

# TAKING OFF THE MASK

## REVEALING AUTISTIC WOMEN



A resource pack for autistic women, their friends and family and others who would like a better understanding of how to communicate effectively with women on the spectrum.

***“An autism diagnosis can feel bittersweet. It can feel overwhelming, leaving you with so many questions about how your life will look from this point. Wondering how to discuss this with your family and friends and whether this new insight will affect the way people treat you. But there is a feeling of relief as you now have answers as to why you have always felt different, about the amount of effort it takes just to feel like you fit in to society. You can see your whole life through a different lens and forgive yourself for thinking that you haven’t tried hard enough to fit in. There is nothing wrong with standing out from the crowd and an autistic, neurodiverse brain can be a wonderfully quirky thing to have.”*** (Lucy, autistic adult)

## **Hello and welcome...**

... to our information pack ‘Taking off the Mask - Revealing Autistic Women’. We are a group of neurodiverse and neurotypical women who are members of Soroptimist International Salisbury and/or experts by experience. We feel that far less is known about autism in women and girls, who are often under/misdiagnosed and therefore may not get the help, information and understanding they need. As Professor Gina Rippon puts it *“The history of autism is male. When autistic girls meet clinicians, they are often misdiagnosed with anxiety, depression or personality disorders, or are missed altogether. Autism’s male spotlight means we are only now starting to redress this profound injustice.”*<sup>1</sup>



This pack is aimed at women on the spectrum, their friends and family and members of the general public, especially those in customer facing roles. It is not specifically aimed at parents of autistic children although some of the content may be relevant.

We had intended to start with a definition of autism but we are not clinicians and this is not intended to be a text book. On further consideration we decided that the best way to begin to understand autism in women is to listen to the stories that autistic women tell us and reflect on their experiences. Links to more formal definitions of autism can be found in the resource section.

1. Gina Rippon, The Lost Girls of Autism (Macmillan 2025)

## THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT AUTISTIC WOMEN

We asked the autistic women in our group what they would like you, ie the general public, to know about women with autism - this is what they said:

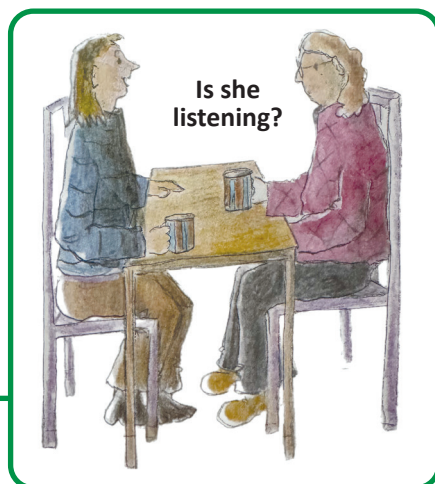
**Cath** *“Most of the time, we are masking, guessing, copying and using scripted learnt social talk and rules. We rarely understand, and in fact*



*cannot see, the unwritten rules around us so we go by words, so if we ask for clarity, please give that to us. Do not get aggressive with us for asking and for not knowing what you picked up instinctively that was not said. That being said, we are likely to baffle most people as we use complicated language as a matter of course, so we are happy to be asked to clarify our words as well.*

*We ask for patience, especially when switching from one task to another, and on interruption. We are made aware that eye contact is expected,*

*but this is learnt behaviour, and not instinctive to us, so often we will be listening without looking, in order to concentrate better. This is to do with our overactive processing of sound, sight, taste, smell, touch. We are aware constantly of our surroundings, and cannot filter our surroundings out. This means that if we are paying attention to one thing, or person, we are likely to use one sense at a time. So please do not assume that we are not listening, as we are doing so intently.”*



**Lucy** “Autistic women have to work hard to fit into the ‘normal’ world. But even if we mask it, we are still autistic. What you see on the surface can belie the reality of our day-to-day life and the pressure we feel to conform.

There are often strong and rather negative sounding words attached to autism, such as ‘Disability’, ‘Disorder’, ‘Syndrome’ and ‘Condition’. But we were born this way and know nothing other than this. We are capable of living full and happy lives on our own terms and we are asking for empathy and not sympathy.

Our neurodivergence means that we think and process things very differently to others. This can help in problem solving and being able to see and frame things differently to neurotypical people. We are not all savants and autism is not a superpower!

