

Autism Acceptance Week

27 March – 2 April 2023

It is [World Autism Acceptance Week](#) this week, 27 March – 2 April, and **World Autism Awareness Day** on Sunday 2 April.

In recognition of this, the EDI leads in the **Departments of Archaeology**, and of **Classics and Ancient History at Durham University** have joined together to give students and staff who have experiences of autism a forum.

The following slides compile experiences of members of our community, some contributed anonymously, some not. The aim of the collaboration of experiences is to foster greater awareness, and greater confidence and sense of belonging for all of us.

The following pages are provided for acceptance-raising purposes and do not constitute a claim of authority. There are numerous online sources which can provide further information about autism. Links to some are provided at the end of this document.

Experiences of autism vary, and your own experiences and views may differ from those represented here. If you wish to raise an issue or report any errors, we value and welcome your contact.


All the participants included were informed of the use of their submissions and contributed their experiences with their consent. Their contributions will be used solely for the purpose of this online acceptance-raising campaign in connection with World Autism Acceptance Week 2023. All participants are free to ask for withdrawal of their contribution at any time.

Did you know?

- It is no longer considered helpful to consider autism as a linear spectrum.
- A wheel is more often used to gauge very varied challenges and strengths. The wheels used vary themselves.
- The term 'Asperger's' is used variably, and both that and the terms 'high-functioning' and 'low-functioning' tend to be avoided by some.
- The acronym ASD, meaning Autistic Spectrum Disorder, is avoided by some, who feel 'disorder' unhelpfully pathologises autism, rather than seeing it as part of the full spectrum of human diversity.

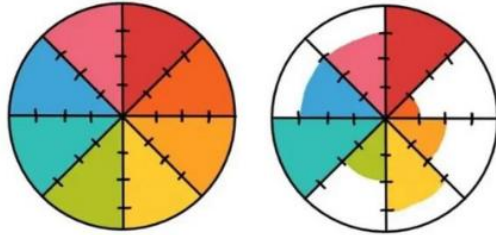
Autism Spectrum

The Autism Spectrum is NOT linear



less autistic very autistic

The Autism Spectrum looks more like:



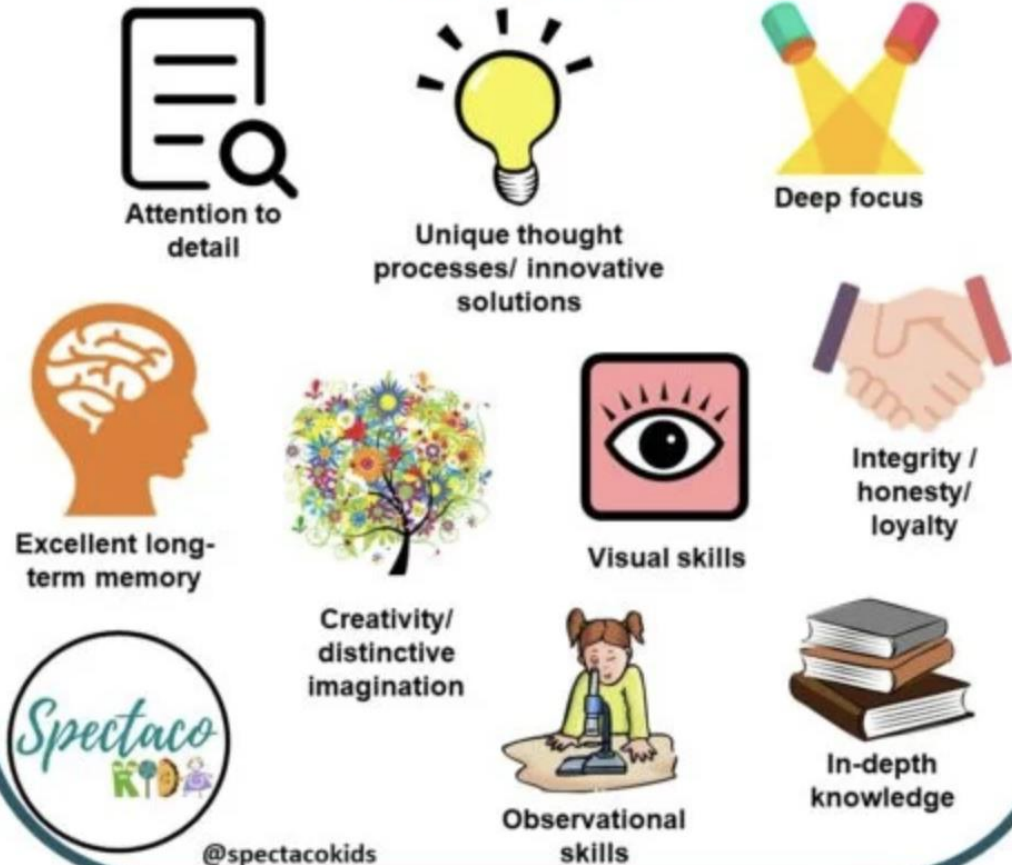
- Social differences
- interests
- repetitions
- sensory sensitivities
- emotional regulation
- perception
- executive functioning
- other

Terms like "high functioning", "low functioning" are harmful and outdated.

