

# “Autistic people aren’t problems to be solved”

As World Autism Awareness Day approaches on 2 April, *IQ* explores the unique and challenging elements of the autistic mind – and why understanding it matters

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**Mensa MEMBERS**



For 80 years and counting, Mensa has celebrated the complexity, depth and astonishing abilities of the human mind.

Neurodiversity builds on this understanding, recognising that our brains are all wired differently – and these variations are not flaws to be corrected but features to be understood.

As autistic professor and advocate Dr Stephen Shore famously observed: “If you’ve met one autistic person, you’ve

met one autistic person.” How then, can this cryptic condition be defined? It turns out – not very easily. Autism was only formally diagnosed in the last 50 years, after Leo Kanner described a set of characteristics he called “classic autistic syndrome”. Even today, it remains widely misunderstood and underdiagnosed. It can mistakenly be conflated with learning difficulties, or – just as harmful – portrayed as the superpower of a gifted mind. The reality, as Dr Shore suggests, is far more nuanced.



### FROM SPECTRUM TO CONSTELLATION

The National Autistic Society describes autism as a condition that “influences how people experience and interact with the world”. It refers to the well-known spectrum concept to illustrate the various strengths and challenges of each individual.

The spectrum model is a popular one, but is also one that is open to misinterpretation. Dr Jennifer Kirton, a lecturer on the Doctor of Clinical Psychology programme at the University of Liverpool, describes a shift in thinking. “Within autism research, there’s a move towards a new way of describing the autistic brain in terms of a constellation of abilities,” she explains.

“The spectrum approach was useful in representing the diversity of the autistic experience, but it can lead to an interpretation that’s quite linear – moving from low to high intelligence, and low to high support needs. A more helpful and accurate approach is to imagine a multidimensional space, where abilities are mapped out like stars in the night sky. And just like the night sky, the constellations can change depending on the wider environment.”

For autistic people, that environment can be profoundly challenging. As Mensa member Catherine Gasson notes: “Before my diagnosis I felt as though I was failing at being an adult, as I found things like small talk and social gatherings impossible. I managed to navigate life by

## ‘THERE’S A MOVE TOWARDS DESCRIBING THE AUTISTIC BRAIN AS A CONSTELLATION OF ABILITIES’ DR JENNIFER KIRTON

mirroring and recognising people’s thoughts and feelings. This allowed me to ‘fit in’ but led to long-term autistic burnouts. I consider autism a disability due to the impact of navigating this difference in a neurotypical world.”

As Catherine states, autism is a recognised disability, but it is not – as commonly assumed – a learning disability. Jennifer explains: “Autism is a different way of *being*. Autistic people show the full range of intellectual ability, just like everyone else. Some are highly intelligent, some are average and some have learning disabilities and delayed development alongside their autism. One of the most common characteristics of autistic people is that they often have uneven or ‘spiky’ profiles of ability.”

### THE SPIKY PROFILE

To illustrate this point, Jennifer shares the story of a friend, an autistic researcher, who made a highly eloquent speech on their research to the House of Lords. The friend breezed through the experience – the kind that would bring many people out in a cold sweat. Yet, when faced with an everyday interaction, such as a doctor’s appointment, that same articulate person becomes minimally verbal.

For autistic people, their environment and activity can have a considerable impact on their abilities. “What we mean by the ‘spiky’ profile is that an autistic

person might be exceptional in one area yet struggle with things that appear much simpler in everyday life. Those tasks are actually much more challenging for that person,” says Jennifer.

This anecdote goes to the heart of her work as co-founder of the University of Liverpool Autism Hub and co-creator of the Autistic Communication Tool. The tool – which was co-created with autistic researchers – allows patients to communicate support needs in advance of primary care appointments. A simple digital form captures individual challenges, such as difficulty processing information or discomfort with physical examination, so that GPs can make reasonable adjustments. Jennifer hopes it will offer “small learning snacks” for clinicians, improving care not only for autistic people but for anyone whose needs fall outside assumed norms.

