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Understanding autistic behaviour and communication



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Discover valuable insights and strategies for understanding autistic behaviour and communication, and learn practical ways to foster better [support](#), empathy, and understanding.

This year, we hosted a webinar titled '[Understanding Autistic Behaviour and Communication](#)' in partnership with [Autism From The Inside](#).

Autism From The Inside co-founders Paul Micallef and Shannan Lea shared valuable insights and strategies to understand behaviour and communication in people with autism – whether they are your clients or loved ones. They also offered practical approaches to foster better support, empathy, and connection.

In this article, we share some of the important highlights from this webinar. You can also watch the webinar below.

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Paul Micallef
Autism From The Inside

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Understanding: autism, a spectrum of diversity

“All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in diverse ways,” says Lea.

Autism is a spectrum condition, meaning no two people with autism are the same. There will be differences in how they feel, think, and communicate. The way they interact with others, learn, behave, or manage their emotions is unique to each individual. This lifelong condition affects everyone differently, which is why autism is also known as [Autism Spectrum Disorder \(ASD\)](#).

Autism is complex and involves variations across 5 key areas of functioning: language, motor skills, sensory skills, perception, and executive function.

they also have unique challenges,” Lea explains. “An individual may be a virtuoso violinist but struggle to organise an appointment diary—these things coexist within the same brain.”

Behaviour as communication

For people with autism, the communication process varies as much as the experience of autism itself. It includes other factors that affect their communication, such as touch, smell, sight, capacity, movement, and interoception. This presents a diverse range of challenges in communication, contributing to difficulty with social interaction, which is why autism is often considered a social disability.

Just as children communicate through behaviour, either positively or negatively, people on the spectrum also exhibit non-verbal physical behaviours without consciously being aware of them.

The community needs to shift its perspective from labelling these behaviours in negative terms to trying to understand them as modes of communication.

“Many autistic individuals experience miscommunication,” says Micallef. “They might be aware of misunderstandings and try to correct them, but others might get frustrated if they don’t understand quickly enough”.

Being patient and observing all the clues—like behaviour, words, and emotions—can help bridge these gaps.

Building greater empathy, understanding, connection and supports

“When we observe different behaviours in autistic individuals, we gain a better understanding and empathy for their communication,” says Lea.

For example, echolalia (repetition of words or phrases) may reflect emotions. Aggression can often indicate discomfort, fear, anxiety, and frustration. At the same time, withdrawal can signal introversion, low self-esteem, social rejection, or mental health issues.

It’s also essential to distinguish between tantrums and autistic meltdowns, which is a response to being overwhelmed.

To build greater empathy and connection, focus on listening rather than reacting to unexpected behaviours. Ask questions to better understand the behaviours and emotions behind them, and use strategies that help autistic individuals, especially children, connect with and validate their feelings. This will enhance their understanding of their own needs.

Empathy and understanding create stronger relationships through better communication. This also includes fostering positive autistic identity, recognising autistic behaviour as authentic communication, providing artistically led supports and a safe environment, and encouraging autistic individuals to embrace their uniqueness.

The link between connection, positive autistic identity, inclusion and social connection

People with autism who have a strong sense of affiliation with other autistic people and have positive views about the autistic community experience improved self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Knowing they are not alone and recognising their differences as simply being human helps them self-acknowledge their uniqueness, which can lead to better mental health outcomes.

It’s also vital to acknowledge autistic strengths and not focus on meltdowns and challenging behaviours that make autistic individuals feel disempowered.

Inclusion is a critical link between social well-being, mental health, belonging, and connectedness. It is a place where diversity is represented, and individuals feel visible and acknowledged.

People on the autism spectrum can cope with difficult situations and challenging emotions when they are included and able to participate as they are. This increases resilience at both

However, we need empathy and understanding to have inclusion and social connection.

“Autistic people want to be included. We want friends and social connections just as much as everyone else,” concludes Micallef. “There is this stereotype of the autistic person who likes to spend time by themselves, and one reason is that being included is difficult. That’s where you can help.”

About Autism From The Inside

[Autism From The Inside](#) provides a safe and inclusive space for the autism community to connect, learn, and grow. They offer a range of courses, events and coaching services for autistic adults and children, parents, educators, and the wider community.

You can [watch the full webinar](#) to gain more in-depth information. For helpful resources on autism and NDIS support, explore our [Autism Topic Library](#).

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Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the cultures of our First Nations Peoples and are thankful for the community that we share together now. We pay our respects to our First Nations Peoples and their elders/leaders, both past and present, and those who are rising up to become leaders.

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