Autism_sketches

@autism_sketches, on Instagram
<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb2ykmTM0TN/?hl=en>

AUTISM STRENGTHS AND ABILITIES



- Autism affects ‘executive functioning’, which can impact things like verbal or written expression, and social interaction, but also things like time management, prioritisation, organisation and ability to switch tasks quickly.
- The strengths and abilities of autistic people can include keen observation and attention to detail, and distinctive powers of insight, pattern-spotting and connection making.
- It is no surprise that all spheres of the arts and sciences benefit from the inclusion of autistic people.

Infographic from:
<https://www.learningsuccessblog.com/infograph/autism-strengths-and-abilities-infographic>

Autism in Academia

- According to a [2021 LSE post by Chloe Farahar](#), 2019-20 HESA data reported 175 academics in the UK are autistic, out of 223,525 academics – only 0.08%, which is out of kilter with the estimated 1% of the population.
- If in keeping with that estimate, there would be over 2,000 more autistic people in academia.
- This implies there may be a stigma and fear of the impact of ‘unmasking’ on career prospects.
- Changing goal-posts and expectations of what it means to be an academic could disadvantage some brilliant scholars.
- Chloe Farahar has a *Call to Action for Autism in Academia*, available through the link above or here: <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/lived-experiences-of-ableism-in-academia>


“

I've always felt I was 'different', more bookish than my family, more rigid than friends, more chaotic than other mums - it didn't make sense... only once my eldest child was diagnosed did I pursue my own diagnosis.

The ease with which the experts agreed astounded me... I'm 'obviously autistic' (and also ADHD it turns out) - but I'm still masking, it's hard to unmask - and it's not healthy or sustainable...

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Anon.



“ Being diagnosed as autistic late in my career has made me realise two things: on the one hand, autism does bring quite a lot of challenges as an academic and we certainly must work to make sure we get the support we need - and fight for it if necessary - but on the other hand, many of the most important things that I have contributed to the understanding of medieval archaeology, I don't think I would have spotted had I not been autistic. Remember that the Neurotypicals need us to help them break out of their conventional thinking! ”

Prof. Guy Halsall

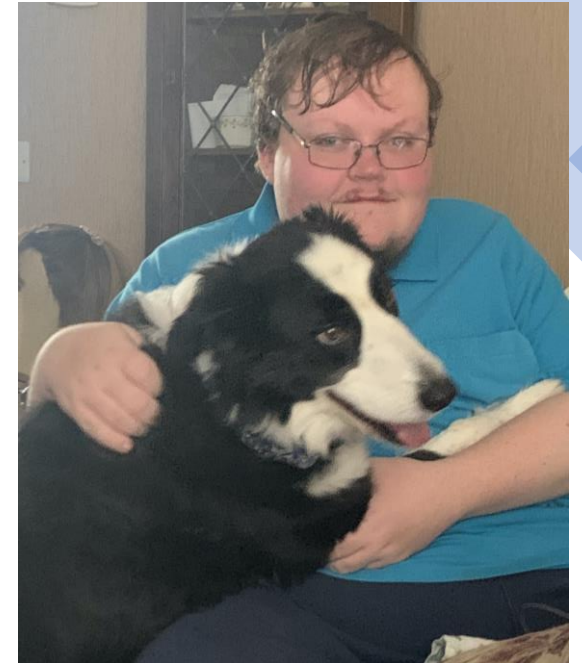


“ When I was younger, I never gave any thought that I was neurodiverse. I just thought that I was odd, like my father, somewhat eccentric. I knew I was different to other children, I was more interested in puzzles and toys that had moving parts, while other children were more concerned with football.. I was given a diagnosis in primary school, but by senior school I did not want people to know that I had issues.

People do misunderstand neurodiversity, but I find it depends on the person, although I do find people have a better understanding now. In the past, I was bullied because people thought I was mentally slower than them. They had not understanding of autism and they misinterpreted the behaviour of someone with neurodiversity.

In archaeology, I find concentrating for long periods of time and multitasking arduous, while team-working is difficult due to social awkwardness. Being different allows me to view everything in archaeology in a holistic way.

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Adam Hardy

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Nell G.

