

National Autistic Society

Know yourself series



A guide to:
Exploring
your identity

Contents

Welcome	3
Introduction	3
Hyperfocus	4
Planning and scheduling	6
Understanding your emotions	8
Feeling stuck	10
Anxiety	12
Catastrophising	18
Autistic joy	20
Summary	22



Welcome

Welcome to the **Exploring your identity** guide from our **Know yourself** series.

All the videos and guides in the *Know yourself* series are written and led by autistic people. We know how important it is for autistic young people to see and hear information from other autistic people, as this can help with understanding autistic experience.

Firstly, if you haven't already seen the first two episodes in the series (Understanding yourself and Energy accounting) then you can [find them here](#). This guide goes into more detail about getting to know yourself and understanding your own unique identity.

There is a **video** on **Exploring your identity** to watch, which has five young autistic people giving their perspective on exploring your identity.

Check it out by [clicking here](#) (or visit www.autism.org.uk/knowyourself)

Introduction

There's a lot more to being autistic than the topics we covered in the first resources in the **Know yourself** series. They were Understanding yourself and Energy accounting – all available here at www.autism.org.uk/knowyourself.

This guide aims to help you explore your autistic identity further and will consider additional topics such as hyperfocus, anxiety and joy.



Hyperfocus

Hyperfocus is a term often used by autistic people to explain their way of concentrating.

It means continuous and intense concentration on something. This is usually where you become completely engrossed in the thing you're focusing on.

Hyperfocusing can be great for studying and getting things done; and being completely focused on something of interest can bring a deep sense of joy - but it can also create challenges. For example, you may struggle to pay attention to other things happening around you.

Let's explore this in more detail.

Potential positives

- You might be able to study and learn lots about what you are hyperfocused on.
- Great ability to avoid distraction.
- Can be really enjoyable when on a favoured topic or interest.

Potential challenges

- You might forget to do things like eat, drink, sleep or schoolwork.
- You might miss appointments because you've lost track of time.
- You might hyperfocus on a topic that is upsetting you or causes anxiety.
- It can be really hard to stop or switch focus to something else when you need to.

“

“At school, I loved independent projects. I could spend hours zoned in. However, I would struggle to also focus on social chats or other workloads which I think led people to view me as moody. But really I struggled to untether my mind from the project, even at times when I wanted to, and particularly when I wanted to sleep!”

Rachel, Autistic adult, 2023

Some people may use strategies to support themselves such as setting alarms and timers, or asking someone to check in on them and provide reminders so they don't lose track of time or forget to eat etc. You can explore what works for you.

“Sometimes when I get hyperfocused on things, I forget to eat and drink. So it's about having a routine and eating and drinking at the same time every day to kind of prevent me from doing that.”

Finty, 2024

”

Planning and scheduling

Lots of people struggle to get organised or motivate themselves to do something they don't want to.

Autistic people may struggle with this even more because there is so much extra information to process and understand.

Many autistic people have said that they can find it hard to start a task or try to avoid it completely when they are feeling overwhelmed. This is something we will explore later on in the guide.

Things you might struggle with:

Being on time



Packing a bag for a trip



Tidying your room



Knowing how long something might take to do



Feeling overwhelmed when plans change



Remembering what was said in a conversation



Due to these potential planning and organising differences, you may find you problem solve differently to others. Some people find they need to take more time to plan or prepare in their heads, or find that visually breaking down a task helps.

Even though this difference in processing may cause difficulty in some tasks, like struggling to manage your time, it can be a real advantage in other areas like being more creative.

Ways to support yourself – Planning and scheduling

There are lots of ways to support yourself with organisation and adding routine and structure.

You could use apps, planners, reminders on electronic devices, or use graphic organisers and diaries to help you plan, organise, break down tasks, remember tasks or appointments and make everyday tasks easier to remember.

Using...	Setting...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• timetables• bullet lists• planners• calendars• to do lists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• reminders• smart speakers• alarms (and labelling them)



Everyone struggles with organisation at times, and if you need some additional support in this area then there are plenty of options out there to help you find what works for you.

