

*The way people talk about my Autism shapes the way I think about myself. I choose to surround myself with voices that raise me up.”*  
~ Emma Ward, Autistic advocate



To the people who support me,

This is an invitation to be one of those voices that raise me up.

As someone close to me, you are in a position of power: power to influence whether I feel accepted, secure in the knowledge I am loved, worthy and enough as the person I am – or not. Your words have the power to raise me up and let me live my life fully as Autistic, not despite my Autism, or make me feel excluded and alone.

I'm not referring simply to your compliments or words of encouragement. I'm talking about choosing to use respectful language that validates my Autistic identity.

Why might I need to hear respectful language from you, you might wonder.

Well, over my lifetime, I've had medical professionals reduce me to the sum of my deficits. As soon as I was "diagnosed" as having "Autism Spectrum Disorder", my passions were recast as "restricted interests", my adaptations to manage my heightened sensitivity were labelled "rigid, repetitive behaviours" and "interventions" were prescribed to "treat" the "symptoms" of my "disorder" for an "optimal outcome" of a "normal" adult, while fundraising bodies search for a "cure". Growing up, professionals spoke freely in front of me of my impairments, assuming my lack of eye contact and busyness meant I was not listening, when in fact, this is how I absorb information most intently. This is what Autistic whole-body listening looks like.

When I hear such stigmatising language used to describe something that is so integral to my identity, I come to understand my Autism as something that is wrong, an affliction that ideally needs treating in lieu of a cure. I am led to believe that this thing I have called Autism is wrong and I'm inherently disordered.

I'm a sensitive soul, so I internalise this "brokenness" and it is reinforced each time I encounter this language. I've sometimes resented my Autism, and since my Autism is intrinsic to who I am, there are times when I've even hated myself. I battle with low self-esteem and anxiety, and likely everyone blames my Autism rather than the language society uses to describe it – the language that became my inner voice.

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Since we started hearing of the lived experience and collective knowledge of Autistic adults, my neurokin and I have established a lexicon of respectful language that will help protect our and future generations from experiencing the internalised brokenness that seems inherent in our predecessors. By choosing to adopt neurodiversity-affirming language, you affirm my Autistic identity and preserve my sense of self and intactness. Below, I share some respectful language with you in the hope that you choose to adopt it and become a voice of validation in my and all Autistic people's lives.

### **Instead of Autism Spectrum Disorder, we use Autism Spectrum Difference or simply, Autism.**

Autism is a neurological difference in the nervous system which begins in utero and makes Autistic individuals think, move, interact, sense and process atypically or differently to a standardised norm. Since Autism is a different way of processing, it is not a disease or disorder. It is a form of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is a term that refers to the rich diversity of human minds and is an undeniable aspect of the biodiversity that is found in human beings.

### **Similarly, instead of Sensory Processing Disorder, we say sensory processing differences.**

### **I do not “have Autism”; I am Autistic.**

Historically, people were taught that the respectful way of speaking about Autistic people was to use “person-first language” (PFL), i.e., “a person with Autism” and that the phrase “Autistic person” was reductive because the person is more than their Autism. However, as more of us share our lived experience, we now know that the majority of Autistic people choose to identify as Autistic\* which is “identity-first language” (IFL).

As Reframing Autism founder and Autistic researcher Dr Melanie Heyworth explains, “Ultimately, you can't separate Autism from personhood, much in the same way you can't (and shouldn't) separate race, religion, or cultural heritage from identity and personhood. Calling myself Autistic acknowledges how integral Autism is to my sense of self. It recognises that my Autism is not a secondary or lesser part of myself. It signals that my Autism is fundamental to my identity and that I embrace that Autistic part of myself, as something of which I can be proud.”

### **My functioning level changes day to day, so please don't refer to my Autism as “high-functioning” or “low-functioning”.**

Human functioning is never static. It changes whether you've had a good night's sleep or not, whether you're sick or healthy, or whether you've had your morning coffee or not. The same holds true for me. My functioning depends entirely on the context in which I find myself. Instead of using functioning labels, which are dehumanising and reductive, please acknowledge that the level of support I need varies across domains, and my challenges and needs will shift accordingly.

\*In a 2022 online poll of 11,212 people, 76.16% of Autistic adults responded that they exclusively use identity-first language when referring to their Autism. (Chris Bonnelo, [www.autisticnotweird.com](http://www.autisticnotweird.com))

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**Please refer to my “co-occurring conditions” rather than my “comorbid conditions”.**

The term “comorbid” specifically relates to diseases or medical conditions that are present in a patient. As I have a different neurotype rather than a disease or disorder, I have “co-occurring conditions”. Similarly, I have Autistic traits rather than “symptoms”.

**Please refer to me being “identified as Autistic”, rather than “diagnosed”.**

I didn’t catch my Autism or acquire it from a vaccine. My Autistic neurotype was always present; it just took time to become identifiable – much like giftedness.

**I do not require “treatments” and “interventions”.**

I require support services, respectful therapies, workplace accommodations and unconditional love.

**I have individual, specific needs rather than “special needs”.**

In fact, all people have individual needs. My needs are different to the next person’s, but no more special.

**Similarly, I need inclusive employment rather than “disability employment”.**

**If I shut down and stop talking, I have become situationally mute rather than “selectively mute”.**

My silence is an involuntary reaction caused by the overwhelming stress of the situation, so I do not “select” or choose to become mute.

**Autistic adults may be nonspeaking but they are not “non-verbal”.**

Excited whoops, contented sighs, spontaneous laughter and echolalic emulation are just some of the rich language my neurokin draw on, even when they don’t use mouth words.

**Finally, just like all people, I have passions and hobbies rather than “restricted” or “special interests”.**

My sense of curiosity and wonder is equally valuable and something to be celebrated, not pathologised.

Thank you for taking the time to familiarise yourself with neurodiversity-affirming language. The terms you use for my Autism will colour my perception of myself and my peers’ perception of me (and my Autistic friends) for years to come. With your validating voice added to the chorus, I can accept myself as lovable just as I am. And my inner voice will assure me, “I am different – not less.”

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