



# Teaching and Working with Neurodivergent Students

Australian Music Examinations Board

24/01/2023



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"Bush Medicine Leaves" by Audrey Brumby for Autism SA.

## Autism SA's Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we're meeting on today and pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

We also acknowledge our gratitude that we share this land today, our sorrow for the costs of that sharing, and our hope and belief that we can move to a place of equality, justice, and partnership together.



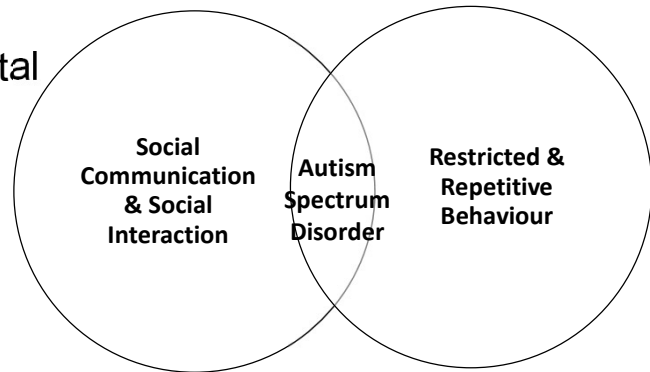
This acknowledgment is part of Autism SA's commitment to Reconciliation. Autism SA 2021

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# Autism

Autism changes the way that a person sees, experiences and understands the world

- Complex neurodevelopmental difference
- Present from birth
- Across the lifespan
- Unknown cause
- Every person is different



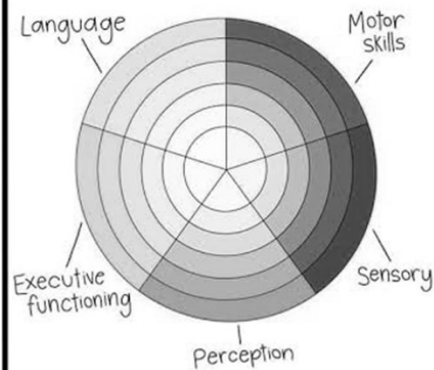
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What People THINK  
the autism spectrum  
looks like:



What it can  
actually  
look like:

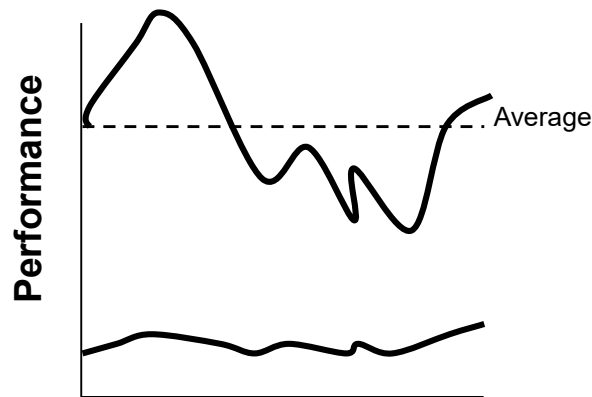


<https://josephinemoon.com/2021/12/10/what-is-the-autism-spectrum/>

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## Scattered profile of an autistic individual



Academic ability: ○

Adaptive skills : ○

(Inc social skills and expressive language)



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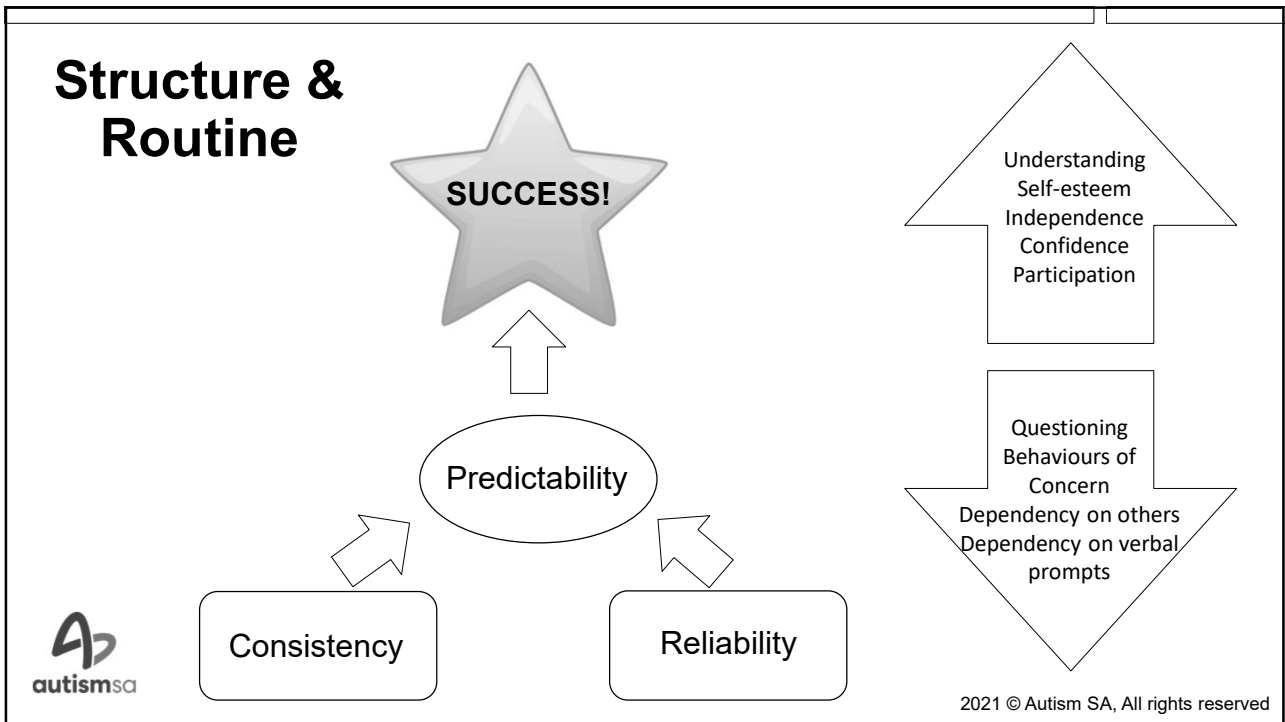
## How autistic students learn:

