

span.toolkit

support me
fact sheet

OTARC | La Trobe University



“Support must have an autistic lens”

An autistic person’s goals, priorities, and needs may differ from healthcare professionals’ expectations. Effective support recognises autistic perspectives and focuses on what each person wants to achieve from therapy or support.

“Stop assuming, start asking”

Autistic people are experts in their own experiences. Making assumptions (especially if an autistic or neuro-affirming lens has not been applied) can lead to misunderstandings, while asking questions supports more accurate, respectful, and effective care.

“Support must be individualised”

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting autistic people. Support needs can vary widely between individuals, so effective care must be tailored to each person’s unique needs, goals, and circumstances.

“Please provide me with options”

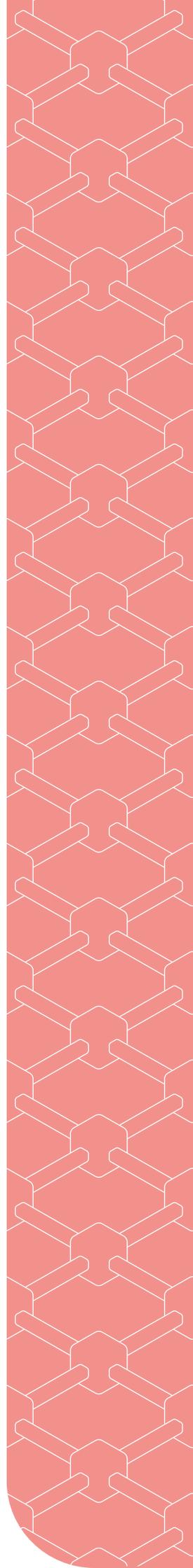
Autistic people have different needs and preferences when engaging with healthcare professionals. Presenting options provides people with an opportunity to choose what works best for them and supports more accessible and accommodating care.

“Commit to learning”

Autistic people often encounter professionals with limited understanding of autism, particularly in adult mental health services, where autism may be considered or confined to the disability sector. Indeed, it is only very recently that the mental health needs of autistic people have been recognised, both within research and applied clinical settings. This can place an unfair burden on autistic people to explain autism or justify their needs to receive effective support for their mental health.

“Create a safe space for me”

Autistic people may have difficulty trusting professionals, particularly if they have had previous negative experiences within hospital, clinical, and mental health settings. Feeling safe is reliant on having an appropriate physical environment that reduces stress and anxiety as well as the quality of the therapeutic relationship, which may take time to establish.



Pillars of Effective Support

This information is based on interviews and focus groups with autistic adults and healthcare professionals who co-produced the span.toolkit.

Support Goals Are Often Misaligned

Autistic people often report a mismatch between what they wanted and what professionals prioritised or provided. Focusing only on symptom reduction, behavioural change, or “normalisation” (which can be traumatising or damaging) doesn’t always align with the autistic person’s needs or goals, such as safety, energy conservation, predictability, and quality of life. When goals were imposed rather than co-developed, support can be experienced as unhelpful or harmful.

Autistic People are Expected to Justify Their Needs

Autistic people commonly describe being required to explain, prove, or defend their needs to receive appropriate accommodations or adjustments. Professionals frequently made assumptions about what autistic people needed rather than asking, which places an unfair burden on autistic people to advocate for themselves while already experiencing distress.

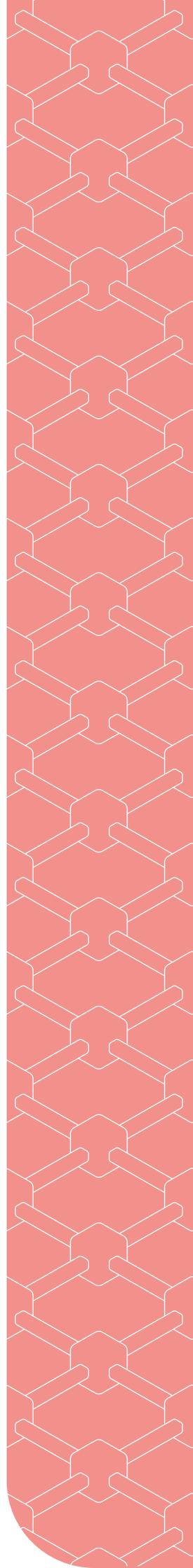
Avoid A One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Support often reflects therapy models and service structures that were developed for non-autistic people and do not fit the needs of autistic people. Fluctuating capacity, sensory processing differences, executive functioning challenges, and burnout may be misinterpreted as non-compliance or lack of motivation, rather than as legitimate barriers to access.