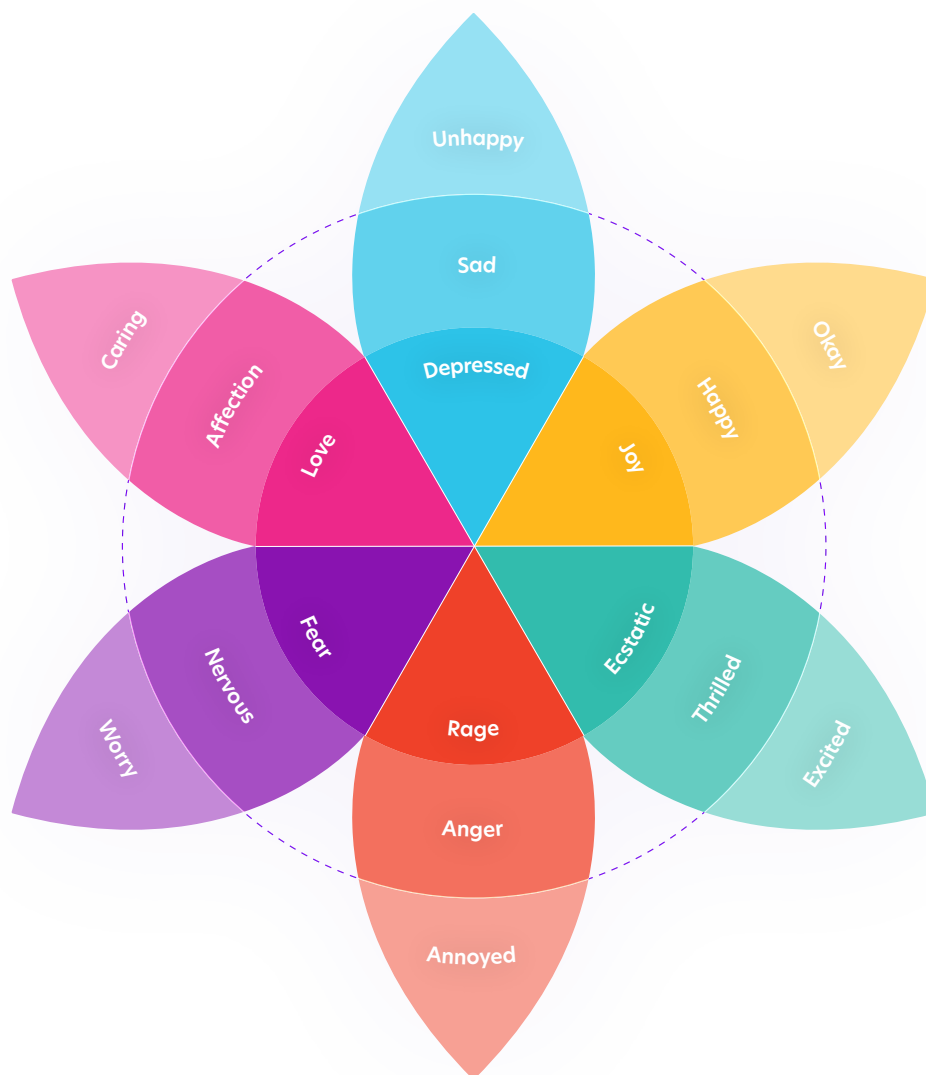
A couple of websites that autistic people have suggested are [Notion](#) or [Goblin tools](#) - take a look at our "[other resources that might be useful](#)" document at www.autism.org.uk/knowyourself for some ideas and links.

Understanding your emotions

Around 50% of autistic people experience challenges with identifying and expressing their emotions.

Do you identify with any of these challenges?

- finding it hard to work out how you're feeling about something
- struggling to find the words to describe how you're feeling
- not knowing which option to use if people ask you to use emotion tools such as emotion colour wheels or rating scales
- being told by other people that you're not showing any emotion, or the right emotion
- being told by other people that you're showing too much emotion
- feeling like you don't know what emotion you should be showing in different social situations.



Not understanding emotions in the same way as non-autistic people is not 'wrong', it is just a difference.

Accepting and understanding these differences is a very positive step towards having a positive sense of self.

