

**The
Advonet
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health
Equity Project**



**Autism
AIM**

Strategies and Resources

Autism, Exercise and Mental Health

Autistic Experiences of Exercise

Autistic people can have universal and unique experiences relating to exercise, activity, hobbies and physical movement.

Autistic people can meet sensory and stimming needs via exercise, as well as supporting emotional regulation and supporting mental health needs.

However, there are specific barriers to access for exercise that will be addressed, and supported in this guide.



This guide will discuss the lived experiences of autistic people relating to exercise, physical activity, and sport-based hobbies.

We will explore some of the ways that autistic and mental health needs can be met via exercise, as well as how to remove barriers to meeting these needs.

Autistic Barriers to Exercise

There are a number of barriers that autistic people face when engaging with exercise activities, and while these may vary from individual to individual, there are a number of common reasons identified:



Linked Conditions

Autistic people can have linked, or co-occurring conditions that impact mobility, energy levels and additional needs when planning for exercise, and fitness activities e.g. dyspraxia.



Gym Environment

Autistic people can often have sensory sensitivities that can make the environment of most gyms uncomfortable, or to some, inaccessible.

Examples of this may include bright lights, or loud and overlapping noises.



New Activities & Routine

New activities can have barriers for autistic people, but also provide us routine and structure in daily life. Difficulty starting routines could also tie in with demand avoidance and burnout.

Nutrition



As autistic people we can have avoidant or restrictive food intake due to sensory needs. This means post-workout nutrition should consider our sensory needs e.g. safe snacks.

Communication & Social Expectations



Gyms or exercise classes, and physical hobbies can have social expectations that restrict autistic participation. For example, small talk at break times, or hi fiving after a good trick/ skill. This can add social stressors.

Energy Accounting



Exercise can have a significant impact on people's energy levels, both positive and negative. So balancing energy levels to improve rest and activity can help.

Challenges for Autistic People and Exercise

Exercise can come with its own set of unique challenges for autistic people, impacting on mental health and coping strategies, often due to the inherent lack of autism specific adaptation, or understanding from society. Below is a list of autistic challenges relating to exercise that some people may experience:

A list of autistic challenges to consider for exercise:

- **Lack of autism training for exercise staff and groups**, which can lead to stigma or poor understanding of autistic needs and barriers in fitness.
- **Unsuitable sensory environments for participation**, where the environment limits access as it does not meet sensory needs e.g. noise.
- **Alexithymia**, where autistic people may not be able to name physical and emotional states, as well as sometimes masking, or being unaware of them. For example, not knowing when you are reaching exhaustion.
- **Co-occurring conditions** that affect energy and mobility needs, for example dyspraxia or hypermobility may mean some activities should be adapted for safety, and sustainability of physical wellbeing.
- **Executive function and demand avoidance**, autistic people may have experience with avoiding demands due to fear of rejection, previous negative experiences and executive function issues. This can impact the ability to maintain exercise routines and engage in fitness hobbies.
- **Need for clear instructions and visual supports** as verbal instructions alone may not be sufficient for many autistic individuals. Instead, we may benefit from clear visual cues, or hands-on demonstrations to better understand.
- **Overload from multitasking instructions** as exercises can require multiple instructions at once, which can be overwhelming/ hard to follow.



Adjustments for Exercise for Autistic People



**Autism Friendly
Exercise Space**



**Written/ Recorded
Exercise Instructions**



**Implement Exercise
Adjustments**



Body-Doubling



**Autistic Exercise
Videos/ Vlogs**



**Burnout Plan e.g.
Disposable Plates, or
No Chop Meal Plans**

Additional Adjustments for Autistic Exercise



**Exercise Which
Incorporates Interests**



**Sensory Deprivation
& Exercise**



**Routine, or Flexibility
for Sessions**



**Recovery Time &
Affirmations**



**Support from Primary
Care e.g. GP, Counselor
or Social Prescriber.**

Unmet needs, chronic pain, or fatigue through the day can compound exercise stressors, so it is important these needs are addressed to help regulate mood, and support your window of tolerance, as well as improve general wellbeing.

Autistic Exercising Tips and Coping Strategies

Tips and coping strategies to manage mental health needs for exercise and physical activity as autistic adults:

- **Activity Leaders that model their needs** during exercise events, such as reminding about water, or toilet breaks to meet internal needs.
- **Peer support** enjoy exercise in a peer space with shared experiences.
- **Acknowledge your achievements**, give yourself affirmation and celebrate enjoyment of exercise activities e.g. learning new dance move.
- **Share your interests** with your family, but also find yourself time to enjoy your hobbies and **reconnect with your own passions**.
- **Implement reasonable adjustments** to support your access to exercise in services, or at home e.g. sensory toolkit for cooldown.
- Have a **burnout plan** e.g. easy meal plans, and support after exercise.
- Know when you need a **time out**, and rest to recover from exercise and activities. This could be physical, or cognitive recovery time.
- **Make use of sensory tools** such as headphones to minimise stress or distraction, or stim tools between exercises.
- **Encourage self-awareness of limits**, an understanding of personal limits regarding intensity and duration of exercise. Being in tune with one's body and recognizing when enough is enough can prevent burnout and overexertion.
- **Use of communication aids**, if verbal communication is difficult, consider using communication devices, gestures, software or cards to express needs, like needing a break or adjusting the intensity of an activity.
- **Gradual introduction to new activities**, start with familiar exercises and gradually introduce new activities. This can prevent overwhelm and build confidence before trying new.



Activities Tailored for Autistic Exercise

Activities tailored to meet autistic people's needs when exercising is important for mental wellbeing, learning, fun and sustainability of engagement with exercise.

As autistic people, we often face barriers to exercise without adaptation, or adjustment and our needs can be deprioritised by professionals, or gym environments.

There are some suggested activities below that help to support autistic needs:



Sharing Special Interests:

Our hobbies and interest can be a useful motivator to engage in exercise and also find community in fitness activities. Think about what you enjoy and how this can be applied to exercise and activity.



Exercise Tools and Aids:

Autistic people may need exercise tools and aids to support with physical activity, such as, noise cancelling headphones to limit background noise during classes. Or exercise balls to provide vestibular feedback via rocking during cooldown.



Sensory Play: Exercise can help meet sensory needs e.g. vestibular needs like dancing/ rocking. Plus, exercise can provide sensory deprivation e.g. swimming/ floating.



Accountability and Body-Doubling: Autistic people can benefit from having an accountability buddy to work out with. This can help with motivation, routine and hyperfocus. Plus, it can be a fun social.

Reasonable Adjustments for Autistic Exercise

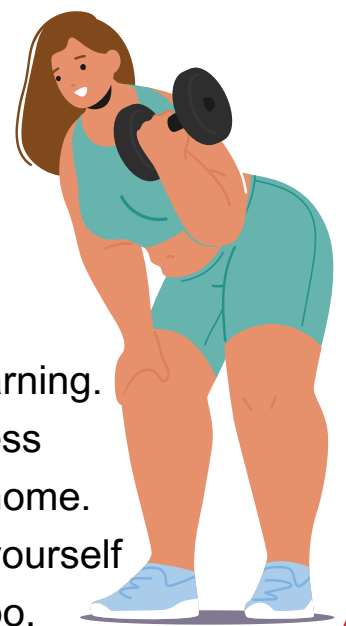
Autistic people can experience access barriers when taking part in exercise, and this can be at home, in a gym, or at outdoor fitness activities e.g. netball.

As autistic people we have rights outlined in the Equality Act 2010 that support our access to reasonable adjustments (RAs).

We will now explore options that are helpful for autistic people to implement to support exercise, and that can improve wellbeing and equitable access.

Suggestions and Prompts of Relevant Reasonable Adjustments:

- **Written summaries and agenda** for exercise groups and activities, so that you know what to expect and can plan social stories to help.
- **Quiet warm-up and cool-down** exercise space to co-regulate/ stim.
- **Extra time** between repetitions to allow for communication and processing needs e.g. staying on one move for longer to learn repetition.
- Request the **same, reliable professional** to support you in exercise classes, or in the gym to reduce social stressors and overwhelm.
- **Alternative methods of communication** e.g. communication cards.
- **Flexible start and end times** of exercise classes, or groups with **regular breaks** accounted for.
- Trainers and group leaders to be supportive of stimming, stim tools, vocal stims and unmasking - create an **exercise space** that is **autism friendly**.
- **Written/ recorded exercise activity guides** to support information processing needs and provide alternate learning.
- **A sensory safe waiting area** to allow you to decompress and transition from exercise to other tasks, e.g. travel home.
- **Access to exercise space early**, or 1-1 to familiarise yourself with new sensory environments e.g. sensory mapping too.



Considerations for Mobility and Energy Levels

Autistic people may have different mobility and energy support needs compared to non-autistic people. Autistic people are more susceptible to multi-co-occurring physical health conditions than non-autistic people across all organ systems (Ward, Weir, Baron-Cohen, 2023).

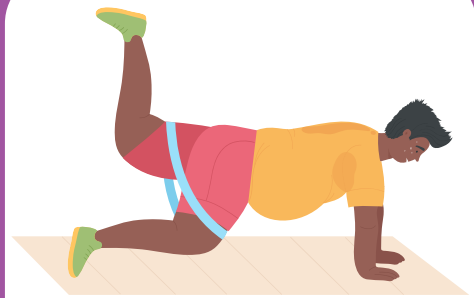
Also, many autistic people have co-occurring conditions that may decrease energy levels, limit mobility during exercise, or increase risk of injury e.g. hypermobility, or postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTs).

It is vital that adaptations are made to support autistic mobility and energy needs.

Ways to Support Autistic People's Mobility and Energy Support Needs:



**Energy Accounting
Diary/ Scale**



**Mobility Tools &
Support**

- Firstly understanding your own energy and mobility limits, and goals. This may be via trial and error, as well as energy diaries, accounting and trackers, such as the App Flaredown.
- Using and learning about helpful mobility aids, such as back-braces and resistance bands to support hypermobile joints for example. Please check your eligibility for grants from PIP, or GP.
- Trainers and exercise staff trained in mobility needs and energy pacing support. For example, classes with mobility adaptations.
- Doing balancing and strengthening exercises that support your mobility needs e.g. building core with suitable weights.



Burnout Support Plan

Autistic people can experience burnout for numerous reasons, such as due to the suppression of autistic traits, inaccessible environments, or life stressors.

Burnout can have an impact on routine and daily activities, including exercise, mobility and motivation to engage in hobbies we would normally enjoy. We will explore ways to support exercise during burnout and recovery.

A list of considerations to create a burnout support plan:

- **Reduce demands in other areas:**
 - cook simpler meals or use pre-prepared ingredients
 - pre and post-workout nutrition support e.g. protein bars, easy peel fruit.
 - hygiene support kit e.g. next to bed a toothbrush, paste, sanitiser, cloth.
 - Layout your exercise/ comfy clothes before bed e.g. leggings, t-shirt.
 - Set boundaries and don't be afraid to say no when an activity, or event will worsen burnout recovery.
- **Lower intensity workouts:** During burnout periods, opt for less intense or shorter sessions (e.g., gentle yoga, stretching, walking, or swimming) instead of high-impact exercises.
- **Support and reassurance:** When people face burnout they can get in to shame, or guilt spirals for not doing activities that are part of their normal routine, including exercise. Talk to friends, family or services, and get support, as well as reassurance.
- **Nostalgia Activities:** Sometimes people may benefit from familiar, or comforting activities during burnout, which is why many turn to old films, or books. However, this can be the same for exercise and physical activity, maybe you want to get out your old roller-skates, or play football again.
- **Signposting and Professional Support:** If burnout continues, please seek help from a GP, or mental health support links at the end of the guide.

Low-Sensory and Energy Exercise Activities

Autistic people can experience fatigue due to masking and autistic burnout, as well as barriers to access that lead to unmet needs, in particular sensory needs if the environment is inflexible and not open to adjustment, or adaptation.

This section will discuss how to meet these sensory and energy needs during exercise. We will explore activities which are low-sensory and lower-energy. There are some suggested activities below for reference:



Floating and Water Therapy:

Floating and water therapy can act as a very low intensity exercise that can also be beneficial in regulating sensory input and allowing for respite from overstimulation.

It can take pressure off of joints too.



Yoga:

Yoga can be a low energy, low sensory activity, that can be performed at home, or in classes.

