

**The
Advonet
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health
Equity Project**

Strategies and Resources

Workplace Stress and Mental Health

Workplace Stress and Mental Wellbeing

The workplace can be especially challenging and stressful for autistic people. Many face barriers such as being overlooked, struggling with mental health issues and sensory overload, or needing to leave their jobs due to overwhelming stress. Without proper recovery and support, this can lead to autistic burnout.

Factors like office politics, power dynamics, interpersonal conflicts, sensory overload and the exhaustion of masking can make navigating the workplace feel daunting. Social interactions and workplace dynamics can further heighten anxiety. However, seeking support and understanding strategies to manage these challenges can help reduce workplace stress and improve well-being.



This guide will provide practical suggestions to support mental health and manage workplace stress. Whether you're an autistic person navigating these challenges or someone looking to support a loved one.

Secondary Factors Limiting Employment



Driving Licence

Autistic people are less likely to have a driving licence than their non-autistic peers, reducing the amount of job opportunities that are available to them.



Education & Training

Limited access to tailored education or training can lead to feeling unprepared for work and the job market.



Socialising at work

Building friendships, interpreting social cues, fear of making mistakes and initiating conversations can be challenging and lead to isolation or exclusion, impacting job satisfaction and mental health. Team gatherings can be overwhelming and exhausting.



Transport

Autistic people are likely to face challenges with transport, such as needing travel plans or assistance to use public transport. Some cannot use public transport at all, while others risk sensory overload, during rush hours.



Fatigue & Health Management

Managing sensory issues, masking, anxiety, or co-occurring conditions can be mentally and physically draining, reducing the energy available for work and commuting.



Healthcare Services

Access to healthcare services, such as timely mental health services, routine GP appointments, dental care, or specialist support can be limited. Access barriers affect well-being and the ability to search for, attain and maintain employment.

Secondary Factors Limiting Employment



Prejudice & Misconceptions

Employers may hold biased values about autism, leading to fewer jobs or lack of understanding about reasonable adjustments and inclusive working environments.



Housing

Stable housing is vital for employment, barriers. Unaffordable rent, unsuitable environments, or a lack of accessible options can limit housing opportunities. Living in shared or supported housing may also limit job opportunities, especially if far from the workplace.



Masking & Autistic Burnout

Autistic people will mask in unsupportive environments, or to meet neurotypical expectations at work. This can lead to autistic burnout.



Support Networks

Many autistic people can face social isolation or limited access to tailor support services, making it harder to navigate job-seeking, request accommodations, or handle workplace challenges.



Financial Barriers

Cost related to transport, accommodations or job seeking (e.g., clothing for interviews) can be prohibitive, especially when on limited income. Increasing stress and making it hard to maintain employment.



Family & Caring Responsibilities

Some autistic adults may have family and caring responsibilities e.g. caring for a sick relative, or young child. This can be a stressor without support.

Workplace Stress Triggers

While every individual is different, certain factors are common stress triggers for many autistic people. Stemming from the work environment, or interactions with colleagues. Below is a list of other common triggers for workplace stress.

Common workplace stress triggers include:

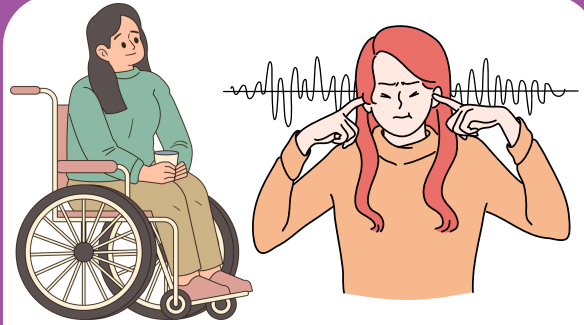
- High Masking in work
- Conforming to, and understanding social expectations
- Reduced Boundaries and people pleasing
- Challenging or uncomfortable working conditions
- Feeling unable to voice concerns due to lack of trust
- Frequent changes to routine, tasks or team structure
- Struggling to navigate unclear workplace policies.
- Travel stressors to and from work
- Working without suitable reasonable adjustments
- Interpersonal issues
- Uncertainty about job roles and responsibilities
- Additional caring responsibilities outside of work
- Work social events and gatherings
- Communication issues with staff and managers
- Lack of proper training
- Sensory Overload
- Inaccessible workplace
- Workplace bullying
- Inaccessible meeting
- Overlapping or excessive work demands
- Limited control over managing workload
- Financial stress
- Over-reliance on verbal communication
- Fear of job loss
- Anxiety