Past Harm Can Shape Current Engagement

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for autistic adults to describe being dismissed, misdiagnosed, or traumatised within mental health systems. These experiences create fear, mistrust, and reluctance to disclose distress. Feeling unsafe is a serious barrier to engagement, disclosure, and continuity of care.

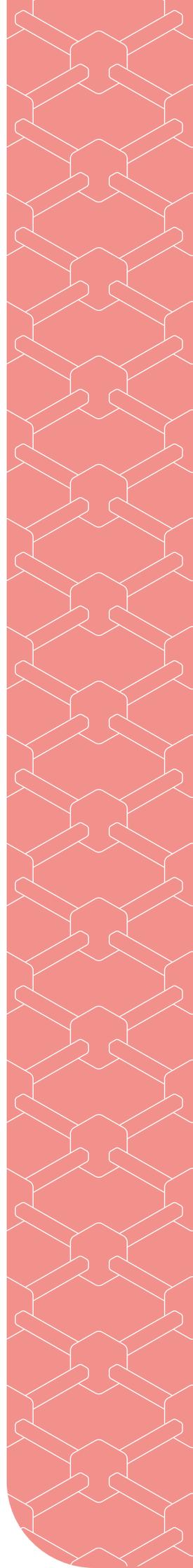
Power Imbalances Limit Shared Decision-Making



Autistic people may feel pressured to agree with professional recommendations or minimise their needs, particularly when support is tied to diagnosis, funding, or service eligibility. This reduces a person's autonomy and makes it harder to advocate for necessary adjustments, pacing, or different approaches to treatment.

Safe Environments and Safe Relationships Matter

Feeling supported depends not only on what is offered, but how it is offered. Sensory-friendly spaces, respectful communication, and a genuine sense of being listened to are critical for autistic people to feel safe enough to engage with therapy or crisis support.



Guidance for Healthcare Professionals: Strategies

Work From an Autistic Lens

- Avoid framing autism as something to fix.
- Ask what the person wants from support, rather than assuming goals will feel relevant or important to them.
- Prioritise trust and safety, predictability, and subjective quality of life alongside symptom reduction.

Replace Assumptions With Curiosity

- Delivering neuro-affirming care isn't a tick-box exercise. It requires listening and learning from the person in front of you.
- Presume competence when asking about needs, preferences, and limits instead of inferring them.
- Treat each person as the expert in their own experience.

Provide Options

- Offer multiple ways to engage where possible (e.g., in-person, telehealth, written, shorter sessions, longer sessions).
- Make accommodations visible so people do not have to ask for them.

Adapt to Fluctuating Capacity

- Expect energy, tolerance, and executive functioning to vary over time.
- Avoid interpreting changes in attendance, communication, or engagement as lack of motivation or interest.

Reduce administrative and executive-functioning burden where possible (e.g., in forms, booking systems, instructions, and follow-up).

Acknowledge Past Harm

- Building allyship requires validating previous negative or harmful experiences with mental health services.
- Move slowly with trust-building and disclosure.
- Avoid retraumatizing practices such as coercion, dismissal, or disbelief.

Create a Sense of Safety

- Reduce power imbalances by inviting shared decision-making.
- Recognise when your professional judgement may be received as gatekeeping, and support access to second opinions or other services.

Commit to Ongoing Learning

- Seek autism-specific professional development, ideally autistic-led.
- Reflect on biases, training gaps, and outdated models. Autism research and practice have changed a lot in recent years, often because autistic people are now genuinely involved.
- Learn from the autistic people you support.
- Consider identifying yourself as an ally to the autistic community, for example, through your email signature or prominent signage in your clinic or service.

