

CareCertify LLC

CareCertify Caregiver Training · Autism Spectrum Caregiving

AUT-03

How Autism Shows Up

Participant Guide

Professional Caregivers & Direct Support Professionals · A Caregiver's Guide to Autism

Updated July 2026 — DSM-5-TR; peer-reviewed sources

Recognizing how autism appears — in communication, senses, and behavior — is the first step to responding with skill and respect.

Learning Objectives — by the end of this module you will be able to:

- Recognize common social communication differences
- Understand stimming and why it matters
- Describe routines, sameness, and intense interests
- Identify sensory differences
- See how autism presents across the lifespan and masking
- Observe well and read behavior as communication

Section 1: Three areas you'll notice

Autism tends to show up across these — uniquely in each person.

- **Social communication.** Differences in conversation, eye contact, and reading or using tone, facial expressions, and body language.
- **Repetitive & routine.** Repetitive movements or speech, a strong need for sameness and routine, and deep, focused interests.
- **Sensory.** Being more or less sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, tastes, smells, and movement than others.
- **Varies by person.** No two autistic people look exactly alike — not everyone shows every sign, and strengths appear here too.

Section 2: Social communication differences

Different, not deficient — and often very honest.

- **Conversation.** Back-and-forth conversation, small talk, and knowing when to speak or pause can be genuinely harder.
- **Nonverbal cues.** Reading and using eye contact, tone, facial expressions, and gestures may differ; less eye contact isn't disinterest.
- **Literal language.** Many autistic people take language literally, so idioms, sarcasm, and hints can confuse — be clear and direct.

Section 3: Stimming — self-regulation in motion

Self-stimulatory behavior that usually helps the person cope.

- **What it is.** Repetitive movements or sounds — hand-flapping, rocking, spinning, repeating words (echolalia), fidgeting.
- **Why it happens.** Stimming helps regulate emotions and sensory input — calming overwhelm, managing excitement, or aiding focus.
- **Let it be.** Don't suppress harmless stimming; it's a valid coping tool. Only redirect if it's unsafe, and offer a safe alternative.

Stopping stimming can increase distress; respecting it shows you understand how the person copes.

Section 4: Routines, sameness, and intense interests

Predictability brings comfort; interests bring joy.

- **Routine matters.** Consistent routines create safety; unexpected changes can cause real distress, not stubbornness.
- **Insistence on sameness.** Doing things the same way, same order, same route — this is a way of making the world predictable.
- **Intense interests.** Deep, focused interests can bring expertise, motivation, and delight — a strength to build on, not discouragement.
- **Rules & fairness.** A strong sense of rules and fairness is common; unexplained changes to 'the rules' can feel deeply wrong.

Section 5: Sensory differences

The same room can feel very different to an autistic person.

- **Over-responsive.** Some sensations feel too intense — a humming light, a tag on a shirt, or a loud room can be painful or overwhelming.
- **Under-responsive.** Some sensations register less — a person may not notice cold, pain, or their name being called right away.
- **Sensory seeking.** Some people seek input — spinning, deep pressure, certain textures or sounds — because it feels organizing.
- **It drives behavior.** Much 'behavior' is really a sensory response; a full module covers sensory support in depth.

Section 6: Communication varies widely

Speaking ability is not the same as understanding.

- **Nonspeaking.** Some autistic people don't use spoken words and communicate through AAC, gestures, writing, or behavior.
- **Few or scripted words.** Some use limited speech, or 'script' — repeating lines from shows or past conversations to communicate.

- **Echolalia.** Repeating words or phrases (echolalia) often carries meaning — a request, a comfort, or a way to process.
- **Fluent but literal.** Some speak fluently yet take things literally and find social nuance hard — fluency can hide real support needs.

Section 7: Across the lifespan — and masking

Autism looks different at different ages, and some people hide it.

- **Children.** Signs often appear in early childhood as social and sensory differences and strong routines.
- **Teens.** Social demands grow; anxiety and the effort to fit in can increase.
- **Adults.** Autistic children become autistic adults; many develop coping skills but still need support.
- **Masking.** Some hide or 'mask' autistic traits to fit in — copying others, suppressing stims — which is exhausting.
- **Often missed.** Girls, women, and adults are more often missed or diagnosed late, partly because they mask well.
- **Burnout.** Chronic masking can lead to exhaustion and 'autistic burnout' — a reason to let people be themselves.

Section 8: Behavior communicates

When words are hard, behavior speaks.

- **A need.** Behavior may say 'I'm hungry, tired, in pain, or need the bathroom' when the person can't say it in words.
- **A feeling.** It may express anxiety, excitement, frustration, or fear that has no other outlet in the moment.
- **A response.** It may be a reaction to the environment — too loud, too bright, too fast, or too unpredictable.

Ask 'what is this behavior telling me?' rather than 'how do I stop it?' — that question changes everything.

Section 9: How to observe well

Skilled observation is the heart of good support.