“In developing this tool we found that highly articulate professionals reported being unable to communicate in situations like GP appointments,” says Jennifer. “The issue was not one of intelligence, but context. This is why environment matters so much. Autistic outcomes are often shaped less by the individual and more by the demands and expectations around them.”

Given the right environment, autistic people can chalk up some astounding achievements. The media often promotes unhelpful stereotypes of the ‘tortured

## CATHERINE GASSON

▶ I received my diagnosis 18 months ago, after years of misunderstanding myself and dismissing earlier suggestions of autism. My diagnosis helped me understand and accept my differences.

Before this, I felt like I was failing at being an adult, as I found small talk and social gatherings impossible. I had

managed by mirroring others, but masking led to long-term autistic burnout.

My strengths include logical reasoning, bottom-up thinking, attention to detail, pattern recognition and hyper-empathy. My challenges centre around sensory overwhelm, particularly sound, and difficulty managing multiple

priorities. When attention to detail is always ‘on’, every sensory input is amplified.

I strongly feel autism should not be labelled a learning disability. I consider it a disability due to the impact of navigating a neurotypical world, but not a learning one. Greater understanding of difference would make life easier.





## DR KENNETH WERTHEIM

I was diagnosed with autism in 2022, and with dyslexia and dyspraxia in 2025. Having a formal diagnosis has helped me understand my strengths and challenges better, refine coping mechanisms and negotiate adjustments.

My strengths include an intense focus on my interests, independence, unconventional ideas, confidence in public speaking and a willingness

to challenge authority. My challenges include ambiguity, change, unstructured social interactions, sensory sensitivities and difficulty describing emotions.

I consider autism a disability, but one that emerges from interactions between individuals and their environments. Unlocking educational support requires a holistic approach.

to hyperfocus as a character trait. Asked to share their strengths, Mensan Dr Kenneth Wertheim, a lecturer in data science, artificial intelligence and modelling at the University of Hull, explains: "I can focus intensely on my interests – such as research, learning and advocacy – for prolonged periods. I am independent and have unconventional ideas. I am a confident public speaker, and I am willing and eager to challenge authority figures."

Similarly, Mensa member Simone Goulding says: "I have attention to detail, an ability to focus and get very absorbed in things that I love."

genius', but the scientific evidence does not suggest a causal link between high IQ and neurodivergence.

### IS AUTISM LINKED TO GENIUS?

The true picture is far more nuanced – and far more interesting. There is one specific theory of the autistic mind that does lend itself to brilliance. That theory is monotropism.

Monotropism is a form of intense, sustained focus," explains Jennifer. "It is akin to shining a torch on a single object: attention is concentrated powerfully in one direction, enabling deep engagement with a subject, often at the expense of competing demands."

For many autistic people, monotropism is not a limitation but the engine of their achievements. Greta Thunberg has spoken about how autism allows her to concentrate relentlessly on climate science; Anthony Hopkins has

credited autism with giving him an exceptional capacity for immersion and pattern recognition in his work as an actor and composer, and National Autistic Society Ambassador Chris Packham says autistic focus underpins his encyclopaedic knowledge of wildlife.

In each case, what is often framed as 'narrow interest' reveals itself instead as depth – the kind that drives mastery and originality. (To find out more about monotropism, visit [monotropism.org](http://monotropism.org)) In the course of this feature, IQ reached out to several autistic members of the Mensa community, with many referring

### THE COST OF FITTING IN

Jennifer emphasises that monotropism can be a useful tool for some, but not for all – and the temptation to generalise should be avoided at all costs. The reality, as Mensa member Catherine states, is that many autistic people struggle to navigate a world organised around neurotypical expectations.

There are troubling statistics: fewer than 30% of autistic adults in the UK are in employment, and many are employed far below their level of ability. The suicide rate among autistic people is also three times higher than the general

**'I CAN FOCUS INTENSELY ON MY INTERESTS – SUCH AS RESEARCH, LEARNING AND ADVOCACY – FOR PROLONGED PERIODS'** KENNETH WERTHEIM

### KERRIE NASH

I'm in my late sixties and I've had a long career in senior leadership roles in international multi-sport events and governance, including as a trustee of the National Autistic Society. I was diagnosed autistic at 62, after decades of navigating a neurotypical world and struggling with the nuances of social interaction.

