

**The
Advonet
Group**

Providing Independent Advocacy



**Mental Health
Equity Project**



**Autism
AIM**

Strategies and Resources

Arts, Crafts and Mental Health

Autistic Experiences of Arts and Crafts

People may engage in arts and crafts to further their interests, have an outlet for creativity, share stories and engage in their hobbies, as well as build community.

Autistic people can meet sensory, social, internal and stimming needs via arts and crafts, as well as supporting emotional regulation and mental health needs.

However, there are specific barriers to access for arts and crafts activities that will be addressed, and coping strategies outlined in this guide.



This guide will discuss the lived experiences of autistic people relating to arts, crafts, and creative hobbies. Arts and crafts is an expansive category and many important activities may go indirectly referenced in this guide.

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

The Benefits of Arts and Crafts

Creativity is a great way for people to express emotions, develop motor skills, socialise and reduce anxiety. Remember, that everyone is different and there is no right way to engage with art. Do what is enjoyable to you!

Sensory Processing and Regulation

Arts and crafts introduce a variety of sensory experiences in a controlled way, allowing exploration of different textures.

Materials like paint, finger painting, clay and kinetic sand can be soothing or stimulating, offering a form of grounding and sensory play.



Social Connection

Projects involving team work, or craft groups where body doubling or parallel play is used can help provide socialisation in a low-pressure way, without relying on direct interaction.

Things like online music practise groups, or in person bands can all be useful to socialise in a way that is comfortable for you!



Routine and structure

Step by step projects can provide a calming sense of order, and can help with not only following a routine, but also with your own planning and development of routines. Repetitive patterns like weaving and dot painting can also be calming and grounding.



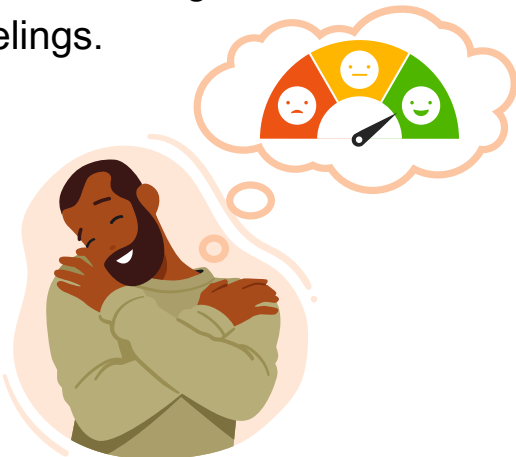
Continued Benefits of Arts and Crafts

Self Expression and Communicating Experiences

Arts and crafts can be a non-verbal way to express thoughts, emotions or special interests that may be difficult to convey verbally.

It can be a tool to help understand emotions, with some people finding art therapy really helpful, for example, when processing emotions it can be hard to find the word, but finding a colour may be easier.

Over time, you may find that you often use the same colour for specific emotions, and this can be a tool to help you develop further understanding with emotions and feelings.



Fine and Gross motor skills

Activities like cutting, drawing, painting and sculpting can all help to improve fine motor coordination and strengthen the muscles in the fingers and hands.

Other large projects like murals or pottery can help encourage gross motor movements.

The repetitive movement in some art projects also help to support hand eye coordination and balance.



Stress Reduction

Art can aid with emotional regulation by allowing people to explore and process feelings, and foster a sense of control and empowerment over your emotions.

For example, relaxing and listening to your recorded music.



Autistic Barriers to Arts and Crafts

There are a number of barriers that autistic people face when engaging with arts and craft 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 arts and craft activities e.g. dyspraxia.

Executive Function



As autistic people our executive function can fluctuate due to unmet needs, or even autistic burnout. This can mean planning for, or focusing on arts and crafts may be harder.



Sensory Environment

Autistic people can often have sensory sensitivities which can make the environment or sensory setup of arts and craft activities inaccessible. Examples of this include bright lights, or rough unusual textures like clay, as well as strong smells from paint.

Communication & Social Expectations



Hobby groups, or arts and craft classes, can have social expectations that restrict autistic participation. For example, small talk at break times, or verbal instructions without written guidance, or processing time to learn. This can add to communication stress.



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.