You may need to do some exploring to deepen your understanding, or to work out if certain areas may cause challenges for you.

Here are some examples from autistic people around emotions.



Emily Katy, 2022



Luke Beardon, 2020



Emily Katy, 2022



Purple Ella, 2022

Feeling stuck

Lots of autistic young people find it hard to get started on tasks, switch between different tasks or to stop doing a task. A term that can be used to describe this is autistic inertia (pronounced in-er-sha).

Starting something (like a piece of homework or packing your bag) can sometimes be really difficult. Some autistic people say it can feel like they are just stuck.

Here are some examples:

"I don't know how to start a task."

"I feel stuck and can struggle to move on to the next thing."

"I felt like I was stuck in sinking mud and someone had stolen my voice."

"I have difficulty transitioning from one thing to another."

"I always lose track of time."



This autistic inertia (feeling stuck, or not being able to switch to doing something else or stop doing something) can happen because of stress, anxiety, burnout and the pressure to be perfect. It may also happen because of the way your brain stores, organises and responds to information.

It is not nice to experience this, and many autistic people have shared their experiences of autistic inertia in the hope that it helps others to recognise if it's happening to them.

Ways to support yourself if you struggle with autistic inertia:

- Consider time supports, eg using alarms, schedules and calendars with deadlines.
- Explore your energy levels and do the things you need lots of energy for at the right time for you.
- Create to-do lists and keep visual reminders (this can be as creative and as unique to you as you want, eg making reminder bracelets, using apps, or even a physical whiteboard).
- Find areas with limited distractions to complete tasks in.
- Break down tasks into smaller more manageable chunks.

Others may suggest arranging to go out, meeting up with others or other strategies which might work for them. But it's important that you understand what works for you. This means knowing yourself well enough to be able to make your own plan for when times are tricky.

Although you may not be experiencing inertia right now, it's still good to understand what could help you when you struggle with motivation or you feel stuck. This will set you up to succeed.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear.

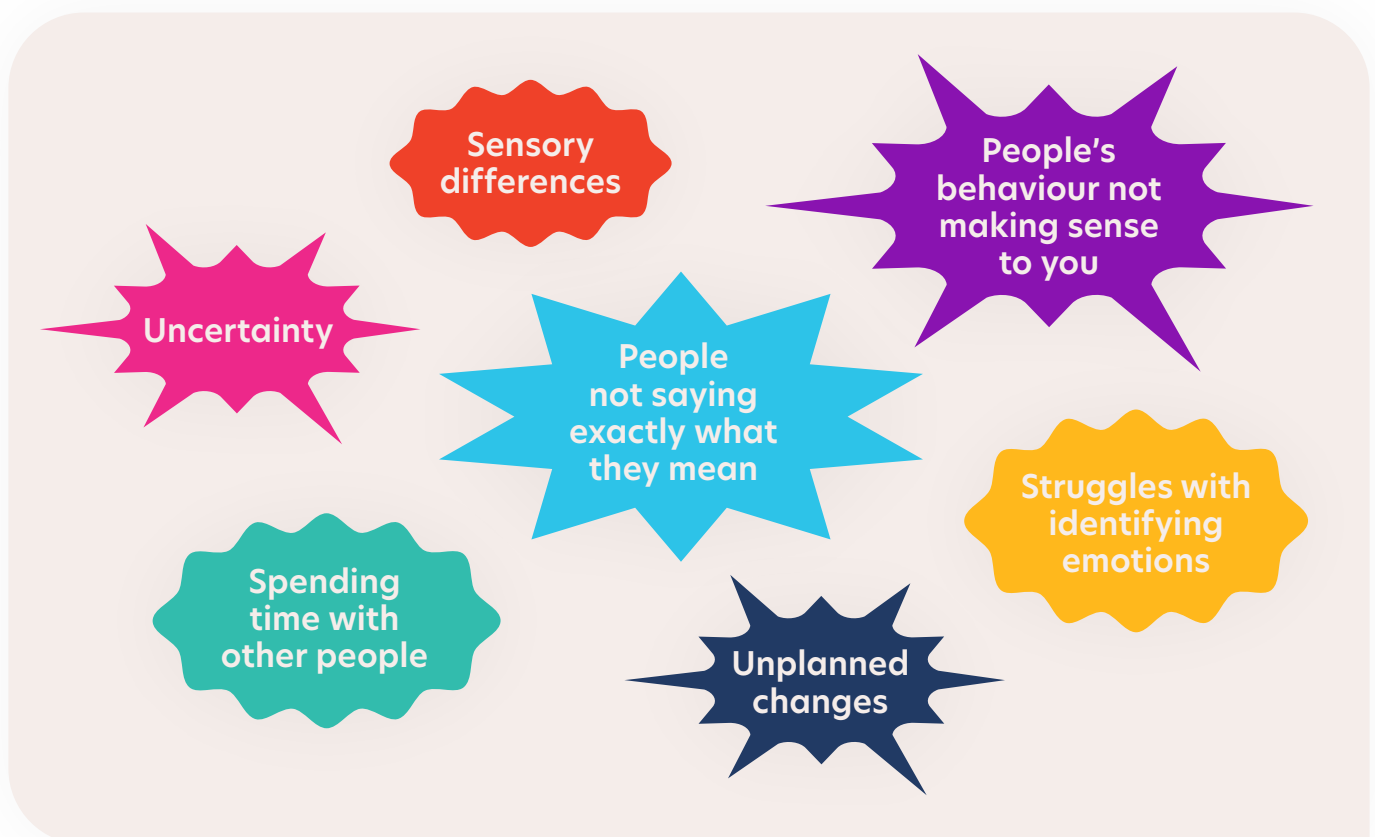
Everyone experiences anxiety.