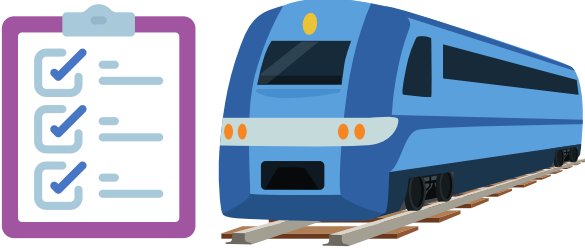
Workplace Stress Triggers



Boundaries & Masking



Inaccessible
Workplace or Culture



Transport & Travel
Planning Stress



Social Events &
Important Events



Limited Break
Opportunities



Uncertainty about Tasks,
Roles & Responsibilities

Common Autistic Experiences at Work

- Short notice changes e.g. meeting rearranged
- Meetings - can be difficult due to larger groups rather than 1-to-1, understanding expectations
- Sensory needs - consider personal adaptations you can make and changes employers can implement
- Routine - some jobs can help give routine and structure
- Repetitiveness and loss of motivation for focus
- Goals to aim for and attain - help with dopamine needs for AuDHD.
- Confusion about responsibilities or tasks (improved communication can help)
- Social interaction with colleagues can be positive, or negative depending on the acceptance and understanding of the workplace
- Work and autistic burnout coinciding due to masking
- Work adjustments and equipment from Access to Work e.g. working from home, or text to speech software

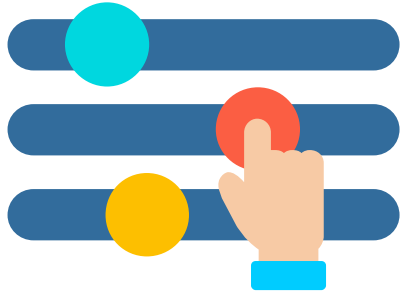
Stories by autistic workers

Autistic worker's stories This section contains stories which have been told to us by autistic people about the work they do and the experience they have had while jobseeking or working. They are not always positiv...

 Employment Autism



Supporting your Mental Health through Workplace Stress



Work Support &
Reasonable Adjustments



Neurodivergent
Friendly Socials



Quiet Space &
Sensory Toolkits



Peer Support &
1-1 Supervisions



Therapy & Mental
Health Signposting



Annual or Sick Leave
to Recover

Asking for Support in Work

Line manager - 1st person to talk to. Supervisions, informal conversations.

HR department - some organisations have internal HR staff, others don't. Advice, adaptations.

Staff Peer Support - may exist, may be scope to set up if not already present. Can give advice, information, solidarity.

Occupational Health - medical service to assess/ advise on reasonable adjustments, and health factors at work.

Access to Work - Assesses needs of disabled people in employment, makes recommendations and can approve grants to pay for equipment, training and support etc.

Employee Assistance Programmes - Such as a confidential helpline or healthcare coverage to support staff. The availability of this will depend on the employer