Monotropism



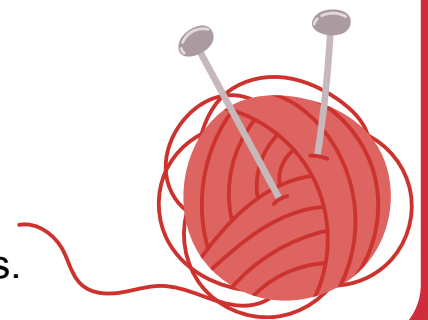
Monotropic thinking can mean we have a small set of interests or activities. Which can be at the exclusion of others, potentially causing issues with starting new hobbies, or meeting internal needs.

Challenges for Autistic People Engaging with Art

Creative activities can come with 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 art and craft groups. Below is a list of autistic, arts and craft challenges that some people may experience:

A list of autistic challenges to consider for art and crafting activities:

- **Unclear instructions**, which can lead to difficulties understanding how to develop skills and participate in activities, and loss of confidence and motivation.
- **Inaccessible sessions or settings**, which do not have reasonable adjustments in place, or cannot be made more accessible through those adjustments. This can include sensory
- **Financial barriers**, whether for materials, subscriptions, or entry fees, can be a potential barrier for autistic people, who are often less financially secure, or unemployed. This may be
- **Monotropism and autistic inertia**, which can both contribute to difficulty in starting and stopping tasks, along with greater difficulty in learning new skills if accommodations aren't made to support them to process information.
- **Sensory issues**, some arts and craft materials can cause sensory issues, and if these are not adaptable can make it difficult to participate. For example, textures of fabrics and yarn, paint or glue on the hands and the feel of utensils like paint brushes.
- **Perfectionism** can lead some people to feel frustrated if the art work doesn't match expectations.
- **Energy levels** and fluctuations in energy can make sustained engagement difficult.
- **Social Pressure** can make group art settings stressful, especially if there are unspoken social rules.



Adjustments for Arts and Crafts for Autistic People



**Autism Friendly
Activity Space**



**Written/ Recorded
Instructions**



**Implement Activity
Adjustments**



Body-Doubling



**Autistic Creative
Videos/ Vlogs**

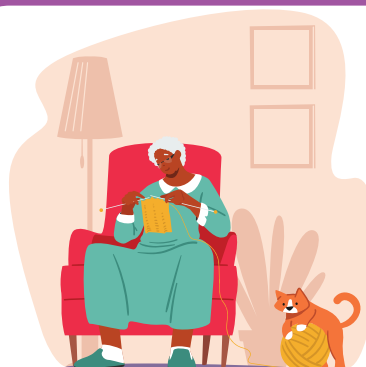


**Gloves or Alternative
Materials**

Additional Adjustments for Autistic Arts and Crafts



**Creativity Which
Incorporates Interests**



**Low-Sensory & Low-
Energy Activities**



**Routine, or Flexibility
for Sessions**



**Recovery Time &
Affirmation**



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

Unmet needs, chronic pain, or fatigue through the day can compound 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 Art and Craft Tips and Coping Strategies

Tips and coping strategies to manage mental health needs for arts and crafting activity as autistic adults:

- **Activity Leaders that Model their Needs** during art and craft groups, such as reminding about water, or toilet breaks to meet internal needs.
- **Peer Support** enjoy creativity in a peer space with shared experiences.
- **Acknowledge your Achievements**, give yourself affirmation and celebrate enjoyment of creative activities e.g. learning new chords.
- **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 art and crafts in services, or at home e.g. gloves to meet sensory needs when crafting pottery, and reducing overwhelm of unpleasant textures.
- Have a **Burnout Plan** e.g. easy meal plans, and support after activities.
- Know when you need a **time out**, and rest to recover from creative hobbies. This could be physical, social or cognitive recovery time.
- **Make use of Sensory Tools** such as headphones to minimise stress or distraction, or stim tools during creative sessions e.g. sunglasses if singing in a choir outdoors to reduce glare and overstimulation.
- **Use of Communication Aids**, such as, flashcards, or AAC for groups.
- **Use Gloves or Alternative Materials** to help you with certain textures that you may otherwise avoid.
- **Step by Step Guides and Visual Instructions** can help with structure and planning of any projects.
- **For those with Sensory Seeking Behaviours** - Provide materials that allow for tactile stimulation, and provide variety.



Ways Arts and Crafts Support Autistic Wellbeing

When selecting arts and crafts activities, it is important to consider individual sensory preferences, energy levels, reasonable adjustments and interests.

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



Sharing Special Interests:

Hobbies can be a useful motivator to engage in arts and crafts, also helping us to find community that share our interests. Think about what you enjoy and how this can be applied the chosen activity e.g. current or past intererests.



