

Understanding Supports for Autistic Mental Health

This video series was produced from the Autism Mental Health Literacy Guide by the Autism Mental Health Literacy Project (AM-HeLP) Group.

This video is one of six in the series about different aspects of autism mental health literacy. For this video, we will talk about: “Understanding Supports for Autistic Mental Health”

Support for Autistic mental health is different for each person. Finding supports can be challenging for an Autistic person. In this video, we will talk about some supports that can be helpful and ways that Autistic people can know if they have the right kind of support.

Autistic people may need supports at home, school, work and more. Here, we will briefly talk about what Autistic people may need such as: Autistic acceptance, reassurance, connection, and patience.

Autistic acceptance is accepting autism and Autistic differences. It isn't just about awareness. It is about accepting people for who they are. Acceptance includes understanding that autism is diverse and embracing it. It involves amplifying Autistic voices and understanding that Autistic people are the experts of their own lived experiences.

Testimonial – “Autistic acceptance means working with who we are and not trying to change us.” – Courtney Weaver, Adviser

Helping or encouraging an Autistic person to clarify what needs to happen, when, and how, and communicate their own plan, can be empowering.

Many Autistic people spend a lot of their lives masking to fit in socially or putting extra energy into navigating a non-Autistic society. So, it is important that an Autistic person feels safe to be themselves and define their own boundaries. It can also help to connect with them based on their interests.

Testimonial – “If the people I'm coming into contact with are neurodivergent, then the experience is usually quite positive. There's a better chance that we will speak each other's language; there's a better chance that we will see and hear each other. But, when I come across non-neurodivergent people or more typical society, then I have a lot more difficulty with others and them connecting with me. It's almost like we speak a different language.” – Patricia George, Adviser

It may take longer for some Autistic people to process information around them. So being patient can help.

Testimonial – “Patience is probably the most important thing in interacting with me. I’m a very slow person, I take longer to process information, to say what I mean and to do certain tasks. When people allow me the time to be myself and to do things in my own time in space, it makes me feel welcome.” – Alex Echakowitz, Adviser

Stress can lead some Autistic people to experience meltdowns, shutdowns, or burnout. These experiences are not diagnosable mental health problems, but they can contribute to them, or worsen existing mental health difficulties.

If you are with an Autistic person experiencing a meltdown, shutdown or burnout, be calm and reassuring, give them space and let them take their time, and listen to what they might need.

Testimonial – “I find being offered water very helpful. So, asking beforehand if an Autistic person has instructions in case of meltdowns, or maybe even an instruction card or medic alert bracelet.” – Patricia George, Adviser

Some Autistic people may not be able to communicate verbally when they are in distress. If possible, help them get to a safe and quiet place away from things like bright lights, loud noises, and other people.

Advocating for Autistic people means helping them express their needs, protect their rights, represent their interests, or help access services they may need.

Testimonial – “An Autistic ally is someone who puts Autistic voices forward and doesn’t speak over us, or for us. Someone who is able to check their privilege at the door and truly advocate for and support Autistic lives and voices.” – ShanEda Lumb, Adviser

It is important to know when advocacy is the right thing to do. Being a good ally means knowing when to pass the microphone to the Autistic person and empowering them to use it. There are many ways to be an Autistic ally, for example:

- Viewing advocacy as partnership with Autistic people
- Building trust with Autistic people
- Supporting Autistic self-advocacy
- Asking the Autistic person what type of support they need
- Being willing to learn about Autistic people’s rights, advocacy and activism history

Testimonial – “An Autistic ally is someone who defers to and amplifies Autistic voices in whatever form or, via whatever platform, those voices exist. An ally is someone who fights for the rights of Autistic people alongside with us.” – Anonymous, Adviser

There are different ways Autistic people can find supports. Some Autistic people find support through online communities, reaching out to Autistic-led advocacy organizations or support groups, reading

books, magazines, or blogs by Autistic writers. It's important to remember that online interactions can be a way to connect, but we also need to be safe and know when to disconnect.

Testimonial – “The best thing that I have found to support me, is community. The autism community understands Autistic people. I run several online support and community groups, and it is those communities where I have found the best advice. The spectrum is huge, so if 1 group isn't a good fit, another will be. Autistic people online (there are few in person groups) are a great resource. A lot of mental health issues are a result of isolation from other Autistics, so meeting up online, sharing experiences, and sharing coping skills, really has a positive influence on self-esteem. Knowing you are heard, understood, and supported by others LIKE YOU! is the best.” – ShanEda Lumb, Adviser

When building relationships or finding supports, choosing who to share information with and who to seek support from is a personal choice. It is up to you to decide when and who you want to share information with.

Good support depends on the relationship with a trusted person or professional. Here are some things to consider before choosing a support person or professional:

- You want to feel connected and safe with that person. Trust your gut when deciding if you like the person who is working with you or not.

Testimonial – “It's okay if you don't like them, you can find another therapist.” – Elsbeth Dodman, Adviser

- For some Autistic adults, it may be important that a therapist who has experience with autism. It is okay to ask the person if they do. Finding a professional with expertise or specialization in autism may help to avoid experiences that are not helpful.

Testimonial – “They accept Autistic traits; they understand the complex minds of Autistic people. They don't just revert to the old standard tactics that work for neurotypical people.” – Aaron Bouma, Adviser

When looking for a support person or professional to help with mental health challenges, look for good characteristics or behaviors in them where:

- They ask for consent and focus on understanding why you act/feel the way you do
- They accept your Autistic traits
- They are honest and patient
- They give all relevant information so you can make informed decisions rather than making decisions for you

You also have to watch out for characteristics or behaviors where:

- They put you down or doubt your autism diagnosis
- They ignore your experiences and what you communicate to them
- They try to “fix” your Autistic traits
- They don’t want to accommodate your needs

Accepting and understanding Autistic differences can make supports more accessible and more helpful. Support needs for Autistic people can look different. Finding supports can take time.

You can find more details and learn more about Autistic supports in the AM-HeLP guide. Knowing more helps more.

Knowing more, helps more.

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More information can be found in **Sections 6 and 7** of the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism.

To learn more about AM-HeLP and to read the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism visit: <https://www.yorku.ca/health/lab/ddmh/am-help/>

Watch the animated video: <https://youtu.be/FEvcGpZi7MU>

Credits

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