Reasonable Adjustments Prompts

Physical Adjustments

E.g. anti-glare screens, or soundproofing



Equipment

E.g. vestibular office chairs, or software



Work Environment

E.g. Work from home, or quiet area



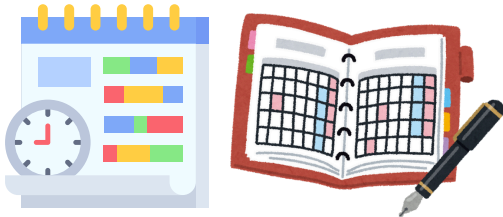
Training

E.g. Autism Training for Staff



Time & Targets

E.g. written tasks and extra time



Responsibilities

E.g. Work to Strengths and Accountability



Breaks

E.g. Frequent Breaks, or Flexible Hours



Travel

E.g. Taxis, or Reserved Parking

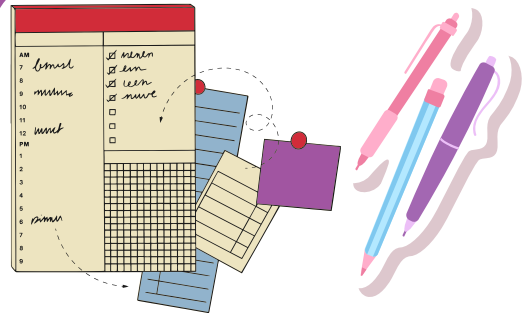


CAR PARK FOR
STAFF ONLY

Returning to Work



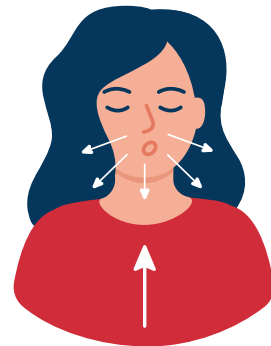
Prepare the day before
(e.g., tools, outfits & travel)



Visual Planners and
Schedules



Prepare for Return to
Work Meeting e.g.
Doctor's Note



Grounding Techniques



Plan Work Peer
Support Session

Draw Your Own Here

Creating an Autism Friendly Workplace

Below includes some things that the workplace can do to make the environment more inclusive:

- Establish workplace peer support groups
- Embracing different communication styles, for example, let staff contribute to meetings in other ways than verbally.
- Provide written summaries of meetings and instructions for given tasks
- Create a dedicated Quiet Room
- Meetings - Establish meeting rules, expectations, structure
- Social rules and workplace expectations
- Inclusive hiring and interview practices.
- Create a safe environment for staff to be open and talk about concerns and adjustments.
- Offer reasonable adjustments to staff and continue to check-in with them about how these are going
- Provide workplace training on disabilities and inclusivity.
- Inform staff of any routine or workplace changes in advance where possible.



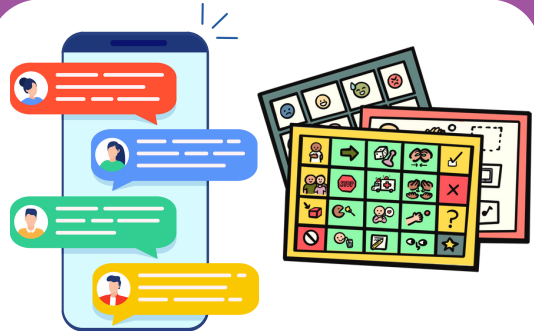
Remember that creating a sensory friendly and inclusive environment benefits everyone, not just autistic people.



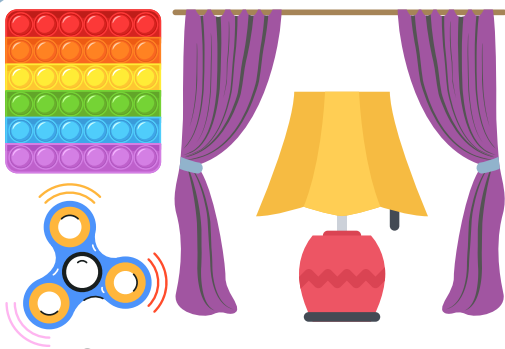
Having an Autism Friendly Workplace



Workplace Peer Support



Multiple Communication Methods Supported



Sensory Friendly Environment



Dedicated Quiet Room



Inclusive Hiring & Interview Practices



Clear Expectations for Tasks & Responsibilities

The Sensory Environment at Work

The sensory environment has a significant impact on autistic employees. For many, sensory issues are a major source of stress, making it difficult to focus, stay comfortable, or feel productive. Having prolonged unmet sensory needs can also influence meltdowns and burnout for autistic people. Below are some of the common sensory challenges that autistic people may face within the workplace.



Noise

Loud or overlapping noises, like multiple conversations or ringing phones, can be distressing for many autistic people and limit conversation. Without a quiet space to decompress or process information, the overwhelm can become harder to manage.

Smells

Many autistic people experience heightened sensitivity to smells, which can be overwhelming in the workplace. Common triggers include strong perfumes, hand soap and food odors from lunches spreading through the environment.

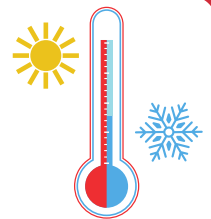


Lighting

Harsh fluorescent over head lights, or limited options for adjusting the warmth and brightness of lights can cause discomfort and headaches.