Art and Sensory Play:

Choosing art activities that enable sensory play can provide great enjoyment and grounding. Things like finger painting, slime-making or sand art can be good for this. As well as creating advocacy tools, such as communication flashcards.



Baking and Internal Needs:

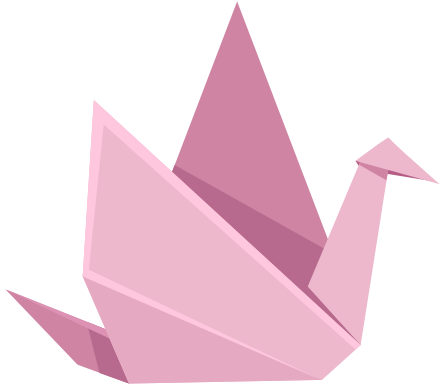
As autistic people we can process our internal needs differently, either being hyper, or hypoaware of them. Baking or cooking are skills which help us to meet these core needs.



Solo-time and Monotropism:

Autistic people can get into a monotropic flow state that helps us to regulate our central nervous and sensory system. Music, crafting and art can help us to achieve this, and feel relaxed.

Activities Tailored for Autistic Arts and Crafts



Limited Mess Activities

For those who prefer less mess, or do not have the energy to be able to pack away after, things like digital drawing, sticker art or paper crafts such as origami can be a good choice for engaging with crafts.



Structure, Routine and Step-by-Step

If you prefer to have more structure with arts and crafts, following guides or tutorials can be helpful. Things like paint by numbers, guided sketching and step-by-step kits with clear instructions can provide a good source of this creativity.



Free Form Creativities

If you prefer less structure with your arts and crafts, it can be good to look at activities that require less instructions. Activities with an open ended structure like improvisational comedy groups may be good to look into as they provide for spontaneity in a scheduled way.



Being in Nature

Using things found in nature can be a great way to bring your outside time into your art. You may wish to bring things back from any walks to add into a journal, art work, or to create an art piece from. You may also get inspiration while out in nature to enjoy e.g. whittling, or music.

Reasonable Adjustments for Autistic Arts and Crafts

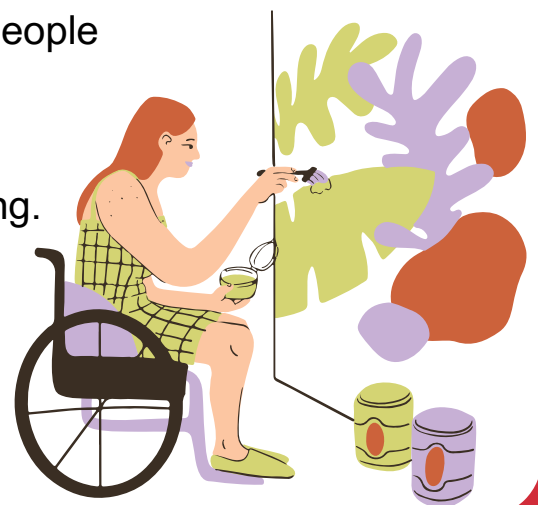
Autistic people can experience access barriers when taking part in arts and crafts, and this can be at home, at a group or class activities e.g. pottery.

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 art and craft access, and that can improve wellbeing.

Suggestions and Prompts of Relevant Reasonable Adjustments:

- **Written summaries, agenda and instructions** for art and craft groups or projects, so that you know what to expect and can plan in advance.
- **Alternative methods of communication** e.g. communication cards.
- **Flexible start and end times** of art classes, and having time for **regular breaks** and quiet spaces accounted for.
- **Use gloves or alternative materials** to help you with certain textures that you may otherwise avoid.
- **Low sensory environments** - reduce background noise and lighting
- **Flexible participation** - Allow for breaks or modifications to the activity. Be flexible around missed sessions and let people contribute in ways that suit them.
- **Allow for repetition** of any instructions to clarify understanding and help with processing.
- **Be flexible on any long term projects**, allowing for extra time and no pressure environments for goals of completion throughout.

