

Resistant to change
or has a rigid routine

Picky eating

Co-morbid conditions

Non-verbal

Selectively mute

Non-autistic person or
allistic person

Preference for sameness
and consistency

They have specific food
preferences (e.g., due to a
sensitive palate or sensory
needs)

Co-occurring conditions

Non-speaking
or AAC user
(e.g., uses an alternative
communication device)
or uses sign language, etc.

Situationally mute
or sometimes unable to speak
(Note: 'selective mutism' will still
need to be written when making a
diagnosis or writing reports)

Clarifying some terms

Traits/ characteristics:

Because 'symptoms' is used for medical problems and being autistic should not be thought of as a medical problem.

Allistic:

Anyone who is not autistic. They may still be neurodivergent in other ways.

Stimming:

(Sometimes shortened to 'stim' or 'stims'.) Movements, actions or voice utterances, often repetitive, for the purpose of soothing, coping, and reducing anxiety, to aid thinking and processing, or because they feel good.

Co-occurring:

Because comorbid sounds deathly and sinister and implies that being autistic is a medical disorder.

Non-speaking:

Someone who does not use mouth-words. Probably does understand language and may use it in other ways.

Non-verbal:

Someone who does not comprehend words at all.

Mouth-words:

Speaking with your mouth, as opposed to manual languages (e.g., BSL, ASL, etc.) or AAC (augmentative and alternative communication—devices to offer alternative communication means). Often also called “spoken words” or “spoken language”.

Situationally mute, or Intermittently (non)speaking:

Because “selectively mute” sounds like we choose not to talk, when actually it is the situation or some other thing that is preventing us from being able to speak.

(Note: 'selective mutism' will still need to be written when making a diagnosis or writing reports)

Neurotype:

Brain type. Our way of being (neurocognitive functioning) because of how our brains (bodyminds) are.

Meltdowns:

Loss of control, usually as a result of sensory or emotional overwhelm. These are not tantrums as they are not purposely motivated towards seeking support.

Shutdowns:

Feeling or becoming unresponsive, dissociative, numb, sometimes resulting in situational mutism (where one is unable to communicate or speak).

Burnout:

Becoming gradually rundown and finding it difficult to cope. Often the result of extended overwhelm, stress and exhaustion, and can last for hours, days, and even years.

Neurotypical (or NT):

Someone who is not neurodivergent.

Neurodivergent (or ND):

Someone whose mind diverges from what society considers 'normal'.

Neurodiverse:

A word that can only be applied to a group, never to an individual. It means a diverse range of neurotypes/minds.

Ableism:

Discrimination in favour of able-bodied and neurotypical people.

Some other terms you may have heard:

AuDHD:

Someone who is both autistic and ADHD.

Neurospicy:

A playful alternative for 'neurodivergent'; spicy originated as a joke to combat the disliked phrase 'mild' autism.

Spoons:

Units of energy for people with chronic conditions/disabilities. You begin each day with a finite number and completing everyday tasks depletes your spoons until you have 'run out of spoons'.

Forks:

Tolerance limits, how much you can cope with, and what needs dealing with first.

SpIns:

From 'Special Interests'. Passions, hobbies, passionate interests.

Same food (and safe food):

Can be eaten every day, feels predictable and trustworthy.