Anxiety is natural and can be very useful. Its purpose is to alert us to danger and make us act to keep safe.

People can get anxious over different things and some people have higher levels of anxiety than others.

Anxiety can be really common for autistic people.

Alongside the common things that cause anxiety for many people, such as exams or medical appointments, autistic people may have extra levels of anxiety because there are additional things to cope with such as:



When anxiety levels are too high and stay around for a long time, it can stop you from living the life you want to live. That's why it's important to know when you are anxious and how to reduce your anxiety levels.

Am I anxious?

Sometimes you will know you are anxious, and you will be able to move on to supporting yourself.

Other times, you might not be aware.

Some autistic people find that they become aware of the effects of anxiety first before realising they are anxious. These effects can include feeling angry and/or shaky, having a faster heartbeat and/or chest pains, and getting less or no sleep than their normal amount.

These are some ways in which anxiety can impact on people. There are other ones too. It is important to recognise how anxiety may impact on you and what you can do about it.



Identifying when you are anxious

It is helpful to identify what things happen to your body when you are anxious. You can then use that knowledge in the future to help you better understand what level of anxiety you are experiencing in a certain moment.

Technology can support you with this; from smartwatches to phone apps, or even something as simple as keeping notes or using a scale can help you figure out what level of anxiety you are experiencing and what action you could take.

What can I do if I'm anxious?

Everyone responds differently to strategies to get rid of those high levels of anxiety. Finding out what works for you might take some detective work.

Here are some of the ideas autistic adults and young people have shared with us:

Energy accounting

Energy accounting is a strategy that people use to help them cope with the daily activities and tasks they must complete, without becoming overwhelmed. It involves thinking about each activity and working out how much energy it may take up or give you. Some things give you an increase in energy, others subtract.

Energy accounting is about finding balance and making sure you add enough things that increase your energy, so that you avoid overwhelm or prolonged anxious states.

Have a look at the [Know yourself Energy accounting video and guide](#) for more information on this topic.



Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be helpful when you feel extremely anxious or overwhelmed. Some people refer to this as your 'thoughts racing' – this is when you are thinking about so many things, or the worst outcomes, and it feels like you can't get control of your thoughts.

Mindfulness is about being present in the moment, engaging with what is happening at that moment instead of all the hundreds of 'potential' things that could happen that are making you panic.

Many people find it helpful to practise mindfulness exercises every day. Over time, this can bring down your general anxiety levels, making it easier to cope when something challenging happens.