- Structure and routine – predictability
- Collaboration between support people (home/teachers)
- Environment with reduced sensory stimulation
- Verbal instructions - short and to the point
- Use of visuals to support/replace verbal instructions (e.g. signs, pictures and demonstrations)
- Relate to area of interest
- Opportunity to take a calming break if needed
- Fewer choices = easier decision making

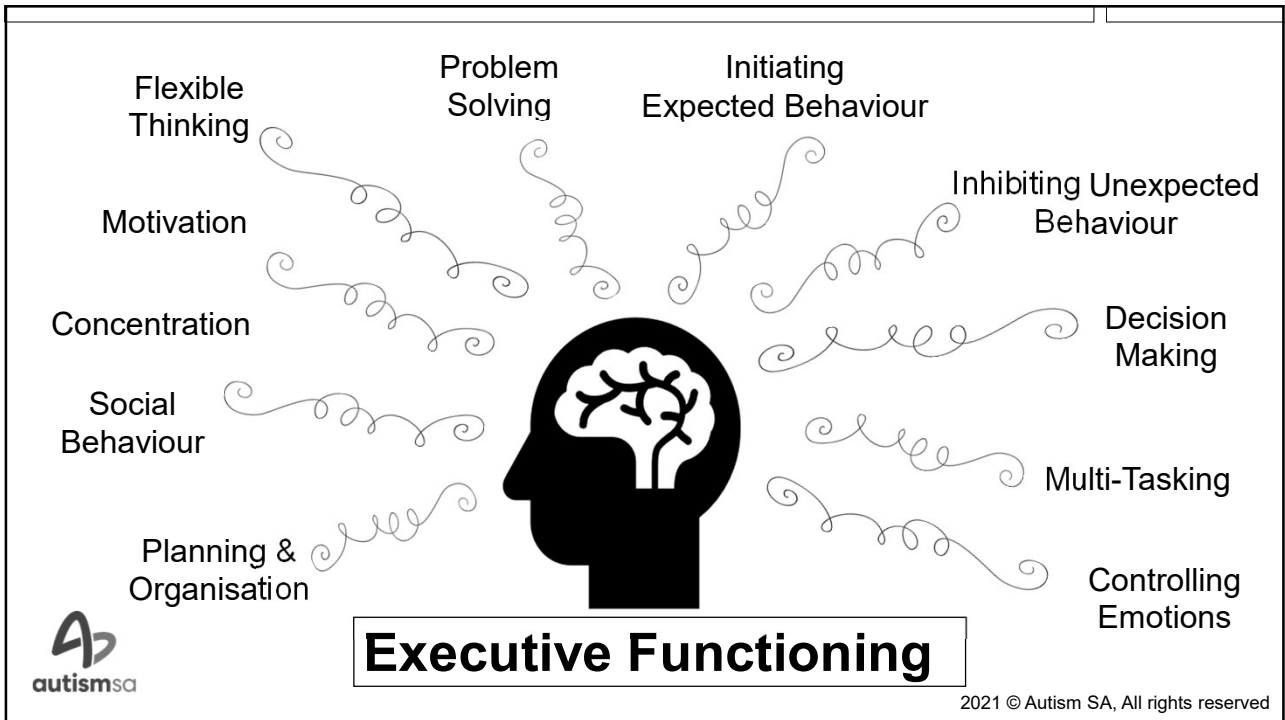


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May have difficulty completing tasks