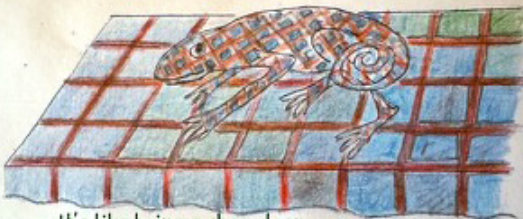
Although we can lack the social skills that come so naturally to others, we are generally happy to talk and welcome conversations about what it’s really like to be on the spectrum. Questions are fine and curiosity is welcomed; the more we can use our voices and share our stories, the more people will understand ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder).”



How are you?

**Flo** “Autistic girls and women are often like chameleons - we learn to blend in and hide our differences to seem ‘normal’, which can make it much harder for us to get diagnosed. Many of us spend years feeling different without knowing why, and are sometimes misdiagnosed along the way. We might have really strong interests, find social rules confusing, or be super sensitive (or not sensitive at all!) to things like noise, lights, smells, or textures.

Autism isn’t a superpower, but it’s not something that has to hold us back either. A lot of the challenges we face come more from the way the world is set up than from autism itself.”



It's like being a chameleon

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION - WHAT HELPS

**Lucy** *"It's important to understand that autism is a spectrum condition, which means that our communication skills will vary from person to person. Some might need extra time to process things that are said or asked of them, and some may have a very straightforward way of speaking that could come over as being a little brusque, sarcastic or offhand. We ask for your patience and understanding."*

*Be clear and concise. Avoid metaphors and figures of speech. Remember that autistic people may take phrases literally or misunderstand their meaning.*

*There are situations which might be overwhelming and difficult for autistic people to cope with. Hypersensitivities can vary, but sound, crowds, lighting, smells and the sensation of touch can be intense to the point of panic and induce a need to move away and find space. If they show discomfort or distress it might be because the environment feels unsafe or too much to handle. Asking how you can help them to feel more secure and responding to their needs will build trust."*



**Flo** “Autistic women might find it trickier to understand idioms, sarcasm, or euphemisms, so it helps to keep language clear and say exactly what you mean. Some may also find physical contact uncomfortable, so greetings like hugs or handshakes can feel overwhelming. And if you’re in a noisy or busy place, it might be harder for her to follow a conversation or feel comfortable speaking.

Just like anyone else, autistic people have a wide range of strengths and deficits when it comes to thinking and feeling! Some autistic women have intellectual disabilities, and some have significantly above-average intelligence. Unfortunately, mis-understandings about autism can lead to us being spoken to in ways that feel patronising or infantilising, or on the flip side, not clearly enough when we actually need direct communication.

The best rule: Don’t make assumptions. Whether someone is autistic or not, respectful, clear, and thoughtful communication goes a long way.”



**Cath** “We often get burnt out, both regularly and for long periods. This is partly the ongoing overstimulation of senses, the usual stresses of life, and also our extreme empathy for all around us. In a way, our empathy for others is maximised whilst our cognitive empathy (reading the room) is minimised. So we need rest after socialising, whether it be work or play. We need to develop strong boundaries, as we grow up being taught to please others at our

own expense. So please respect our boundaries, and do not take it personally when we say we have no physical or emotional energy to do something. If we do not rest enough, we get ill and mess things up. Sometimes a short break away from noise, lights, smells, and expectations of others is all we need. Other times we need to leave a situation.”



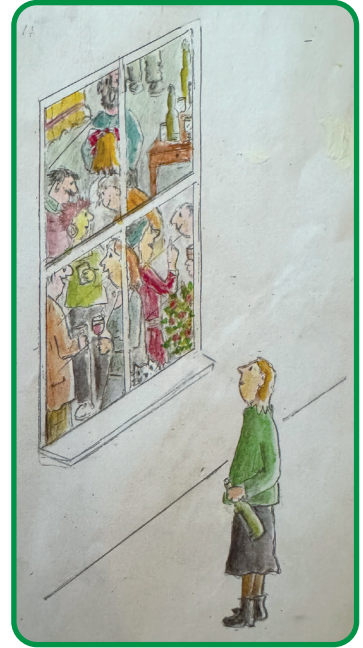
**Louise** *"I may look like I'm normal on the outside, but on the inside I am experiencing a wave of emotions. I find it hard to read people, so a lot of the time I am guessing and getting confused. I find it hard to understand some people's emotions, and I guess that I must appear rude and abrupt to some people.*