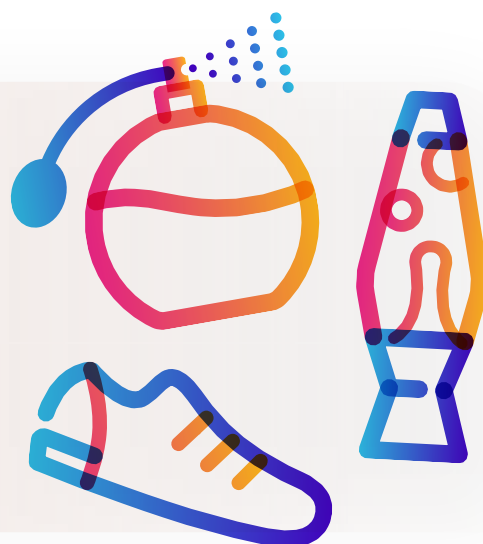
There are different ways to practise mindfulness, so here are three ideas to think about trying:



Focus on the senses

Focus on the senses to encourage calming. This could include smelling favoured scents, eating something, using a lava lamp or focusing on a sensory light.

Taking time to notice your environment, walking and spending time in nature can help when it comes to practising mindfulness.



Use external tools

Use external tools like colouring books, crafting or something to focus and concentrate on.

Try breathing exercises

Breathing exercises can be particularly effective. This involves focusing directly on the breath; for example, diaphragmatic breathing (breathing from your abdomen) or breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.



Lots of people recommend using apps to support themselves. Headspace is a paid app that some autistic people have found useful. It's a science-backed app that can help with your mental health, reducing stress and anxiety and helping with better sleep.

As with all the ideas we mention, mindfulness might not work for everyone, so if it doesn't work for you - then have a look at some of the other ideas in this section. It's always about finding what works best for you.

Grounding

Grounding is similar to mindfulness and involves focusing on what is happening in the moment. Concentrating on physical things, activities or sensations takes your focus away from your thoughts, and this can help to reduce those racing and spiralling thoughts at times of panic. Doing a physical activity like going for a walk, running, playing a sports game or playing with a pet are all ideas autistic people have suggested.



Grounding can be very effective during panic attacks.

Here are five examples of grounding in action:

Place your wrists under cold running water and focus on that sensation.



Throw pebbles into water and focus on the sounds you hear and how the water splashes and ripples.



Have a drink or snack and focus on that sensation.



Focus on what's around you in your physical environment, things you can see, hear, feel, smell and even taste. For example, birds flying, birdsong, soft cushion, smell of toast, taste of toothpaste.



The 5-4-3-2-1 technique. Name five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.



Chunking

Chunking is breaking a larger, more daunting task or action down into smaller, more manageable chunks.

Chunking is thought of as a study technique, but it can also be used for managing your anxiety levels. It can be really effective when you feel things are building up and becoming too hard to manage.

For example, if you are joining a new tennis club, there might be lots of unknowns and this might cause anxiety. But if you break it down into chunks, such as going to a new place, meeting new people, how long you are going to stay, and what to do if you want/have to leave, then you can plan for each chunk. You could look online for photos of the tennis club so you know what it's like, see if there are team photos on the club's social media pages, plan what you might say, or consider where you can go if you need some time alone.

Take a look at our other resources document for some ideas and links. A couple of ideas that autistic people have suggested are [Notion](#) or [Goblin tools](#).



Catastrophising

Catastrophising is when your brain takes you straight to the worst-case scenario and doesn't let you think about other, often more realistic, outcomes.

It can happen extremely quickly and cause huge anxiety.

To other people, it may seem like you have taken an unrealistic leap to this worst-case scenario. It can help to try to break down all the thinking that went on to bring you to that potential worst-case scenario.

Many autistic people are catastrophic thinkers.

“

“Catastrophic thinking is like an anxiety bullet. It is fast and it is extremely detrimental on impact. The ‘shot’ could be someone texting me to say they’ve got something to tell me. The ‘bullet hitting me’ is me then imagining every single possible thing it could be that they are wanting to tell me. My anxiety takes over, my mind races to all worst-case scenarios so I’m ‘bleeding-out’ all my worst imaginative extremes of what might happen. It is never as bad as I have imagined, but the impact on my mental health, heart pace and wellbeing is very real.”