I was diagnosed with autism aged 16. My diagnosis made everything make sense. In primary school, it was obvious that languages were my thing, and once I started Latin in Year 7, and Greek in Year 9, I knew that all I ever wanted to do was translate! The way my brain works helps with learning vocabulary and grammar tables, and my attention to detail comes in handy too. I'm also quite obsessed with etymologies of English words, made even better when they have Greek or Latin origins!

New social situations, the unknown, and change cause a lot of anxiety but I always want to push myself out of my comfort zone so that one day the things I always thought impossible will be something I do with confidence. An example of this is attending university and moving out of home.

I became determined to get to where I wanted to be no matter what. Coming to university was a huge challenge, particularly at the beginning, but my love of Classics encouraged me to persevere.

Often I have to do things differently to other people. But that doesn't mean I can't do them.

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I am not autistic myself, but I know a few people who have been diagnosed or who are in assessment in middle age. They have found the diagnosis and even information about autism has transformed their understanding of why they have had certain struggles, especially at work, and how they feel about themselves.

International Women’s Day this year had the theme of *#EmbraceEquity*, and this is something that really needs to be considered and understood.

Why do we mean by equity?

What would be an equitable workload for neurodiverse and autistic people?

This is really problematic, so the theory and practice of this needs to be considered at a high management level, who can support Occupational Health, Faculties and very taxed Departments through management training, and providing access to tools such as digital tools that ease (rather than complicate) work and the government Access to Work scheme. We have an opportunity now to ask for this.

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Dr. Pam Graves

I have had a long career as a cited scholar and teacher, and am only now undergoing the long assessment which may possibly result in me being diagnosed with autism (and/or ADHD).

I wanted to highlight how some (of course not all) situations, which seem perfectly navigable for many people, utterly floor and incapacitate me, and it has significantly diminished my ability to act in the world in certain situations, especially work situations, since I can remember.

It is what I call the utter ‘overwhelmedness’ of some circumstances. I cannot think straight or calmly disentangle a pathway; I am blinded by panic and immobility; I become overwhelmed with despair and depression, made worse knowing that people expect me to be able to do stuff that they can.

More insidious, though, is my brain’s seeming reluctance to do stuff ahead of deadlines. It screams to run away; refuses it like an animal turns away from an obvious poison or danger.

Experience has shown me that I almost entirely have my best ideas and impetus only when I have severe pressure of deadlines. It sounds like an excuse, but I cannot properly describe the visceral incapacity to settle down to certain tasks. This is my everyday (non-)functioning.

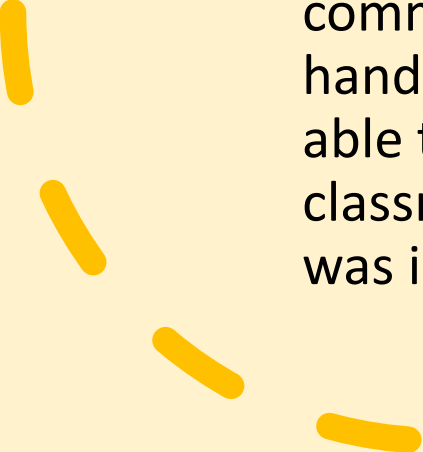
As a result, I end up operating on frequent crisis management, which is exhausting for everyone. I had no idea that this could be part of unrecognised neurodiversity, rather than just my failings!

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Autism and ADHD is more common now than ever, but what goes unnoticed is the comorbidity between the two. Being diagnosed with the two in the space of 6 months was highly challenging, as I was yet to understand one before being hit with another. Alongside this, came the misconception others held that they both effect you in the same way or one was more overbearing than the other, which unfortunately is not the case; they both included very annoying and challenging symptoms that are problematic 100% of the time.

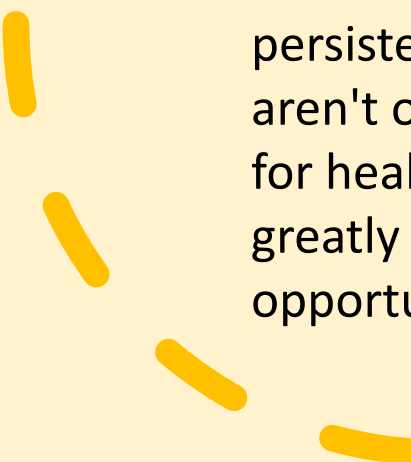


With only being diagnosed at 17, suffering from ASD made every 'normal' teenage social situation impossible due to my lack of ability to communicate, express emotions and actions appropriately. On the other hand, my ADHD made every educational advance a struggle, not being able to concentrate or being overly stimulated so much I have to leave classrooms and when it came to exams, keeping a timetable or a schedule was insufferable due to boredom and no real motivation for structure.

Continued...