*I need reassurance from time to time and need things explained in 'plain English': All this jargon irks me. I hate it when people get impatient and moody when I ask what they mean, please be patient. Another annoyance is being misunderstood, please have the patience to listen and make things clear; it's not rocket science is it?*

*Some people don't understand why I sometimes don't use eye contact and get baffled by the things I say. Then they start interrupting and confusing me even more. I would like people to let me finish a sentence, then ask the question. Don't think I'm not listening, because I am.*

*Also don't invade my area by standing too close, this is an invasion of my space, if people don't agree with that then they can go away. We try to be normal, but there are times when we find it hard to fit in, a little voice whispers in my ear 'you shouldn't be here, you don't belong'. With all my senses firing off at once this can be difficult so patience here is a must. Autism is viewed with a negative stance, we are not 'weirdos' we are just trying to fit in. Autism is not someone with super powers, just a skill. We are like other adults except we view the world differently; and no I don't make bombs with hydrogen in!*

*We talk differently to each individual we meet, some of us are witty and smart, but we are also elusive until our trust is gained. Don't use complicated language as we take things literally to heart. We don't like loud unexpected noises, bright lights and we have boundaries. Too much stimulation can be overbearing and frightening; anxiety is our worst enemy. There are times when I need to step back and walk away."*



## RESOURCES

What follows is not a definitive list of resources for autistic women but rather a taster of what's out there. Those listed are, in general, specialist resources aimed at women but we have also included some aimed at all autistic people.

### Websites

Our favourite website is the Autistic Girls Network which has lots of useful info. Start with checking out these pages:

<https://autisticgirlsnetwork.org/>

Front page of the website provides overview of autism in girls/women and a menu for finding the area you are most interested in. The website is easy to navigate, informative and can be valuable to anyone affected by autism, personally, or in relation to a family member, friend or other interested party.

<https://autisticgirlsnetwork.org/autistic-women/>

This page concentrates on autistic women diagnosed as adults and gives information about how to cope with issues a woman may have.

<https://autisticgirlsnetwork.org/autism-and-girls/>

This page concentrates on difficulties of diagnosis, how autism may affect women.

### Other useful sites / pages

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Front page of the foremost organisation for autism in UK, giving menu of website which covers lots of areas relating to autism in all people.

<https://www.autismcentral.org.uk/guidance/understanding-autism>

A series of short videos that explain how autism affects the people in them – mostly girls /women but one boy and how people can help understand how they are and act.

### Books

We are happy to say there are an increasing number of books written for, about and by autistic women on the shelves today so we will be drawing your attention to those we particularly like. It's important to remember that one size doesn't fit all and a book you find brilliantly helpful may not resonate with your friend. Our recommendations

below are all for recently published volumes as some older books do not reflect current language or thinking. That is not to say that you may not find them helpful however.

When researching or acquiring books, useful places to start are your local library and bookshop, Amazon (the reviews are particularly helpful) and websites (see above).

## Reading Suggestions

### Looking After Your Autistic Self

*Niamh Garvey*  
(*Jessica Kingsley 2023*)

Featuring strategies you can tailor to your own personal needs, including 'Quick Calm Plans' for managing triggers and lived-experience advice on understanding emotional regulation, coping with sensory overload, and how to look after your senses during intimacy, this guide is here to ensure that you don't just survive adulthood you thrive in it.

### Different Not Less

*Chloé Hayden*  
(*Murdoch Books 2022*)

This is a moving, at times funny story of how it feels to be neurodivergent as well as a practical guide, with advice for living with meltdowns and shutdowns, tips for finding supportive communities and much more.

### Drama Queen: One Autistic Woman and a Life of Unhelpful Labels

*Sara Gibbs*  
(*Headline 2022*)

Drama Queen is both a tour inside one autistic brain and a declaration that a diagnosis on the spectrum, with the right support, accommodations and understanding, doesn't have to be a barrier to life full of love, laughter and success. It is the story of one woman trying to fit into a world that

has often tried to reject her and, most importantly, it's about a life of labels, and the joy of ripping them off one by one.

