

# span.toolkit

**understand me**  
fact sheet

OTARC | La Trobe University



### **“Society still does not understand autism well”**

Our understanding of what autism is and how it can present has changed substantially in recent years. However, stereotypes and outdated assumptions about autism still persist and may contribute to some autistic people being overlooked, misidentified, or receiving delayed or inadequate support at different points in their lives. This is particularly true among people who are assigned female at birth, trans or gender-diverse, or from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds..

### **“There is so much diversity across the spectrum”**

It is not always obvious who is or isn't autistic, and even experts or specialists may take some time to determine whether or not a diagnosis of autism is the right fit for an individual's presentation. Autism presents differently across people, and recognising this diversity is essential for identifying and supporting all autistic individuals.

### **“I am not a list of deficits”**

Autistic people are not “faulty” neurotypical people. Rather, autistic people experience and process the world differently from non-autistic people. These differences are part of who a person is and should not be understood as either a problem to fix or cure, or something that can be switched on or off at will. For example, sensory processing differences can be a significant source of distress in some contexts, while in other contexts they may provide comfort, calm, and positive experiences.

### **“I am more than a label”**

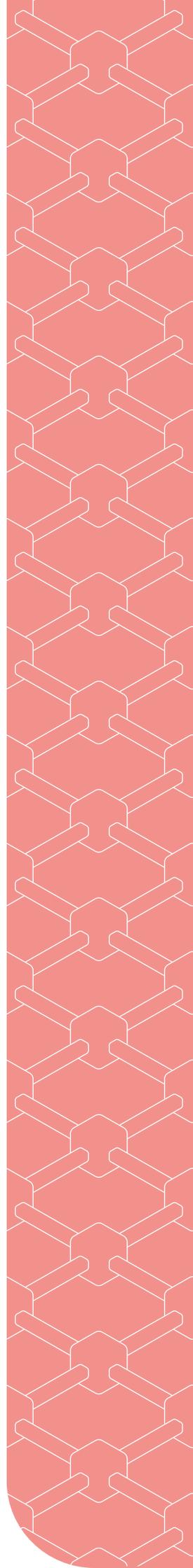
Autistic people are whole individuals with unique and multifaceted lives. Autism is one part of a person's identity, alongside many other personal, social, and cultural factors.

### **“Dig deep to understand my world”**

A person's environment can have a significant impact on mental health. Systemic barriers, societal expectations, and stigma can cause harm, particularly when environments are not accessible or responsive. The way an autistic person expresses their internal experiences may differ from non-autistic norms, but this does not mean those experiences are exaggerated, less serious, or unimportant. Each person has a unique profile of needs, preferences, strengths, and challenges.

### **“Systemic failures are common”**

Many autistic people have been let down, harmed, or traumatised by inaccessible healthcare systems, particularly within the mental health sector.



# Common Experience

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

## Misunderstanding Autism in Mental Health Settings

Narrow stereotypes of autism can exclude huge segments of the autistic community. Autistic people assigned female at birth, trans and gender-diverse people, and those who consciously or unconsciously mask their autistic characteristics report being overlooked, misidentified, or not taken seriously in mental health services.

## Potential for Harm

Many of the autistic adults we spoke to described long histories of being misdiagnosed, dismissed, or treated in ways that did not fit their needs. Many had been in contact with mental health services for years or decades before autism was considered as potentially contributing to or underlying their presentation. These experiences often led to trauma, loss of trust, and reluctance to seek help.

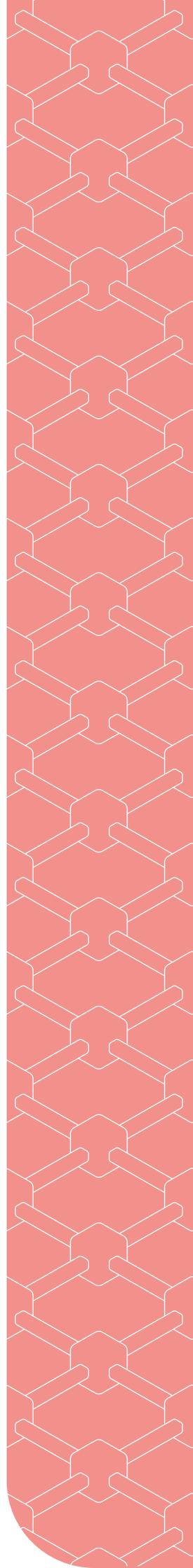
## Autism Is Not a List of Deficits

Understanding autism as a broad collection of problems or impairments (i.e., a deficit-based approach or model) obscures a person's unique strengths, challenges, preferences, and needs. When professionals focus only on deficits, important aspects of the person's experience, capacity, and wellbeing are missed – factors that are critical to successful intervention and reclaiming one's health and wellbeing.

## Autistic People Are Whole People With Complex Lives

Autistic people's identities are shaped by many interacting factors, including gender, culture, relationships, mental health, physical health, and life history. Autism is one part of a person's identity, not the whole story. Understanding people holistically is essential for providing accurate and effective support, as is being aware of power imbalances, and walking alongside the person through their recovery from mental ill-health.

