

Autism, Redefined

Words matter. How we talk about, explain, depict, and describe autism can have a significant impact on not only the lives of individuals on the autism spectrum and their loved ones, but also society overall. No matter one's age, presentation, communication differences, perceived level of cognitive ability, and/or the complexity of their needs, every individual is deserving of respect, dignity, autonomy, support, and presumption of competence.

Would *you* like to be referred to as “disordered” for the way your brain naturally works? What about being described as a “problem” in need of solving? How hurtful would it be to be discussed and treated in a manner that belittles your personhood and disregards your privacy? Would you find it acceptable that regardless of your opinion, outside parties are granted authority to categorize and essentially “rate” your value as a human being, impacting the way you are perceived and treated by others?

Be part of the solution as opposed to the problem. Help eradicate stigma! Use these tips to help encourage respectful, objective, non-stigmatizing communication about autism, neurodiversity, and disability in general.

- **Avoid using functioning labels** such as “high-functioning” autism or “low-functioning” autism; would *you* want to be described as being “*low*?”
- **Avoid subjective terms** such as “profound autism” or “mild autism” which are imprecise and don't tell you anything meaningful about the person.
- **Use neutral, non-stigmatizing terms:** “autism” instead of “autism spectrum disorder,” “nonspeaking” instead of “nonverbal,” “autism” or “ASC” instead of “ASD” in everyday, non-clinical communication.
- **Respect people's language preferences.** Some people use person-first language (“with autism”). Others use identity-first language (“autistic”). Some use either, both, or something different (“on the autism spectrum”).

Autism, Redefined

Neurodiversity-Aligned Description of Autism

Deficit-Based (DSM) Description of Autism

“Variations in the way the world is experienced and the way learning, communication, and movement occurs.”

“Sensitive hearing, vision, touch, sense of smell, and/or taste.”

“May direct one’s eyes away or use hands or other body parts differently to regulate input.”

“May develop skills on a different timetable or in a different order than expected.”

“Might develop the ability to predict consequences and control impulses at a different age than non-autistic peers.”

“**Persistent deficits** in social communication and interaction across multiple contexts.”

“**Deficits** in social-emotional reciprocity.”

“**Deficits** in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction.”

“**Poorly integrated** verbal and nonverbal communication.”

“**Abnormalities** in eye contact and body language.”

“**Deficits** in understanding and use of gestures.”

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Neurodiversity-Aligned Description of Autism

Deficit-Based (DSM) Description of Autism

“A deep passion for interests which allows for focusing in great detail on specific topics.”

“Individualistic; interests or other characteristics might not conform to that of others.”

“Intrinsic need for stimulation and/or movement to focus, comfort anxiety, express joy, and/or process information.”

“Movements and/or expressions may include rocking, flapping, spinning, humming, ‘stimming’ movements, dancing, jumping.”

“Recognition of visual, musical, social, and/or emotional patterns that others may miss.”

“Often emotionally intuitive, picking up on strong emotions very easily. Might become overwhelmed due to sensitive emotional radar.”

“**Restricted, repetitive** patterns of behavior, interests, or activities.”

“Highly **restricted**, fixated interests that are **abnormal** in their intensity and/or focus.”

“**Stereotyped** or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, and/or speech.”

“**Insistence** on sameness, **inflexible** adherence to routines.”

“**Ritualized** patterns and/or verbal nonverbal behavior.”

“**Hyper- or hypo-reactivity** to sensory input.”

“**Unusual** interests in sensory aspects of the environment.”

Autism, Redefined

Neurodiversity-Aligned Description of Autism

Deficit-Based (DSM) Description of Autism

“Benefits from accommodations in the environment, learning, public venues, employment, and society in order to experience the world, learn, work, play, and live with the same ease as others.”

“High-alert system.”

“Increased risk for exhaustion, malnutrition, anxiety, and/or depression without proper supports/accommodations.”

“The responsibility of having an autistic loved one and/or being an autistic person is intense and requires flexibility, an open mind, exertion, and mindfulness.”

“The fewer accommodations and support, the more frustration. The more accommodations and support, the less frustration.”

“Autism is a disability, NOT a behavior problem.”

“**Symptoms** must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed **limited capacities**.”

“**Symptoms** may be masked by learned strategies in later life).”

“**Symptoms** cause clinically significant **impairment** in social, occupational, and/or other important areas of current functioning.

“**Deficits** in social communication cause noticeable **impairments**.”

“**Inflexibility** of behavior.”

“Difficulty coping with change creates **interference with functioning**.”