- Watch for patterns — when and where behaviors happen
- Notice the setting — noise, lights, crowds, transitions
- Look for what came just before (the trigger)
- Consider needs — hunger, pain, tiredness, sensory overload
- Note what helps the person settle
- Share what you observe with the team and family

Curiosity beats assumption — you're a detective for what the person needs.

Section 10: Strengths show up too

Look for these as closely as you look for challenges.

- **Focus & persistence.** Deep focus on interests can mean impressive knowledge and follow-through.
- **Memory & patterns.** Strong memory and pattern recognition are common gifts.
- **Honesty.** Directness and sincerity make for trustworthy, genuine relationships.
- **Expertise & creativity.** Passionate interests can grow into real skill, employment, and joy.

Section 11: Every person is different

Signs are a guide, not a checklist.

- **Not every sign.** No autistic person shows every sign; the mix is unique to each individual.
- **Combinations vary.** Someone may be very sensory-sensitive but socially outgoing, or fluent but easily overwhelmed.
- **Ask and watch.** Learn each person's specific signs, triggers, strengths, and joys — from them, their family, and their plan.

The goal isn't to label the signs — it's to understand and support this person.

Apply It — Scenarios

Hands flapping with joy

During a favorite activity, a client flaps their hands and makes happy sounds. A visitor asks if you should 'calm him down.'

The right response: → Explain that this is joyful stimming — a healthy way he expresses excitement. → There's no need to stop it; it's safe and it's him being happy. → Join his joy rather than dampen it; celebrate what he loves. → Educate the visitor kindly — respect for stimming is respect for the person.

Taking it literally

You tell a client to 'hop in the shower' and they look confused and anxious.

The right response: → Recognize the literal interpretation — 'hop in' can be confusing. → Rephrase clearly and concretely: 'It's time to take your shower now.' → Use direct, literal language and avoid idioms, sarcasm, and hints. → Add a visual or gesture if it helps the person understand.

Key Terms

Term	What it means
Social communication	Conversation, nonverbal cues, and relationship differences common in autism.
Stimming	Self-stimulatory, repetitive movement or sound that helps regulate emotion and senses.
Echolalia	Repeating words or phrases, often to communicate or self-regulate.
Sensory over-responsive	Experiencing sensations as too intense.
Sensory seeking	Actively seeking sensory input because it feels organizing.
Masking	Hiding autistic traits to fit in — often exhausting.
Autistic burnout	Exhaustion from chronic masking and unmet needs.
Behavior as communication	The idea that behavior expresses a need, feeling, or response.

Check Your Understanding

1. Autism commonly shows up in social communication, sensory differences, and:

- A. Repetitive behaviors and routines
- B. Contagious symptoms
- C. Curable illness
- D. Height and weight

Answer: A — Three areas: social, sensory, repetitive.

2. Stimming is:

- A. Always harmful
- B. Deliberate misbehavior
- C. A sign of danger
- D. Self-regulation that helps manage emotions and senses

Answer: D — Stimming = self-regulation.

3. Intense, focused interests are:

- A. Something to discourage
- B. A problem to fix
- C. Always unhealthy
- D. A strength to build on

Answer: D — Interests are a strength.

4. A nonspeaking autistic person:

- A. Cannot understand anything
- B. Has nothing to say
- C. Should be ignored
- D. May understand fully and communicate through AAC, gestures, or behavior

Answer: D — Speaking / understanding.

5. The best question to ask about a behavior is:

- A. 'What is this telling me?'
- B. 'How do I stop it?'
- C. 'Who's to blame?'
- D. 'How do I punish it?'

Answer: A — Behavior communicates.

6. A client flaps hands and makes happy sounds during a favorite activity. You should:

- A. Calm him down
- B. Stop the activity
- C. Recognize joyful stimming and let it be
- D. Restrain him

Answer: C — Joyful stimming is healthy.

7. Sensory 'seeking' behavior (like spinning or deep pressure) is:

- A. Always dangerous
- B. Meaningless
- C. A punishment
- D. A search for input that feels organizing

Answer: D — Seeking input can be organizing.

What You Learned

- Autism shows up in social communication, repetitive behavior/routines, and sensory differences
- Stimming is self-regulation — respect it; only redirect if unsafe, and offer an alternative
- Routines and intense interests bring predictability and joy — build on them
- Sensory differences (over-, under-responsive, seeking) drive much behavior
- Communication varies widely; speaking ability isn't the same as understanding
- Autism presents differently across ages; masking is real and exhausting
- Behavior communicates a need, feeling, or response — observe with curiosity

Next: AUT-04 — communication and connection, including AAC and building trust.

Legal & Training Basis

This course is caregiver education about autism spectrum disorder, developed from current, authoritative sources including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the DSM-5-TR diagnostic framework, and peer-reviewed research. It is general education for caregivers — not medical advice, a diagnosis, or a treatment protocol. Every autistic person is an individual; caregivers should follow each person's own support plan and consult qualified professionals for medical, behavioral, and dietary decisions. Current as of July 2026.

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