My intelligence helped me compensate, but at a personal cost. Receiving a diagnosis was profoundly validating and allowed me to understand experiences such as confusion with self-compassion – and advocate more clearly for my needs. My strengths include

analysis, pattern recognition, strategic thinking and depth of focus. But high intelligence does not insulate me from autistic challenges. Noise sensitivity, unspoken social rules and constant mental activity can be exhausting.

Autism is not a learning disability or a mental health condition, but a third of autistic people also have a learning disability. Support should be based on how someone experiences the world. We can and should hold both truths: autism is not an illness or deficit, and autistic people may still need meaningful, tailored support to thrive.



population. These facts are not simply attributed to autism itself but to the fact that often, autism does not come alone. Associated conditions include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia and learning difficulties; physical health conditions like sleep disruption, sensory processing problems and epilepsy; and mental health conditions such as obsessive compulsive disorder, eating disorders, anxiety and depression – often stemming from stress or misunderstanding rather than the condition itself.



Like Catherine, many autistic people get by through 'masking' their autistic traits to fit in. This is an exhausting process that can lead to autistic burnout – a state of profound exhaustion that can last days, weeks or even months.

"Burnout reflects chronic environmental mismatch, not personal weakness," explains Jennifer.

Kenneth was diagnosed autistic in 2022, with further diagnoses of dyslexia and dyspraxia confirmed in 2025. They note: "Autism, like other neurodivergent

conditions, cannot be considered in isolation. Unlocking educational support requires a holistic approach."

They add: "Autistic people aren't problems to be solved."

#### THE CLARITY OF DIAGNOSIS

One of the most empowering things an autistic person can do is to take the time to understand the workings of their mind – and then use that information to advocate for their needs. For some, that process begins with securing a formal

### SIMONE GOULDING

I was diagnosed around 2021. It tied together various aspects of life that I'd struggled with, and helped me understand that I wasn't just being rude, lazy or stubborn. Having the diagnosis gives me a reason to look after my needs and to be kinder to myself. I feel

more able to seek support and community with other autistic people, although it took time to accept the diagnosis.

My strengths are attention to detail and the ability to focus deeply on things I love, which brings joy but can also lead to self-neglect.

My challenges include sensory issues, social anxiety, a low social battery, difficulties with change and poor mental health at times.

More awareness would make life easier for autistic people, but it needs to go beyond stereotypes and surface-level knowledge.

diagnosis – often described as an ‘aha!’ moment, in which past experiences suddenly align. Jennifer has personal experience of this feeling, having autistic family members and a diagnosis of ADHD herself. “For the first time I felt able to connect together the knowledge I have gained academically as a researcher and the traits I have come to understand about myself,” she says.

Mensa member Sophia Cooke can relate. “I received my formal diagnosis in the summer, and it has been wonderful to understand myself better and to be more forgiving of the things I find difficult,” she says. “It has also enabled me to make helpful changes, such as introducing a more structured daily routine.”

Simone, who was diagnosed autistic in 2021, also felt a sense of clarity: “It ties together various aspects of life that I’ve struggled with...Having the diagnosis gives me a reason to look after my needs and be kinder to myself.”

While diagnosis can clearly be empowering, Jennifer warns against viewing it as a panacea. Research suggests that up to 60% of autistic people remain undiagnosed, with women particularly affected. Cognitive neuroscientist Professor Francesca

## **‘IT HAS BEEN WONDERFUL TO UNDERSTAND MYSELF BETTER AND BE MORE FORGIVING OF THINGS I FIND DIFFICULT’ SOPHIA COOKE**

Happé has shown that autism in women and girls often fails to match historically male-centred diagnostic criteria, contributing to late or missed identification. And since autism was not widely understood until relatively recently, younger people are more likely to have a formal diagnosis.

Also, up until 2013, clinicians didn’t diagnose autism and ADHD together. Jennifer notes: “Things are beginning to change, but there is still a lot of catching up to do.”

### **CHANGING THE FRAME**

If there is a single theme that emerges from autistic voices, it is the importance of self-understanding. Diagnosis can be a gateway, but it is not the endpoint.