Temperature

Many autistic people struggle to regulate their body temperature. This can make the workplace feel too hot, too cold, or otherwise uncomfortable if there is not suitable temperature control options.

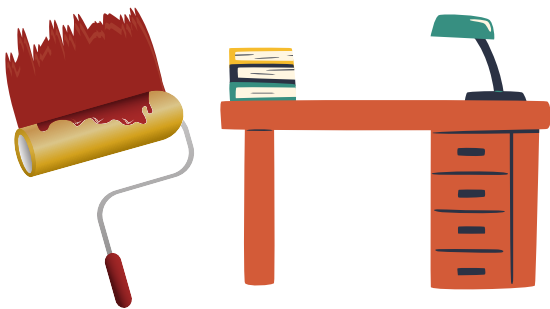


The Sensory Environment at Work

A supportive sensory environment doesn't just improve discomfort; it enables employees to thrive. Below includes some practical adjustments managers can implement to create a more inclusive and accommodating work environment.

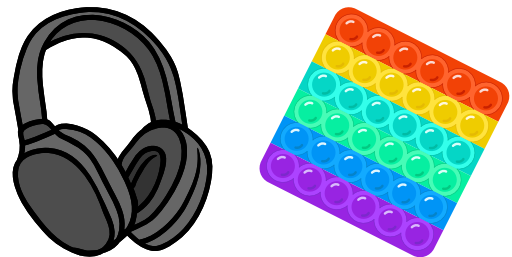
Physical Office Changes

Adjustments to the physical office environment can reduce sensory stress. Examples include calming colours, thoughtful decor, desk layout and creating quiet spaces.



Personal Adjustments & Equipment

Personal adjustments can aid in managing sensory challenges, such as using Access to Work funding for resources, providing fidget toys, or allowing extra breaks to decompress.



General Considerations

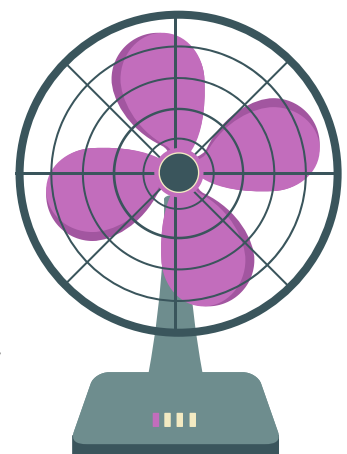
Improving the sensory environment does not have to be costly or complicated. Simple changes can make a big difference in creating a more comfortable workplace.

- Consider asking people what office and personal adjustments they need.
- Regularly check in to ensure changes remain effective and address any new needs.
- Train managers on sensory inclusion to better understand and support autistic staff.

The Sensory Environment at Work - Physical Office Adjustments

Physical Office Adjustments Examples:

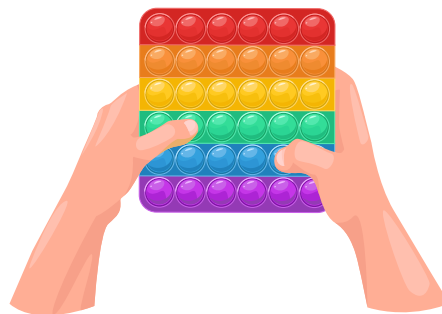
- **Visual barriers:** Use cubicles, frosted glass or privacy screens to reduce visual distractions
- **Quiet Toilets:** Use paper towels rather than hand-dryers to reduce auditory input in the toilets.
- **Food Smells:** Create a separate lunch space where people can go to socialise and limit the smell of food travelling round the workspace.
- **Sound Proofing:** use soundproof panels or noise-dampening materials background noise.
- **Temperature control:** Provide additional temperature control options like desks placed near windows, desk fans or heaters for comfort.
- **Lighting:** Provide adjustable lighting, including natural light and warm lit lamps, rather than relying solely on harsh overhead lights.
- **Colours of the office:** For example, walls and carpets being neutral and simple to avoid overwhelming patterns or distressing colours.
- **Desk layout:** Sectioned off areas instead of open plan to reduce noise and visual distractions.
- **Quiet spaces:** Designated pockets of the office or specific rooms as quiet zones for decompression.