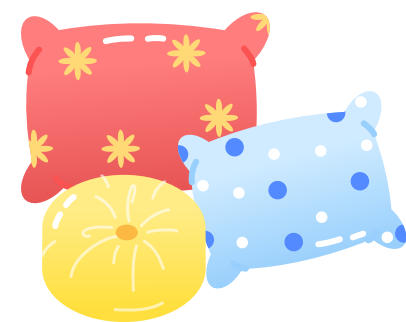


Ways to Support Mobility and Energy Levels for Arts and Crafts

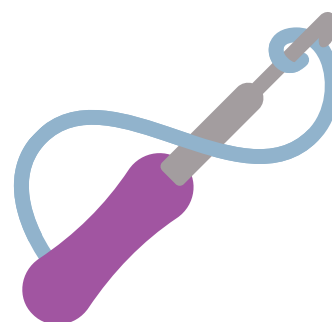
Autistic people may have different mobility and energy support needs compared to non-autistic people. Autistic people are more susceptible to multi-co-occurring physical health conditions than non-autistic people across all organ systems (Ward, Weir, Baron-Cohen, 2023).

Also, many autistic people have co-occurring conditions that may decrease energy levels, limit mobility to engage with arts and crafts. Certain activities may increase fatigue, require dexterity and fine motor functions e.g. knitting, or guitar. 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:



Adaptive Seating and Spaces



**Ergonomic Equipment
E.g. Easy-Grip Crochet**

- **Energy-conserving and ergonomic equipment** such as easy-to-grip brushes and crochet hooks, pre cut shapes can help reduce fine motor strain. As well as seated, or wheeled activities, such as dance classes that are accessible for people using wheelchairs/ mobility aids. Please check your eligibility for grants from PIP, or GP practice.
- **Adaptive seating and spaces** can be helpful, for example, cushioned chairs or standing desks for comfort.
- **Shorter sessions** - break projects into manageable steps over multiple sessions and set breaks in activities.



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.

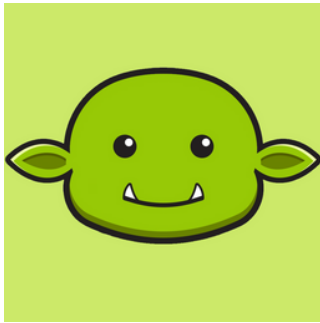
Burnout can have an impact on routine and daily activities, including exercise, mobility and motivation to engage in hobbies we would normally enjoy. We will explore ways to support exercise during burnout and recovery.

A list of considerations to create a burnout support plan:

- **Recognise burnout signs** - Know what your signs of burnout are, for example loss of motivation, fatigue and sensory overwhelm, so that you are able to manage this easier when you need to.
- **Pacing projects** - Avoid long sessions and try to break tasks into smaller steps so you are not doing too much at once.
- **Alternative restoring activities** - try to have multiple options, such as low energy alternatives like digital colouring or audio-guided crafts can help you still be able to engage in crafts when low on energy.
- **No pressure approaches** - try to prioritise enjoyment rather than productivity for your arts and crafts. This is a space for you to enjoy your project, and not to put pressure and overwhelm on yourself.
- **Alternative group participation** - If you are struggling to attend groups, see if you can have some sessions away, or join an online group. You can also utilise doing projects alone or having a safe person with you whilst you craft, and they do something else. This can help meet the social need without pressure.
- **Reach out for support**, check our signposting information on page 15.

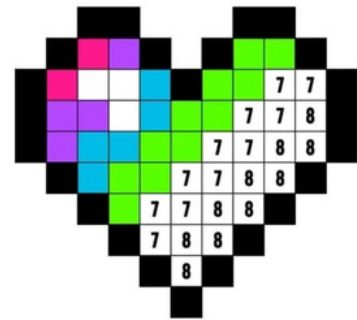


Arts and Crafts Apps



Goblin Tools

Help break down projects & tasks



Colour by Number

A mobile paint by numbers



Procreate

Draw, sketch & paint electronically



Pinterest

Create mood boards and find creative inspiration



Sims FreePlay

Online world, design homes and interiors



YouTube

Find tutorials to suit your crafting interests

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.

MindWell Leeds in collaboration with Purple Patch Arts has a wonderful webpage listing accessible arts and craft activities in Leeds: <https://shorturl.at/57IPv>

People in Action run autism and learning disability friendly arts groups, including talent and drag shows: <https://artstogetherleeds.co.uk/partner/people-in-action/>

Heart in Headingley also runs, art, music and craft events, including a pop-up art gallery. You can find more information here: <https://heartcentre.org.uk/whats-on/#Arts-Section>

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>

Contact Us



yaamhep@advonet.org.uk



0113 244 0606

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



[@yorkshireautismaim](https://www.facebook.com/yorkshireautismaim)



[@yaamhep](https://twitter.com/yaamhep)

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.