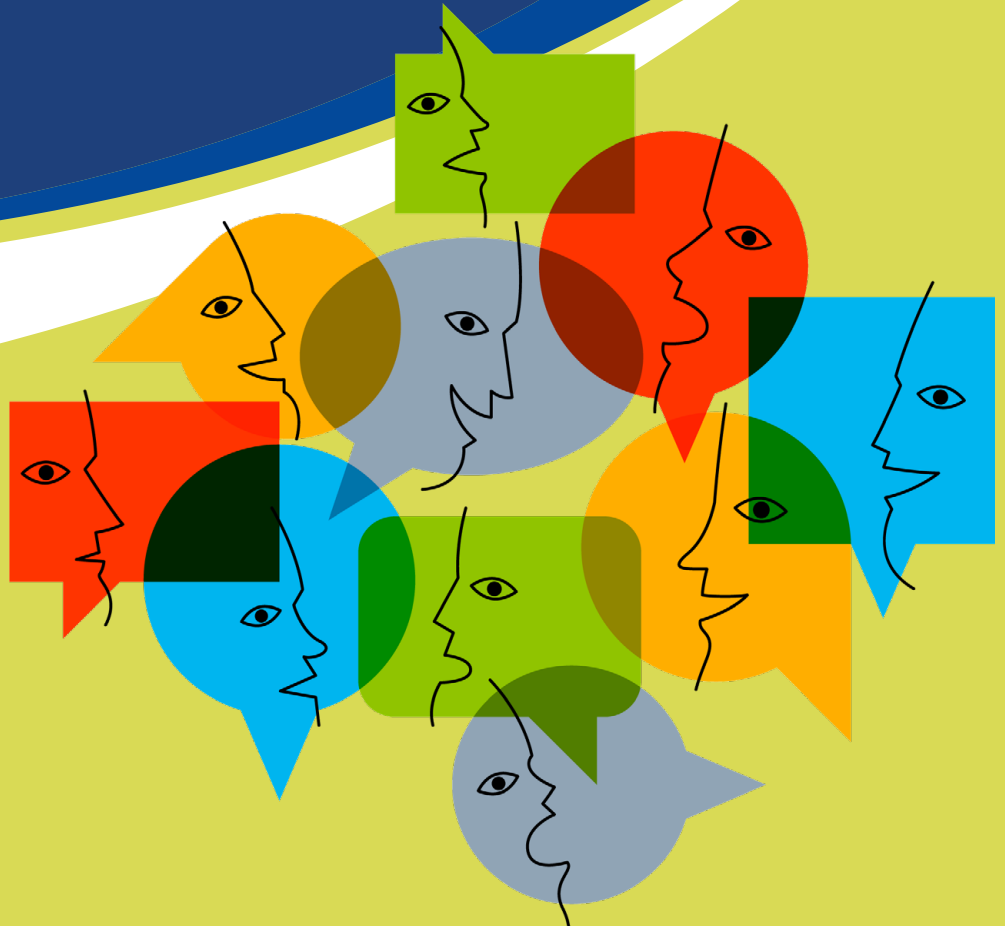




Discussing Autistic Traits

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When discussing autistic traits, it can be difficult to describe them in a way that does not either (1) focus primarily on deficits or (2) undermine the levels of support individuals may need. This tip sheet is designed to explain why a deficit-based approach can be harmful as well as offer suggestions for how to discuss autistic traits in a respectful but accurate way.

❑ **According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – 5th Edition (DSM-5), a person may receive an autism diagnosis when the following criteria are met:**

1. Persistent difficulties with social-emotional reciprocity, reading non-vocal cues, and maintaining relationships.
2. Demonstrate repetitive movements, prefer reliability/routines, have highly focused interests, and/or have different reactions to sensory input.

❑ **Why is this problematic?**

These are presented as “deficits” and “abnormal” characteristics. This terminology is not only harmful but implies that there is a standard or “norm” for these skills that is both achievable and expected to be met.

What constitutes something as a “deficit” or “abnormal”? These qualifiers present anything other than neurotypical as a negative that needs to be corrected.

❑ **While the stigmatizing language in the diagnostic criteria needs to be corrected, that does not mean these areas are not difficult for autistic individuals.**

“I personally don’t find it necessarily bad to state that some features of autism (particularly social communication impairments) are indeed deficits (e.g., difficulty in recognizing others’ emotions, difficulties with pragmatic language, difficulties picking up on nonverbal cues). That being said, I tend to use the term ‘difficulty’ when describing social deficits.”

~Zack Williams, self-advocate

Autistic individuals can still face difficulties when navigating their social environment, but this difficulty can often be attributed to the prioritization of neurotypical communication and behavior in this environment (see [“Disability vs. Disorder vs. Difference”](#) for more information).

What are some neurodiversity-affirming ways to describe autistic traits?

Sensory Experiences	Focused Interests	Social Communication Differences
Demonstration of either hyper- or hyposensitivity to aspects in the environment.	Demonstration of stereotypy (i.e., repetitive patterns of responding for vocal and/or motor behaviors).	Difficulty with engaging socially and emotionally connecting with others.
Comfort in engaging in stereotypy with it primarily serving as a form of self-regulation.	Strong preference for certain routines and/or patterns that may result from black-and-white or all-or-nothing thinking.	May not adhere to cultural norms regarding non-vocal communication and/or difficulty understanding these norms.
Internal and/or external meltdowns when there is a disconnect between wants, needs, and control over the environment.	Focused attention to areas of passionate interest, ranging across a variety of topics.	Differences in communication styles may make it harder to form and maintain relationships.

❑ **Levels of support needed will vary across individuals and across traits.**

While some autistic individuals may have strengths in some areas (e.g., communication), they may still feel impacted in other areas (e.g., self-regulation). *“High-” and “low-functioning” are therefore not only discouraged, but are inaccurate, as autistic individuals can vary on their support needs across different areas.*

In addition, autistic clients should be included in the goal-writing process as much as possible to advocate what areas they would like support in and how they can achieve their defined goals of increasing their quality of life.

❑ **Summary:**

Although there are areas where autistic individuals may need support, describing these characteristics objectively rather than negatively can reduce harmful stigmas against autism. It’s also important to remember that while these traits are broadly described, there are still variations of how these traits are presented both across and within individuals. As such, it is *necessary* to personalize support to meet that individual’s unique needs and to include them as part of the goal-writing process.

❑ **Additional Resources:**

- » [Evidence-Based Support for Autistic People Across the Lifespan: Maximising Potential, Minimising Barriers, and Optimising the Person-Environment Fit](#)

This resource was created with direction, input, and feedback from TRIAD’s Advisory Committee. For more information about this committee, please visit our website on [Community Informed Practice](#).