The Sensory Environment at Work - Personal Equipment and Adjustments

Personal Equipment and Adjustment Examples:

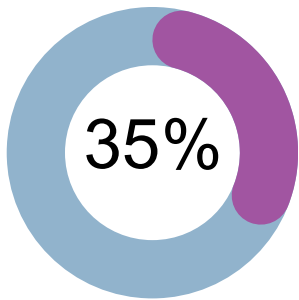
- **Access to Work:** Helps to fund resources and equipment that help with the sensory environment. For example, ergonomic equipment, noise cancelling headphones and overlays.
- **Noise Reduction:** Allow the use of headphones and/or earplugs for employees, you may be able to provide these in the workplace.
- **Home working:** Allow employees to work from home if the job allows to do so to reduce sensory challenges.
- **Flexible working hours:** Allow for flexible working to help manage where the employee works and to implement extra breaks
- **Scent Free Products:** Provide scent-free hand soap and cleaning supplies to reduce triggers.
- **Fidget toys:** Make sensory aids like fidget toys available to help employees focus and self-regulate.
- **Uniform flexibility:** Allow changes to uniforms or dress codes to ensure sensory comfort.
- **Extra breaks:** Provide additional breaks for employees to decompress or manage sensory overload.



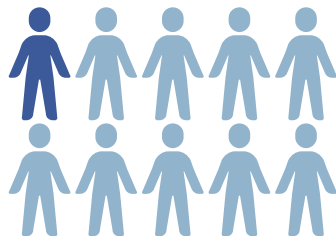
Barriers to Recruitment and Employment

Autistic people often have negative experiences with job interviews and group tasks. They face challenges like vague job descriptions, unclear interview questions, and environments that are difficult to navigate, with many interviews focusing more on social skills than the actual job requirements. This can lead to autistic people feeling pressured to mask their traits just to fit in. Masking is exhausting and takes energy away from focusing on the work itself.

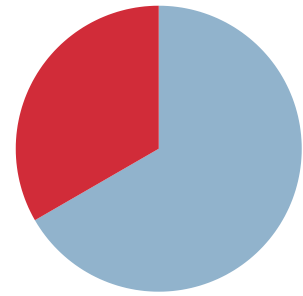
Maintaining long term employment can be difficult due to not receiving support or adjustments to do their job to their best standard.



Around 35% of autistic employees are fully open about being autistic



1 in 10 choose not to disclose their disability at all.



One third feel unable to discuss their adjustment needs at all, and for those who do, a quarter are refused the requested accommodations

Autistic people are more likely to be overqualified and underpaid compared to peers with the same skills, or job roles. This can impact on their well-being at work and lead to having an unmanageable workload. It can be difficult to set boundaries when being set too much, adding to workload pressures and the risk of burnout.



Having an autism friendly workplace Inclusive Hiring and Interview Practices

Interviews and hiring processes can often be inaccessible to autistic people, leading them to slip through the cracks before even getting to the interview.

Job Advertisement

Job adverts can often be vague, often containing points of essential skills that are not relevant for the job. This can be confusing for autistic people and lead to them not applying for the job at all.



Interview Process

Interviews can often be conducted with little information given prior, a large use of case study scenarios as well as relying upon social skills rather than skills required for the job.



Tips to make the interview and hiring process more accessible:

- When putting the job description online, provide details about the expectations, job role and skills required to do the job.
- Provide information prior to interviews, such as who will be on the interview panel, where this will be and interview questions beforehand.
- Providing a map and pictured of the building or interview room can be helpful.
- Ask applicants if they have any reasonable adjustments for the interview, showing accessibility from the start.
- Ensure the interview room has a suitable environment, consider virtual interviews to improve accessibility if the room cannot be changed.

Additional Resources

Local Organisations and Support

Workplace Leeds, which is run by Leeds Mind supports people with mental health issues who are seeking employment, they offer 1-1 support and will advise you on each step of the employment process. We have done partnership work and training with them, and some of their staff are also autistic:

- Website: www.leedsmind.org.uk/services/workplace-leeds/
- Phone: 0113 230 2631
- Email: admin@workplaceleeds.org.uk

Scope also has support for disabled people accessing work, and can support with interview prep, as well as practise and discuss reasonable adjustments with you too:

- Website: Support to Work | Disability charity Scope UK

AIM's Employment and Volunteering employment information:

Website: Employment and volunteering - Leeds Autism AIM

Contact Us



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Please leave a message for the AIM Mental Health Equity Project team.



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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.