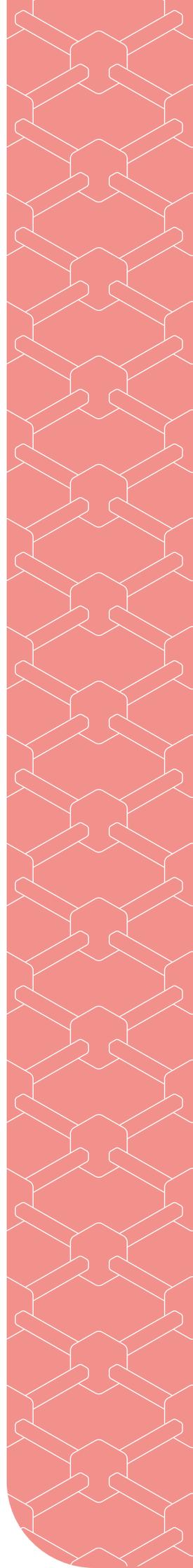
## External Environments Strongly Shape Distress



Sensory environments, social expectations, stigma, and systemic barriers can significantly affect the mental health of autistic people. While distress can be internally generated, it is also often a legitimate response to environments that are overwhelming, invalidating, or inaccessible. For example, a busy, loud emergency department (ED) may be overwhelming for someone with sensitivities to light, sound, or other sensory input, particularly during periods of heightened distress or crisis. Administrative processes and communication demands can further add to this burden. Healthcare settings that do not accommodate autistic people's needs may contribute to escalation or worsening mental health symptoms.

## **Diagnostic Overshadowing & Intersectionality**

Autistic traits are often attributed to mental health conditions, personality, or behaviour, rather than being recognised as a distinct and diagnosable medical condition. While it is true that autism often presents alongside complex mental health conditions, appreciation of the intersectionality of autism and mental health is critical to effective treatment planning. Failure to appropriately identify autism can lead to inappropriate or unsuitable treatment, unidentified or missed needs, and confusion about identity and mental health.



# Guidance for Healthcare Professionals

## Look Beyond Stereotypes

- Consider autism across all genders, ages, and presentations.
- Apply critical thinking, and do not rely on portrayals of autism in training, media, or diagnostic checklists that may be outdated, deficit-based, or emphasise stereotypes.
- Seek out diverse autistic voices online or in-person as a way of challenging outdated ideas.

## Consider Autism in Different Contexts

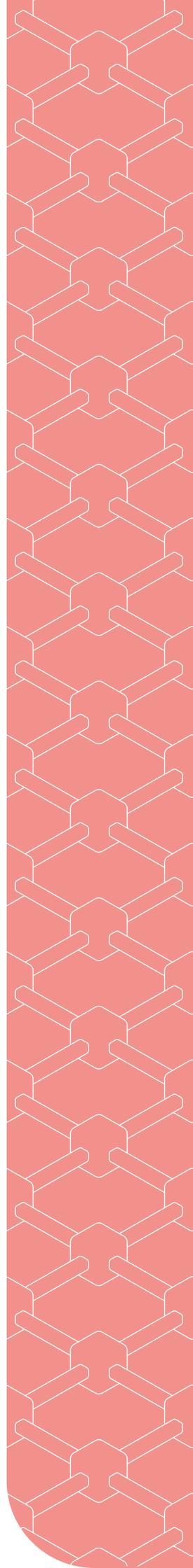
- Consider autism as a potential differential diagnosis, especially when people have long or complex mental health histories.
- Be alert to how widespread diagnostic overshadowing and misdiagnosis is.
- Recognise that physical health, pain, sleep, and sensory differences can significantly overlap with, and contribute to autistic people's mental health and wellbeing.

## Apply a Neuro-Affirming Lens in Daily Practice

- Familiarise yourself with neuro-affirming practices.
- Avoid framing autism as something to fix, cure, or overcome.
- Use language that respects autistic identity and difference.
- Be aware of, identify, and avoid using deficit-based language and frameworks.

## Understand the Person Holistically

- Ask about the person's life, identity, relationships, and context.
- Consider how these interact with autism and mental health.



## Recognise System-Related Harm

- Validate previous negative or traumatic experiences in mental health care.
- Understand that mistrust, guardedness, or withdrawal may reflect past harm or trauma.
- Adopt a trauma-informed approach where appropriate to do so.

## Consider Environmental Factors

- Ask about sensory, social, and practical barriers affecting the person.
- Look for ways the environment can be adapted or changed. Ask what each person needs (e.g., lights, sounds, smells, and other sensory inputs) to feel safe and supported.

## Avoid Deficit-Based Assumptions

- Do not automatically assume that difficulty or delayed engagement reflects low capacity, motivation, or insight.
- Recognise strengths, skills, and adaptive strategies that may not fit your own expectations or challenges.

## Learn From Autistic Voices

- Seek out autistic-led or co-designed training and resources.
- Stay up to date with contemporary autism research and practice