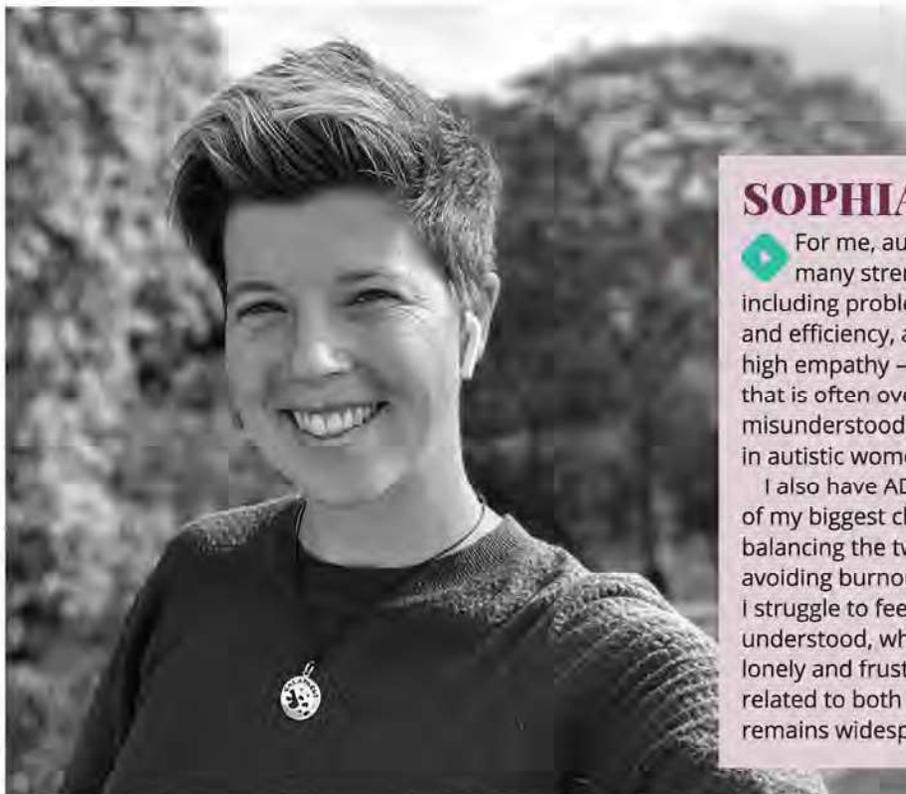
“Diagnosis alone is liminal,” says Jennifer. “If you receive that diagnosis and don’t engage in any self-reflection, the beneficial impact will be limited. The most powerful thing is to get to understand yourself.” She’s developed a

model that explains how individuals may experience improved wellbeing following autism identification, either via formal diagnosis or self-identification. That model is called the Thriving Cycle.

For those who feel like a round peg in a square hole, there is an opportunity, not to change your own shape, but to ask for a more flexible fit.

Asked how they would like to create a gentler world for neurodivergent people, Mensans listed: workplace accommodations; adjusted interview processes; quieter social spaces; and, simply, the opportunity to say ‘no’ and prioritise self-care. These are changes underscored by empathy, from which everyone – neurodiverse or neurotypical – could surely benefit.

Autism need not be framed as a deficit or a superpower. It is, simply, a distinctive and deeply human way of being – one that challenges us to think more carefully about intelligence, success and what it really means to thrive.



### **SOPHIA COOKE**

For me, autism brings many strengths, including problem-solving and efficiency, alongside high empathy – something that is often overlooked or misunderstood, particularly in autistic women.

I also have ADHD. One of my biggest challenges is balancing the two and avoiding burnout. At times, I struggle to feel understood, which can be lonely and frustrating. Bias related to both conditions remains widespread, and

greater understanding of the benefits and challenges would be fantastic to see.

In addition, I feel there is still too much of a one-size-fits-all approach. For many, autism is experienced as a disability, often severely so, but for others, myself included, it feels like more of a difference. While I benefit from support and understanding in certain situations, I would feel uncomfortable ticking a disability box, yet that is often the only one available.