

Providing Gender-Affirming Care to Autistic Individuals

About the Author and Research

This resource is intended for gender-affirming health care providers who want to provide better care for their autistic clients. It is part of the research project *Understanding Trans Autistic People's Experiences of Gender-Affirming Care*. The researcher interviewed twelve autistic adults who had accessed gender-affirming care in the past five years in Ontario, Canada. Participants shared their recommendations for improving gender-affirming care for autistic people. This document summarizes these recommendations and includes quotes from participants and links to additional resources. It is not medical or legal advice. The document is based on research with adults and is primarily applicable to gender-affirming care for adults rather than children and teens. Quotes are given with pseudonyms and do not use the research participants' real names.

This resource was developed in 2024 by Kai Jacobsen based on their MA in Sociology thesis research. Their email is KaiJacobsen@cmail.carleton.ca. This document draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and an Autism Scholars Award from the Council of Ontario Universities. This document is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Many people are both trans and autistic

Autism is much more common among transgender people than cisgender people. The largest survey of trans and nonbinary people in Canada (n = 2873), Trans PULSE Canada, found that 14% of participants were autistic.¹ Other research has consistently found a high degree of overlap between trans and autistic populations. A 2022 meta-analysis estimated that 11% of people with gender dysphoria or gender incongruence have an autism diagnosis.² In contrast, 2% of children and youth in Canada are diagnosed with autism.³

An autistic person's gender is an important part of their identity, not just a phase or special interest. Research suggests that autistic and non-autistic trans people have similar gender identity development trajectories.^{4,5} A recent systematic review of evidence^{4,5} for theories on the link between trans identities and autism found no evidence that autistic people's trans identities are a product of rigid or obsessional thinking.⁶ In contrast, the most promising theory identified in the review was that autistic people are less influenced by social norms and rules, including binary gender norms.⁶

Many autistic people use the neurodiversity paradigm to explain their experiences. The neurodiversity paradigm views autism as a difference, not a deficit.⁷ While autistic people may experience challenges and barriers, autism is not something that needs to be fixed or cured. Autistic adults can thrive when they have the supports they need.

Autistic people are a diverse group and might not “look” autistic. Autism is a spectrum and manifests in a variety of ways. Many autistic people can make eye contact, speak verbally, and are not obviously visibly autistic. Autistic people often work hard to hide or mask their autistic traits because of past experiences of stigma and discrimination.⁸

Autistic people may express their gender differently than non-autistic people. For example, some autistic people may choose clothing and hairstyles to accommodate their sensory needs in addition to expressing their gender. Many autistic people struggle to articulate emotions and sensations and therefore may describe gender euphoria and dysphoria differently than non-autistic people. This does not mean that autistic people are not ‘really’ trans.

Trans autistic people have unique and diverse experiences. Other intersecting identities, such as race, class, sexuality, and other disabilities and diagnoses also impact how each individual navigates healthcare and the world. Educate yourself and ask thoughtful questions to learn about how social determinants of health impact your trans autistic patient.

“We might not have the kinds of experiences that they expect from trans patients, and that doesn't make them less real. Explaining our identities and feelings is often much harder. I think there needs to be more willingness to trust that we know ourselves and can know what we want, and that assuming we can't due to being autistic is infantilizing and cruel.” - Ellis

Autistic people can consent to and receive gender-affirming care

Autistic people who can consent to other forms of health care can also consent to gender-affirming care.

While autistic people may need adaptations, accommodations, or supports, the standard of informed consent for gender-affirming care is the same for autistic and non-autistic people.

World Professional Association for Transgender Health *Standards of Care, 8th edition (WPATH SOC-8)*

“The presence of psychiatric illness or mental health symptoms do not pose a barrier to GAMSTs [gender-affirming medical and/or surgical treatments] unless the psychiatric illness or mental health symptoms affect the TGD [transgender and gender diverse] person’s capacity to consent to the specific treatment being requested or affect their ability to receive treatment.”^{9(p34)}

“It is vital gender-affirming care is not impeded unless, in some extremely rare cases, there is robust evidence that doing so is necessary to prevent significant decompensation with a risk of harm to self or others.”^{9(p37)}

Help reduce the barriers autistic people face to accessing healthcare

- ❑ **Communicate clearly and directly.** Autistic people often communicate very literally and directly and may seem rude, blunt, or arrogant. Medical settings are often stressful, overwhelming, and overstimulating, which can make communication more difficult for autistic people. You can help your patient communicate clearly by not taking this personally, giving them the benefit of the doubt, and asking questions to confirm you understand correctly.
- ❑ **Help your patient navigate the healthcare system.** Navigating complex bureaucratic healthcare systems can be especially challenging for autistic people. Offering support with system navigation and completing paperwork is often helpful.
- ❑ **Support your patient to prepare for sensory triggers in medical settings.** Autistic individuals may have sensory issues related to injecting hormones, recovering from surgery, or being in medical environments. For example, some autistic people feel overstimulated by fluorescent lights, loud noises and beeping machines, or the feeling of medical supplies on their skin. Ask your patient what will help. Provide accommodations and alternatives where possible and help prepare your patient for stressors that are unavoidable.
- ❑ **Recognize the impact of past negative experiences with healthcare providers.** Many people have had negative experiences disclosing their autism in the past. Many people have heard about autistic individuals who were denied or delayed access to gender-affirming care because of their autism and are afraid of this happening to them. Patients might not disclose their gender identity and autism until they know they can trust you.

