

span.toolkit

help me understand myself
fact sheet

OTARC | La Trobe University



“My journey to autism identification was complex”

There are many barriers to receiving an autism diagnosis, and some people are more likely to be missed (i.e., not having their autism recognised or identified) than others. This includes people assigned female at birth, trans and gender-diverse people, those who mask (consciously or subconsciously conceal autistic traits or characteristics), and those who do not fit stereotypical or traditional presentations of autism. It is becoming more accepted that self-identification as autistic is valid, but support for autistic adults following self-identification remains a significant service gap and self-identification can add a further barrier to receiving appropriate healthcare support.

“An autism diagnosis can lead to both positive and negative emotions”

Receiving an autism diagnosis or self-identifying as autistic can bring relief, validation, and understanding. It can also bring grief, anger, confusion, or sadness about missed support and past experiences. It may take time to process these mixed emotions.

“I don’t know who I am under the mask”

Many autistic people have masked their authentic selves for so long that they no longer understand who they are, what their needs are, or what they want in life. Developing this self-understanding can take time and support.

“I fell through the cracks for too long”

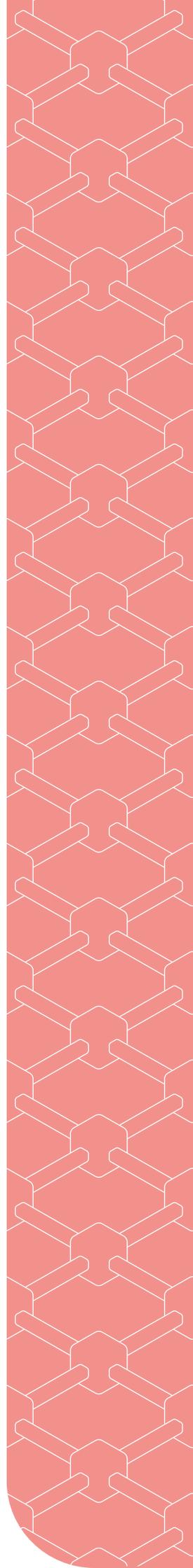
Many autistic people remain unidentified despite accessing mental health support since childhood. Missed opportunities often lead to misdiagnoses, inappropriate treatments, and unmet needs, which can cause significant harm. Many late-identified autistic people feel grief, anger, or distrust towards mental health services, and may avoid seeking support due to previous negative experiences.

“My voice has been suppressed for so long. How do I use it now?”

Autistic people may struggle to advocate for themselves after years of having their needs misunderstood, minimised, or dismissed. Support may be needed to help them recognise their needs, express preferences, and build confidence in self-advocacy. This support should presume competence and be done collaboratively with the person, not for them

“Help me plan for a positive future”

Autistic people want to live meaningful lives defined on their own terms. They may already have supports and strategies that help, and may benefit from building on these. Plan sustainably, and focus on success in ways that align with their values, capacity, and goals



Finding the Authentic Self

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

Many Autistic Adults Were Identified Late or Missed Altogether

Autistic people describe long histories of engaging with mental health services without autism being recognised. Thus, despite autism being lifelong and diagnosable in childhood, it is not uncommon for autistic people to be diagnosed in adulthood. This delay can lead to years of misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatment, and unmet needs. Being missed or misidentified shapes how autistic people understand themselves, their distress, and their life stories.

Identification Brings Mixed Emotions

Receiving an autism diagnosis or self-identifying as autistic often brought relief, validation, and clarity. At the same time, many participants experienced grief, anger, confusion, or sadness about missed support and past experiences. These emotional responses could shift over time and were an important part of the adjustment process.

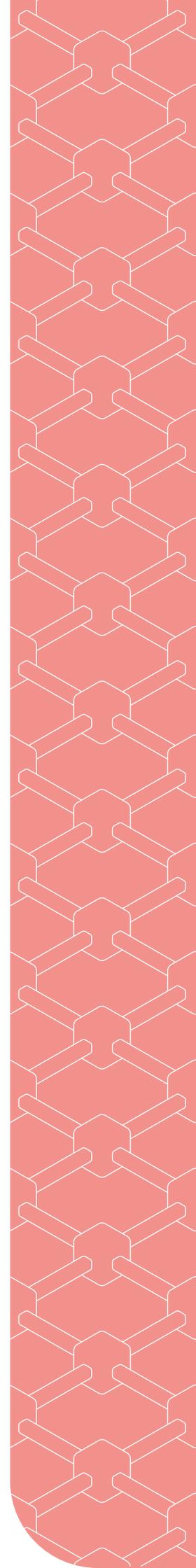
Masking Can Disrupt Self-Understanding

Autistic people often describe masking as helpful for avoiding discrimination, but it can also blur personal preferences, limits, and values, contributing to confusion about identity, needs, and what a meaningful life looks like. Importantly, masking may occur without the person being aware they are doing it (i.e., unconsciously), potentially leading to unintended mental health impacts or consequences that are not readily explained by other factors. Healthcare professionals can play an important role in identifying and understanding the impacts of masking on a person's mental health.