Autistic young adult, 2023

Here's an example:

You receive a text that says:



An autistic teenager might quickly catastrophise and wonder if:

- someone has been hurt
- someone has died
- they have upset someone
- it's nice news but they don't know how to react to it
- they are in trouble
- they don't want to be your friend anymore.

Whereas someone who doesn't catastrophise might just wonder what it might be and wait until the next message comes through.

If you do catastrophise – it is helpful to be aware that you do this. Then, if you find yourself catastrophising, you can try to work backwards to the facts; what do you actually know about the situation?

Be kind to yourself and understand that this is just something you do, and is not something you need to feel bad about.

It can sometimes be helpful to talk to someone you trust to help you manage catastrophising and its effect. Often, other people might be able to provide you with alternative scenarios and possibilities about what might happen, and this can help reduce the impact of our catastrophic thinking.

Autistic joy

“

“Autistic joy’ describes the all-encompassing, very intense feeling of joy and excitement that many autistic people experience. This may be over things which seem small to other people (but definitely aren’t small!).”

Emily Katy, 2023

Many autistic people talk about experiencing intense feelings of joy and excitement. They speak about getting joy from a range of things, such as...



Some autistic people say that it can be so intense it consumes their full world at that moment in time.

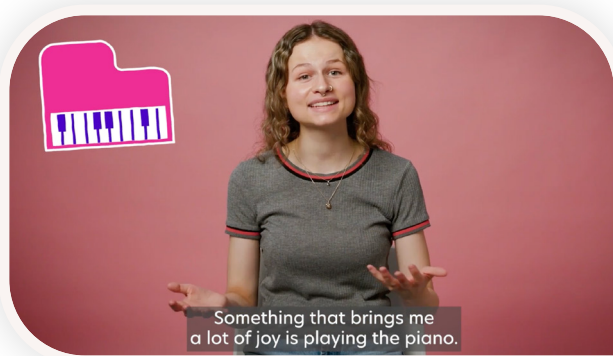
Often, autistic people find joy in the things that many non-autistic people can miss, like the intricacies of nature, the reassuring calmness of repetition or the sheer joy of info-dumping on your favourite topic.

There are lots of things about being autistic that many non-autistic people often only think about in a negative way, but some of those experiences could also be joyful. One example is the extra intense way of experiencing things that many autistic people have. We know this can come with its challenges (as we have already looked at), but can also be something that is joyful.

“I feel joy in my whole body, like sparks igniting.”

Emily Katy, 2023

”



If you've not watched it already, make sure you look at the film on [Exploring your identity](#) to see autistic people talking about what brings them joy.

All autistic people might tell you something different about autistic joy - here's just a few more examples of how people feel about it:

"For myself, autistic joy comes from several areas. I experience sensory joy from being in water..., I experience it when I am playing The Sims or watching classic Disney films, or googling niche facts when I want to find something out I don't know yet."

Sarah Boon, 2024

"That excitement when you get to feel the things you love... it's when my mind's not rattling around with a million different things... it's locked onto that interest."

James Ward-Sinclair, 2023

"I've recently developed a very deep interest in tea, specifically herbal teas and matcha tea... everyone that I meet learns about tea... it brings me joy to be imparting that knowledge to the world."

Purple Ella, 2023

"For me, autistic joy is being unafraid to really like something, having almost a child-like happiness and maybe even stimming vocally or physically. It makes someone light up."

Nellie Allsop, 2024

Summary

It is important for everyone to understand their own identity, likes and preferences as best as possible. This means continuing to keep learning more about yourself as you get older.

The guide ***Setting yourself up for success*** is a useful tool to learn what things might be best to support your needs.

If you are interested in finding out more, please look at our “**Other resources that might be useful**” document at www.autism.org.uk/knowyourself.





The National Autistic Society is a charity registered in England and Wales (269425) and in Scotland (SC039427) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England (No.1205298), registered office Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH.