

**The
Advonet
Group**
Providing Independent Advocacy



Strategies and Resources

Autism & Conflicting Needs

What are Conflicting Needs?

For autistic people, our needs can be complex, and at times, they can come into conflict - with the needs of others, with systems that are not built to accommodate neurodivergence, or even within ourselves. When these needs conflict it can be stressful and difficult to solve.

The autism spectrum is not linear, and many prefer to use the term spiky profile. This means we can struggle in one area, but not in another, and these difficulties can also change daily.



This guide aims to support autistic people in recognising, understanding, and managing conflicting needs - both in everyday life and within themselves.

Types of Needs

Below includes some examples of the types of needs you, or other people may have. You can have multiple needs that conflict with each other or needs that change in certain situations, for example, when stressed or overwhelmed.



Sensory Needs

Sensory needs can involve needing a less sensory stimulating environment, or vice versa. For example, needing low lighting, or loud music.



Processing Needs

You may need certain things to help with processing, for example, extra time to process what's been said, a quieter environment or information written down.



Physical Needs

Some people may need adaptations or support with, for example, moving or navigating a room.



Energy Needs

Individuals may have different, or fluctuating levels of energy to engage in various activities and this may require compromise.



Communication

Communication needs may include things like needing easy read documents, clear or simpler language, or alternative communication methods.



Mental Health Needs

Mental health needs may include time to decompress, and be left alone, or additional support or reassurance may be needed.

What can Cause Conflicting Needs?

Conflicting needs happen when two or more requirements, preferences, or access needs can't be fully met at the same time - or when meeting one may make it harder to meet another.

Some causes of conflicting needs:

- Where two people have different needs to each other than conflict.
- Being sensitive to certain sensory input (like noise or light), yet also need that same environment for another reason - for example, needing to be in a busy space to access a service, but becoming overwhelmed by it.
- Masking and social expectations can impact the need to appear okay, but can clash with the need to care for one's wellbeing.
- Choosing between equally important needs, like rest vs productivity, because the environment doesn't allow both.
- The need to explain something clearly may conflict with difficulty processing or expressing thoughts under stress.
- Mismatch between environments and needs. Situations like work, or healthcare may not accommodate neurodivergent needs, leading to internal conflict.

Examples of Conflicting Needs

With such a wide range of different people, and different disabilities, it is not possible to fully meet everyone's needs at once. Access needs are often very individual. It can also be hard to meet all of your own needs, especially when they can be different or fluctuate.

Below highlights some situations where conflicting needs can be seen.

One person's need for quiet conflicts with another's need to externally process and talk things through out loud.



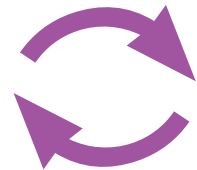
VS



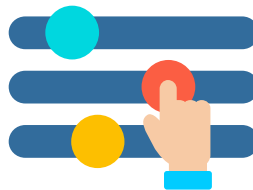
Needing routine for stability, while also feeling a deep need for spontaneity and change.



VS



Needing accommodations, but feeling pressure to not appear as "difficult" or "different"



VS



Needing a stimulating sensory environment to feel engaged, yet becoming easily overwhelmed and exhausted by too much sensory input



VS



None of these situations mean that anyone is wrong or that their needs are less valid. It simply means that we must think carefully and compassionately about how to navigate these moments.

What Can Harm Conflicting Needs

Conflicting needs become more difficult to navigate when individuals are placed in environments that lack flexibility, understanding, or accommodation. Some of these factors include:



Lack of awareness

Other people's lack of awareness or understanding about the legitimacy of internal conflicts in autistic individuals.



Sensory Overload

Being in overload, and environments that don't allow regulation. For example, that do not have anywhere to decompress while needing to perform socially.



Forced Masking

Masking or the expectation to behave neurotypically, can suppress authentic needs.



EXPECTATIONS

Rigid expectations

Rigid expectations at home or work can prevent prioritising one need over another.

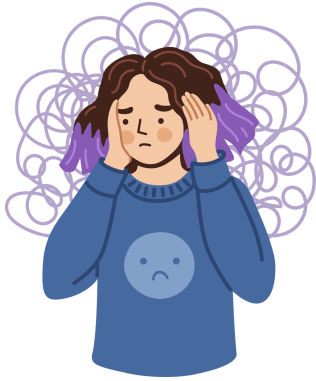


Guilt, Shame and Internalised Ableism

Internalised ableism and masking pressures can make individuals feel guilt or shame for having needs at all.

How Conflicting Needs Can Impact Mental Health

Without discussing and compromise differing needs can lead to conflict, or to one person struggling with unmet needs that can potentially have a serious impact on mental health. This can manifest as:



Increased Anxiety



Burnout



Depression & Low Self-esteem



Executive dysfunction



Isolation



Sensory Overload & Meltdowns

Impacting on Masking & Burnout

For many autistic people, day-to-day life involves navigating a web of conflicting needs, both from within and from the external world. These conflicts can intensify the pressure to mask autistic traits, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout

Masking involves concealing or compensating for autistic traits in order to blend in, avoid judgment, or meet social expectations. While it can be a useful coping strategy, masking over long periods is mentally and emotionally exhausting.

Masking can:

- Drain energy reserves
- Suppress self-expression
- Delay or obscure recognition of one's own needs
- Prevent rest or recovery
- Deny one's own needs to be met



Autistic burnout is more than just stress or fatigue - it's a state of overwhelming exhaustion, reduced functioning, and emotional shutdown. It often arises when the balance between energy in (through rest, routine, self-care, and meeting own needs) and energy out (through masking, unmet needs, socialising, adapting) becomes unsustainable.



Conflicting needs, whether internal or external, can tip that balance. If someone is constantly forced to choose between needs that feel both essential, but can't coexist in the moment, they may default to masking, which can increase the risk of burnout.

Conflicting Needs in Different Contexts

For autistic people, everyday settings can present unique and sometimes unpredictable challenges. A need that feels manageable in one context might become overwhelming in another. For instance, the need for alone time may be easy to give yourself when at home, but feel impossible to meet in a busy workplace.

The following section explores examples of how conflicting needs can manifest in a range of environments, and how these situations can impact well-being, communication, and self-advocacy.

Parenting

Parenting comes with its own set of challenges, however, for a parent there can be many times where conflicting needs can arise. For example, needing to step back and have alone time or a low sensory environment whilst looking after a child who needs sensory stimuli, supervision, or is perhaps crying. This can make it difficult to meet your own needs, often going for extended periods of putting personal needs aside to care for children.

This can lead to parents feeling isolated, fatigued and possibly burnt-out. It can be helpful to seek support where possible to give yourself time away from caring responsibilities to meet your own needs for an hour or more if possible.



Conflicting Needs in Different Contexts

The Workplace

The workplace often brings hidden challenges, such as unspoken rules, social hierarchies, and competing needs in shared spaces. One person might thrive in busy, social office and enjoy eating lunch at their desk, while another may need quiet to focus and feel overwhelmed by strong smells. These clashes can lead to stress, sensory overload, or even burnout.

Autistic workers may experience tension between professional expectations and personal well-being. For example, the need for routine might clash with the job's demand for flexibility. The need to advocate for adjustments may conflict with the fear of being judged.



Social Setting

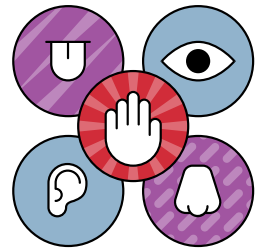
The need to be social and included may clash with the need to avoid overstimulation. Social events that include a lot of people, or are in inaccessible environments can clash with other people's access needs. Participating in group events can require masking, which creates additional strain.



Conflicting Needs in Different Contexts

Sensory Environments

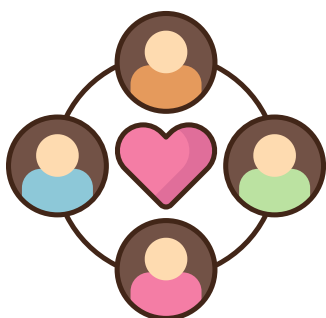
Examples include needing both movement and quiet, or wanting to stim while also trying to mask. Public transport, shared spaces, or schools can be especially triggering when multiple conflicting sensory needs arise.



Personal Life / Relationships

In relationships or family life, needs can conflict. This may be communication needs, conflict resolution, or the need for socialising being different. For example, some people prefer to verbally discuss things, whereas someone else may need this to be in written communication.

Sensory sensitivities may clash with others preferences (e.g., loud environments or physical affection). Misunderstandings can arise if one partner interprets withdrawal as rejection.



GP Appointments

GP appointments can often involve conflicting needs for autistic people. The need to clearly explain symptoms can clash with anxiety or processing delays, while short appointment times may not allow enough space to express concerns or understand advice.

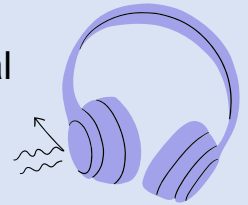
Masking can also make it hard to show pain or distress, leading to unmet needs and inadequate care. Bright lights in consultation rooms, though necessary for examinations, can conflict with the need for a calmer, low-sensory, dimly lit environment.



Prioritising / Middle Ground

Sometimes conflicting needs cannot be fully accommodated, and compromise may be needed. In some cases one person's needs may need to take priority.

For example, one person may require support with physical or sensory needs that may cause sensory issues for another person, depending on the severity of those needs the other individual may need to make their own adaptations, possibly with the use of tools to find a middle ground between the two.



Expectations

Discussing needs and expectations around shared and differing needs can be vital, interpersonally and professionally, so that conflict and issues with unmet needs can be avoided and compromise planned ahead of time.



For example:

Conflicting need: Touch.

Ted is touch-seeking and needs deep pressure for regulation and touch for connection. Bill is sensitive to touch and it can be overwhelming.

Strategies: Negotiation of type of touch, amount and time. Communication of when at limit or when in need. Potential for “not now, but later”. Tools like weighted blankets for deep pressure and layers of clothing as a barrier for skin contact.

Personal vs External Accommodations

Sometimes conflicting needs may be accommodated through personal adaptations and tools, along with external or environmental changes. External accommodations are often supported top-down or systemically. Below shows some examples of personal and external accommodations.



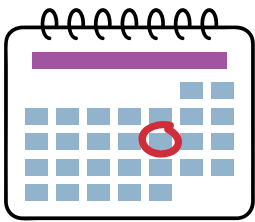
If someone needs bright light to be able to see properly, but you are sensitive to light, wearing tinted lenses or sunglasses could provide a compromise that works for both people.



A company could support employees to work under flexible or compressed hours to meet their personal needs, and requirements, such as, people with insomnia working flexible hours to enable them to work a sleep supported schedule.

Navigating Conflicting Needs

Navigating conflicting needs is an essential part of well-being. Whether this be our own internal conflicting needs, or navigating your own alongside other people's. This section explores some tips on strategies to manage conflicting needs, for yourself or to support others.



Planned decompression

Building in recovery time after high stress events where quiet time wasn't available can help meet this need after the event.



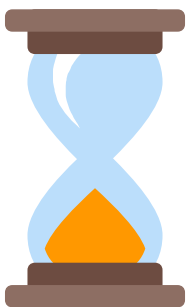
Visual aids

Using visual aids of different needs can help see when something is needed and help make decisions. This can also help with prioritisation and scheduling.



Naming your Needs Clearly

It is okay to tell people your needs. For example, saying "I want to be present with you, but I can't do that right now because I am overstimulated".



Using Time Limits or Structure

If you need alone time, and someone else is needing time to externally process or socialise with you, offering clarity can be helpful for the other person's needs and reduces uncertainty. For example "I'll need 30 minutes to myself and then I'll check in"

Navigating Conflicting Needs



Sensory Tools

Tools like noise-cancelling headphones, dim lights, sunglasses, weighted blankets, fidget toys etc can help you engage with others while still caring for yourself.



Negotiating Needs

Remember when two people have conflicting needs, it isn't about whose needs are more important, it is instead about, how can both needs be met creatively or in turns? There may be a solution that has yet to be found.



Support networks

Trusted people, therapists, peer support groups etc can help be a safe space to reflect and validate needs.



New Environments

If you are going to a new event or environment, check ahead what facilities they have and about pre-existing accessibility features. If there are things that conflict with your needs or an adjustments you need isn't already in place, get in contact with them.



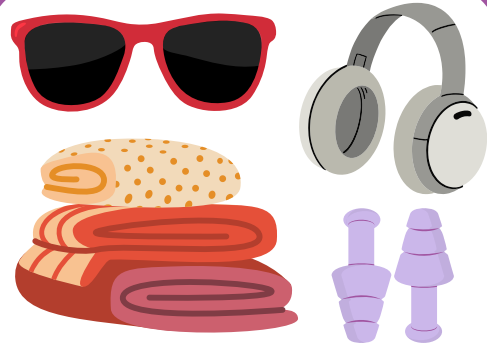
Prioritisation

Recognise that you may have unique challenges amongst different people and try to prioritise needs based on urgency and impact on the group, or individual.

Managing Conflicting Needs - Tips



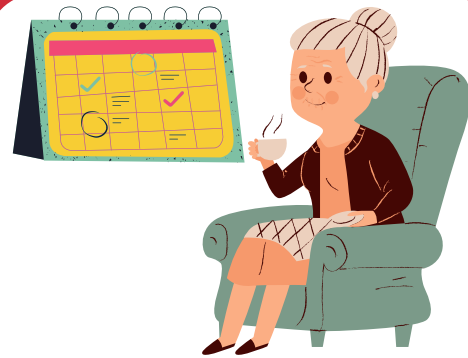
Prioritize Needs based on Urgency & Impact



Use Sensory Tools to Meet Needs



Negotiate Needs



Plan Decompression Time



Use Visual Aids for Your Needs



Inform People of Your Needs

Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

Leeds Recovery College – An NHS service that runs courses where you can learn more about mental health.

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

Live Well Leeds – Provide a range of services to people with mild to moderate mental health needs, including 1-to-1 support and groups.

Citizens Advice - Provide support with workplace and educational adjustments, as well as rights and setting legal boundaries.

Workplace Leeds - Offer 1-to-1 mental wellbeing support and work retention support, as well as workshops around employment.

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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