Internal States Can be Hard to Recognise

Alexithymia, or difficulty identifying emotions, stress, or physical signals, is common. This can make it hard to recognise when mental health is deteriorating, when burnout is approaching, or what kind of supports are needed.

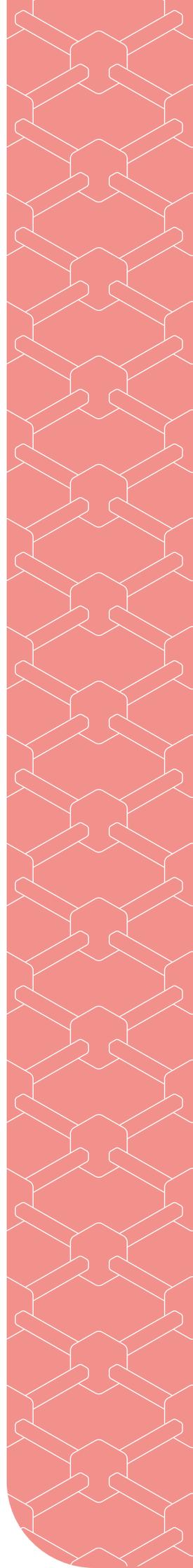
Self-Advocacy Has Often Been Suppressed



After years of having their needs misunderstood, minimised, or dismissed, autistic adults often struggle to speak up or advocate for themselves. Difficulty asking for help, setting boundaries, or explaining needs may reflect past experiences within confusing or complex systems rather than a lack of capability.

Understanding Yourself is Part of Recovery

The process of learning about autism, needs, and strengths is central to rebuilding self-compassion, agency, and hope. Self-understanding is closely tied to planning a future that is sustainable, meaningful, and aligned with personal values.



Guidance for Healthcare Professionals

Support Meaning-Making

- Help people make sense of their life history through an autism-informed lens.
- Validate grief, anger, relief, and confusion as normal responses to identification.

Explore Identity and Strengths

- Help identify strengths, interests, and values.
- Support reconnection with authentic preferences and goals.
- Always presume competence and autonomy

Support Unmasking Safely

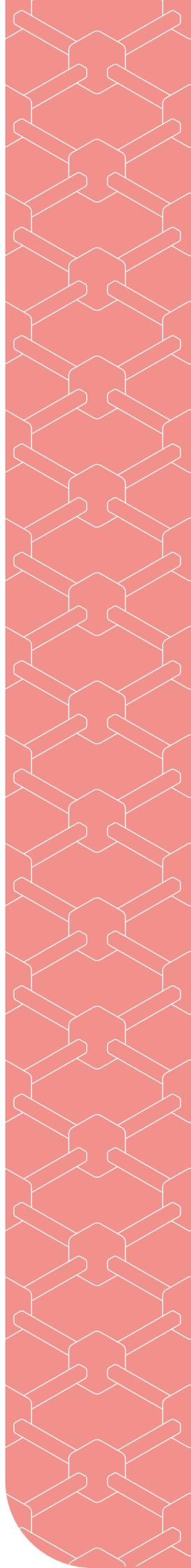
- Recognise that while masking may be protective or offer some advantages in the short-term, it is often experienced as exhausting and damaging in the long-term.
- Explore where and with whom it feels safe to be more authentic.

Build Self-Awareness

- Use concrete tools to help people identify emotions, stress, and needs (e.g., an emotion wheel, sensory profile, or schedules for attending to bodily needs that may not be easily recognised).
- Support recognition of early signs of distress, burnout, or crisis.

Strengthen Self-Advocacy

- Help people practise expressing their needs and setting boundaries. When compliance and conformity have been implicitly rewarded or explicitly required (e.g., in school, work, some autism therapies), asking for something different may need active support and encouragement.



- Provide scripts, role-play, or written supports if helpful.

Support Access to Practical Resources

- Assist with accommodations, workplace or study supports, and accessing funding (e.g., understand eligibility criteria, barriers to accessing government or other supports, and provide documentation or assistance to those applying).
- Build multi-disciplinary supports and refer to allied health services such as occupational therapy, speech pathology, peer support, social work, and autistic-led community groups.

Plan for a Sustainable Future

- Help people define what a good life looks like for them. Emphasise autonomy and self-determination.
- Support pacing and realistic goal setting. These may not fit neatly into time- or funding-limited services, so learn about and proactively share options or connections to subsidised and ongoing care