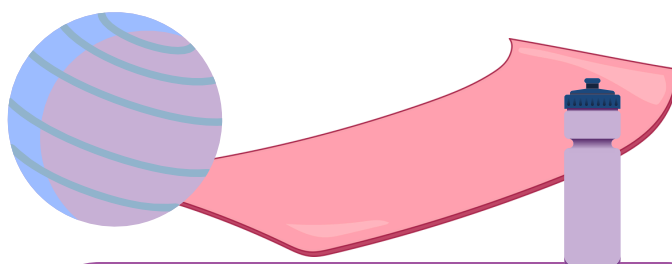
Alongside physical benefits, you may find that yoga allows you to relax. For some yoga can help reduce overwhelm.



Tai Chi:

Tai Chi emphasises slow movement breathing and mindfulness.

Tai chi can help relax the body and settle the central nervous system via breathing and low-energy moving sequences.





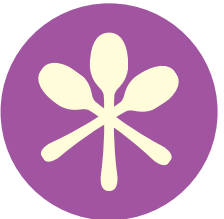

Pilates:

Pilates is a form of low intensity exercise focusing on posture and core strength. It may be of particular use for autistic people as we often experience mobility and coordination issues, which it can help to improve.

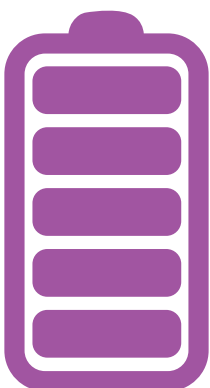
Energy Accounting Activity

Everyone starts their day with energy. Some people have more energy than others, for those who are autistic, our energy can get depleted by things that wouldn't affect neurotypical people as much. Such as socialising which can be draining for some autistic people, but is energising to others. In this activity we want you to think about your energy in a day. Each unit of energy is represented by a spoon, this is called the 'Spoon theory'.

If you only had 12 spoons per day, how would you use them? Write into each box the activity which you feel uses up the least energy such as watching tv, to the most amount of energy such as going to work.

			
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Write some activities help with your well being, or make you feel energised or peaceful. These are things you can turn to when you need to self regulate.



My Activity and Energy Plan

Name:

Chosen Activity Options: (such as, swimming, rollerblading, hiking, basketball etc.)

Co-occurring Conditions (such as, hypermobility, epilepsy, dyspraxia, chronic fatigue, diabetes etc.)

Activity Support and Energy Accounting:

Think about what support you need to account for your energy levels and fatigue during exercise.

Extra Time Quiet Room Regular Breaks

Exercise Reasonable Adjustment Checklist:

Autism Friendly Gym Hours (Low Sensory)

Sensory Toolkit for Warm-up/ Cool Down

Energy Accounting Diary for Planning

Exit Plan and Safe Person for Group Activity

Mobility Aids e.g. Lumbar Support Wedge

Communication Aids e.g. Flashcards

Safe Food and Snacks for After Exercise

Burnout Plan e.g. Microwave/ No Chop Meals

Quiet Room to Reduce Overwhelm

Easy Hygiene Options e.g. Wipes/ Sanitiser

Travel Support and Guide to Exercise Venue

Written Exercise Guide and Activity Agenda

Apps to help with Exercise for Autistic Adults



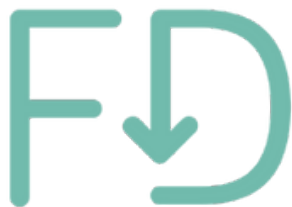
Sociability

Find Accessible Days
Out and Services



Spoony

Neurodivergent Friend App



Flaredown

Activity, Fatigue & Pain
Management Support App



Visible

Invisible Illness and
Energy Pacing App



Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service – Offer a range of services and support for people struggling with mental health, such as anxiety.

Active Leeds - Offer low-sensory gym sessions, to find out more in terms of timings and the closest location to you, please check this link:

<https://active.leeds.gov.uk/classesandactivities/gyms/accessibility-gym>

Bramley Baths - They offer ground floor accessible entrance, a hoist to enter the pool, as well as stairs to enter rather than ladders for a gradual decent. There is disabled changing area and toilet, and they have LGBTQ+ friendly swim and gym events too: <https://www.bramleybaths.co.uk/>

Find more disability friendly / adapted sports at:

<https://active.leeds.gov.uk/classesandactivities/sports/disability-sport>

Further sources of support can be found in Leeds Autism AIM's Mental Health Guide: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/04/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v6-April-2023.pdf>

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This guide was produced by the Mental Health Equity Project, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.