With a lot of ASD and ADHD patients, emotional outbursts are common when not provided the right support, which my high school and college did not. They lacked engaging methods of study support, they lack an official that specialised within these conditions, making continuity with my work routine extremely difficult, which is a vital stimulant many sufferers require, not to mention the simplicity of having organised social clubs or gatherings specifically for these disabilities. Without these services, my education suffered greatly and to add insult to injury, with my struggles and frustration came anger from teachers and head of years on the belief 'I was choosing to act out'. This unfairness and attitude only added to my resentment of institutions, and it is currently is still a growing process to trust officials. If handled appropriately, this would be nonexistent.



All that was needed was slight adaptations: supportive and patient workers who are persistent in aiding with the maintenance of routine with sufferers, as admittedly we aren't our own best motivators; proposals of scheduled groups or creative classes to allow for healthy expression. These little adjustments would benefit ASD and ADHD patients greatly and would make sure we get the same out of our education and social opportunities as everyone else. ”

Anon.

Ben

“ I think the first obvious clue is how I socialise. I have been described as talking at odd angles and not fully explaining my train of thought before talking as though it naturally flows into the conversation.

It makes it difficult to write essays because my train of thought is apparent to me but sometimes doesn't translate. I alternatively have a tendency to deconstruct and over complicate questions, leading me to do lots of work which is a waste of time and ends up being graded poorly. ”

Ben

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Studying Classics while being autistic has its challenges.

For instance, it's hard to read ancient texts – something that requires a sensitivity to the context of the ancient world, a subtle understanding of idiom and metaphor – while having a condition characterised by difficulty understanding social context and metaphorical language. But despite these challenges, there aren't (m)any activities I enjoy more than reading Classical literature, and I'm very glad to be studying Classics here at Durham!

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Anon.



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Being an autistic academic is a very mixed experience. Many traits that come along with an autistic mind are valuable strengths in research: pattern recognition, systemising, attention to detail, passion for topics of interest, and tenacity, to name a few. For me, it's allowed me to bring a different perspective on interpreting data than other researchers. But I really dislike the whole “superpower” narrative, because while there's nothing wrong with having a different mind, realistically existing in an environment that wasn't designed for people like you comes with inherent difficulties that are disabling and require support.

Autistic and non-autistic people communicate differently, and typically the burden of bridging the gap falls on autistic people. Conferences and social events can be especially hard and exhausting for us, with long periods of social performance and sensory overload. Hectic workloads and juggling demands coming from many different directions are also very stressful and difficult for a mind set up for deep focus.

But all of the difficulties are navigable, and strengths can be enhanced, with the right support. The challenge for higher education institutions who are serious about being inclusive is to create environments where many different kinds of minds can thrive. ”



Anon.



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I have known that I was neurodiverse since I was a child. I have not interacted with many people but I have not felt singled out over my autism.

I do wish I had more support such as prompts because I have struggled this year to stay afloat with work. Non-academically, just leaving my room to do something was a struggle to be honest, I rarely did anything outside apart from lessons.

The most difficult thing to me was/is researching and writing essays. The lessons were all fine albeit fast, but trying to find my own sources and then to read them within the time given alone was a major struggle as my brain keeps skipping text or switching off after barely a page. The writing is also a major struggle but mostly because of the reading fight. I wish it was easier to find a source and determine if it were appropriate or not. I always feel like I am talking nonsense or something irrelevant. The large grey area and my own lack of confidence make this worse for me, and I do not know how to work on it.

I never found a study method that worked for me, and music doesn't help so I can get bored quickly which is no help. But once I do have an idea I actually like, writing it down can be done rapidly, so most my essay writing switches between a snail's pace and sudden progress.

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Anon.



Resources

There are a myriad of resources to help you learn more about autism, which you can find through an online search.

We list just a few here:

- Durham University has specific online modules for both students and staff through Oracle Learn.
- The Open University has a free online course on [Understanding Autism](#).
- [Asterion – Celebrating Neurodiversity in Classics](#). Co-founded by Durham's own Justine Wolfenden.
- The [Chartered Institute for Archaeology's Neurodiversity](#) (CIfA) page lists a number of resources including courses.
- [Enabled Archaeology Foundation](#) – there is an EAF session at the CIfA Conference in Nottingham in April this year.
- [The National Autistic Society](#)

Austism and the Academy – some links

- [How can we enable neurodivergent academics to thrive?](#)
- [Neurodiversity in Academia: The Autistic advantage in qualitative research](#)
- [Autistic academics seek inclusivity to combat burnout](#)
- [Milton, Damian \(2020\) *Autism and the academy: a personal reflection*](#)
- [Jones, Sandra C. \(2022\) 'Autistics working in academia: What are the barriers and facilitators?'](#)
- If you are a neurodiverse student at Durham, who has not declared your neurodiversity to the Disability Support team, you can do so by contacting them through their website: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/colleges-and-student-experience/student-support-andwellbeing/disability-support/>