May run late

May forget Steps


May be easily distracted

May misplace items


Possible information overload = Shutdown

May be unable to filter what is and isn't important info

May not know how/where to start a task




**Executive Functioning – Possible impacts**




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## Strategies: Information Processing



- Break tasks & instructions down into smaller sequenced steps
- Provide information/tasks visually *e.g.*, *checklists*, *mind maps*, *pictures*, *lists*
- Use colour coding
- Identify a person's strengths and interests & use these
- Identify skills & provide opportunities to demonstrate these skills & extend them
- Teach skills in a range of environments with a range of people



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# BLACK WHITE THINKING

"I can do it"

"I will be correct"

"I know what to do"

"I know what to expect"

~~"I'll have a try"~~

~~"I'll get help to do it"~~

~~"Mistakes are ok"~~

~~"It's ok if it's not ideal"~~


"I can't do it"

"I will be wrong"

"I don't know how"

"I don't know what to expect"



...Therefore I won't try!





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Sorry I can't concentrate because...






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I need my hat on to shield my eyes from the lights
- 


I need to move
- 

The smell of someone's lunch is making me feel sick
- 

The pictures on the wall are over stimulating
- 

I can hear the people next door talking and the traffic outside
- 

The wind is wailing and is hurting my ears



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## Enhancing Communication

- Use direct, specific and consistent language
- Short instructions (with accompanying visuals)
- Use pauses, allowing processing time, emphasising key words, allowing additional time to respond
- Be accepting of unexpected body language (eg. No eye contact)
- Positive Phrasing – say what **to do** rather than **what not to do**
- Avoid using questions to give instructions



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## How being neurodivergent can impact on learning and exams

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- Anxiety
  - Motivation
  - Staying focused
  - Understanding exam questions/requirements
  - Executive Functioning differences
  - Sensory differences

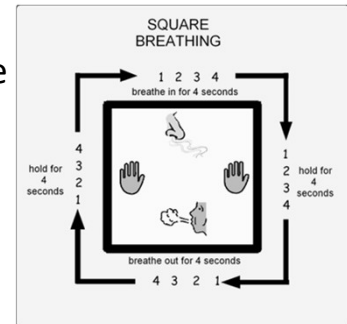


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## Anxiety

- Self imposed pressure - some students set unrealistic expectations about their performance and worry about results
- Exams can increase anxiety as they are a new and unpredictable experience
- To help reduce anxiety explain to students -
  - ✓ When/where/how lessons/exams will take place
  - ✓ Who will be present
  - ✓ Visual supports eg list, timetable, social story
  - ✓ How to prepare
  - ✓ Exam day procedures
  - ✓ Relaxation eg a fidget toy, square breathing



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## Motivation

- Some students can have difficulty understanding why they need to practice/sit an exam. They know they have the knowledge/skill, so what is the point?
  - ✓ Explain how exams can help a student e.g. having qualifications can show employers that a person has knowledge of and is good at specific subjects
  - ✓ May need to provide additional praise, positive reinforcement and reward



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## Staying focused

- Students may have difficulty knowing how long to spend on each question/section during an exam
- Teach the student how to pace oneself, to complete all of the exam on time – hints and tips including skipping a question to go back to if needed
  - ✓ Practice exams/tests throughout the year
  - ✓ At the start of the exam, look through the whole exam and plan time accordingly
  - ✓ Use visual timers



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## Sensory differences

- Impact of sensory differences = increase in anxiety
- Students may feel overwhelmed by the size and unfamiliarity of the lesson/exam room
- Impact of the environment (eg strip lighting, noise, smells, clock ticking, feel and fit of the furniture)
  - ✓ Minimise distractions as much as possible
  - ✓ Practice exams/tests throughout the year
  - ✓ Possibly visit the venue/room prior to the first lesson/exam
  - ✓ Find out about any sensory sensitivities/needs ahead of time, and how these may be able to be accommodated



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The image shows an iceberg floating in the ocean. The tip of the iceberg is above the water line, and the much larger base is submerged below. Text is placed around the iceberg to describe symptoms and causes.

**Above the water line (Visible symptoms):**

- Left side:
  - Avoiding tasks
  - Leaving lessons part way through
  - Not completing tasks
  - Not participating in lessons
- Center:
  - Leaving/running from environments
  - Not responding to direct instructions
  - Unexpected responses to instructions
- Right side:
  - Covering eyes/ears
  - Running late
  - “Refusal”

**Below the water line (Underlying causes):**

- Poor communication skills
- Lacking understanding of social rules
- Unaware of others' feelings
- Anxiety about change
- Lacking social interaction skills
- Overloaded by sensory stimuli
- Anxiety/Confusion in an unstructured/unfamiliar setting

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*“If you’ve met one person with autism,  
you’ve met one person with autism”*

- Dr Stephen Shore -

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