“I had this fear that as an autistic person, they would take me less seriously. Because I have heard stories like that, that it's almost like you're denied your agency as an autistic adult.”
- Bowen

“Everything feels like it's designed to not trust you and require extensive hurdles that make it difficult for everyone, and especially anyone autistic.”
- Ellis

Listening is an important part of patient-centered care

- ❑ **Ask what language your patient uses to describe themselves.** Just as individuals may use a variety of terminology to describe their gender and body, autistic individuals use varied language to describe their neurodivergence. Many people prefer “autistic person” rather than “person with autism,” but it is best to ask each individual. Using your patient’s preferred language demonstrates respect.
- ❑ **Always speak to your patient directly rather than their caregiver or support person.** Let your patient decide how and when they want others to be involved in their care.
- ❑ **Help your patient access the information and supports they need to make informed decisions about gender-affirming care.** Many autistic people are great researchers and might have done a lot of research and thinking about gender-affirming care before they first meet with you. Others might be overwhelmed by the information available and need support in exploring options and making decisions.

“[My nurse practitioner] doesn't really know what she's doing, but she's willing to sit and talk to me about any trans-related problem I have for as long as I need to talk about it and search for every possible solution, and is very forthcoming about her knowledge gaps and limitations. But we work together on any health issue I need, and I'm so fortunate to have her now as an NP.” -Molly

Being open to learning helps build trust

- ❑ **Be ready to learn.** You don’t need to be an expert to care for trans autistic people, but you do need to be open to learning. There are lots of resources available to support clinicians with less experience caring for trans autistic people, such as those included at the end of this document.
- ❑ **Be honest about the limits of your knowledge.** This signals your willingness to work collaboratively with your patient. Demonstrating humility promotes trust and patient satisfaction,⁹ especially for trans autistic individuals and other marginalized patients.^{10–12} Listening to your patient’s knowledge and lived experience as a trans autistic person is an important foundation for shared decision-making.
- ❑ **Take the time to build trust.** Building trust with trans autistic individuals may take more time and effort than with other patient populations. But building this trust is especially important due to the legacy of transphobic and ableist discrimination and harm in healthcare.¹³

“If you do not take people seriously, it just doesn't matter how much you know, because it's better to know less and be more willing to learn than know more and not take people's words seriously.” - Ivan

Offering adaptations and accommodations promotes accessibility

- ❑ **Proactively ask all clients if there is anything that would make appointments more accessible for them.** This provides space for autistic individuals to disclose their access needs and signals that you are informed about accessibility and neurodiversity.
- ❑ **Offer fidgets or stimming tools for clients to use during appointments.** This can help autistic people self-regulate and signals that you are a safe space for autistic people.
- ❑ **Offer alternative methods of communication,** such as phone or video appointments, emails, and online appointment booking, where possible. This reduces the barriers many autistic people face to accessing health care in-person.
- ❑ **Provide visual and written communication aids.** For example, write down post-op instructions or use an anatomy diagram. Providing materials that your client can take home to review after the appointment is especially helpful.
- ❑ **Let clients know what to expect in advance in as much detail as possible.** This looks like describing what you are about to do, communicating the appointment structure, and explaining the process involved when referring a client to another service. Knowing what to expect can help autistic people manage their anxiety and effectively prepare for appointments. Provide system navigation and referral supports whenever possible.

Further learning

- AIDE Canada Video - Tips for Doctors: How to Support Your Autistic Patients - <https://aidecanada.ca/resources/learn/communication/tips-for-doctors-how-to-support-your-autistic-patients>
- Academic article: Doherty M, McCowan S, Shaw SC. Autistic SPACE: a novel framework for meeting the needs of autistic people in healthcare settings. *Br J Hosp Med (Lond)*. 2023;84(4):1-9. doi:[10.12968/hmed.2023.0006](https://doi.org/10.12968/hmed.2023.0006)
- Tip-sheet from Surrey Place: Communicate CARE: Guidance for person-centred care of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities - <https://ddprimarycare.surreyplace.ca/tools-2/general-health/communicating-effectively/>
- Training from Rainbow Health Ontario: Autism and Gender Identity - <https://learn.rainbowhealthontario.ca/course/info.php?id=53>
- Book: Gratton FV. Supporting Transgender Autistic Youth and Adults: A Guide for Professionals and Families. Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2019.
- Book: Kourti M, ed. Working with Autistic Transgender and Non-Binary People: Research, Practice and Experience. Jessica Kingsley Publishers; 2021.

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