### Taking off the Mask

*Dr Hannah Belcher*  
(*Jessica Kingsley 2022*)

Growing up autistic can often feel as though you have to become a chameleon in social situations, camouflaging yourself to fit in with a seemingly neurotypical world. Combining lived experience with scientific research and practical advice, this book is the essential guide to understanding why you mask and how to feel confident without one.

### Mess is Progress

*Hannah Walker (2023)*

No-one prepares you for the post diagnosis burnout, the imposter syndrome and the grief. *Mess is Progress* encapsulates all of that and more. Self discovery, revelations and the elusive goal of finally unmasking are all here within.

### The Lost Girls of Autism

*Gina Rippon*  
(*Macmillan 2025*)

When autistic girls meet clinicians, they are often misdiagnosed with anxiety, depression, personality disorders - or receive no diagnosis at all. Autism's male spotlight means we are only now starting to redress this profound injustice.

## Check out YouTube

Flo (seen on Inside our Autistic Minds with Chris Packham) produced a short video for the event dispelling some of the common myths surrounding neurodiversity and explaining what it feels like to experience a sensory overload. This excellent video is available to watch on YouTube:

<https://youtu.be/O26IT1c4N6E>

### Podcasts

If you're someone who prefers listening to reading, these podcasts might be just the thing for you. But just to let you know they are not specifically oriented towards autistic women.

The Autistica Podcast brings you the latest discussions around autism research. It is for everyone from autistic people and parents interested in research to professionals and researchers.

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/get-involved/discover-podcast>

The Autism Podcast, delivered by the London Autism Group Charity, is the definitive autism related podcast. The podcast aims to improve our understanding of autism, boost acceptance, reduce autism stigma, and generate impactful, transformative ideas ranging from practical everyday advice to thoughts on policy, practice, and wider socio-cultural challenges.

<https://theautismpodcast.podbean.com/>

Not just a podcast, Autistic Radio also offers the opportunity to join their 'Sunday Drop In 444' which is recorded and then edited for broadcast at a later date. People are free to join in if they are comfortable to speak, but there is no commitment. Also we like to ask people after the recording if they give consent for us to use their words.

The link to the Sunday Drop In 444 is:

<https://www.autisticradio.com/sunday-drop-in-4-44pm/>

## Local Resources

### **Wiltshire Autism Hub (WAH)**

Supports individuals 14+ years with a diagnosis of autism living in Wiltshire. Provides 1:1 support, peer group support and travel support.

[www.wsun.co.uk/wiltshire-autism-hub](http://www.wsun.co.uk/wiltshire-autism-hub)

### **As We Are Peer Support Group**

A social group for autistic people (18+) who live in Wiltshire (on-line and in-person meets). No formal diagnosis necessary.

[www.wsun.co.uk/as-we-are-group](http://www.wsun.co.uk/as-we-are-group)

### **WITHINSIGHT COACHING**

<https://www.withinsightcoaching.co.uk/>

Emily is a Neurodiversity Coach in Wiltshire, Salisbury and Online. Visit her website for further information. As well as individual and group sessions Emily also runs WITHINSIGHT Social, informal social get-togethers for neurodivergent people in and around Salisbury looking for a relaxed and welcoming way to meet others. Whether you're up for a chat, want to share experiences, or simply fancy being in a space where you can just be – you're very welcome here.

Sessions take place on the first Tuesday of the month at the Everyman Cinema on Endless Street from 7-9pm.

<https://www.withinsightcoaching.co.uk/events/withinsight-social/>

### **National Autistic Society - South Wiltshire Branch**

*'We are a welcoming group who help and support people who wish to know more about, or who are on the Autistic Spectrum. All are welcome.'*

The Community Space, Tesco,  
Southampton Road  
Salisbury SP1 2 NY

The group meets on the first Monday (usually) of each month  
7.30pm to 9.00pm

# DON'T FORGET!

*“Autistic women are already amongst you. We are asking you to see us, value us, and let us be part of our communities. We expect to be treated as your equals, to be appreciated for our diversity, and want to feel included.”*

(Cath, autistic adult)

**You can also download a copy at:**

<https://sigbi.org/salisbury/club-projects/taking-off-the-mask-revealing-autistic-women/>



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