

TRANSCRIPT

Introduction

Welcome to Part 02 of the Understanding Autism module developed for PGA Learn.

Part 01 examined Autism from a contextual perspective. It explored the diagnostic history of Autism, the legal responsibilities that apply to organisations and professionals, and the participation outcomes currently observed across the Autistic population.

Part 02 now focuses on the Autistic lived experience.

This section examines how Autistic individuals experience and navigate the environments around them. It looks at how sensory information is received, how the nervous system manages incoming demand, how communication and behaviour reflect internal state, and how environmental conditions interact with these processes during participation.

The module begins by clarifying what the Autism spectrum refers to and how Autistic neurological profiles vary.

It then examines sensory processing and regulation, followed by cognitive processing, communication, and behavioural expression.

Masking and outward presentation are then introduced, before the final section considers participation environments and how environmental conditions influence the sustainability of participation for Autistic individuals.

2.1. - Understanding the Autism Spectrum

This section introduces the foundation for understanding Autistic lived experience.

The Autism spectrum refers to variation in neurological organisation. It describes differences in how individuals perceive, process, and respond to their environments. These differences shape how situations are experienced, how information is processed, and how participation in everyday environments unfolds.

Because the spectrum reflects neurological variation rather than a linear scale, Autistic individuals do not share a single pattern of experience. Each person's neurological profile is composed of multiple characteristics that vary in how strongly they are expressed. The combination of those characteristics produces a profile that is unique to the individual.

The experience associated with that profile is also influenced by context. Environmental conditions, sensory demand, and regulatory load can all affect how an individual's profile expresses itself in a given situation. As a result, the same person may experience different environments in very different ways.

Understanding this variation is important because the Autistic lived experience is not defined by a single trait or behaviour. It emerges from the interaction between an individual's neurological profile and the conditions of the environment they are participating in.

The following segments introduce the key principles needed to understand this variation.

Phrase 01. - What the Autism Spectrum Is

The Autism spectrum refers to a range of neurological configurations rather than a scale measuring severity.

Autistic neurology differs in how information is perceived, processed, and organised. These differences influence how individuals experience their surroundings, how they interpret information, and how they respond to situations.

The term "spectrum" therefore describes variation in neurological organisation rather than a progression from less to more Autistic.

Phrase 02. - Profile Variation

Autistic neurological profiles are composed of multiple areas that may vary in how strongly they are expressed.

These areas can include sensory processing, communication patterns, cognitive processing style, attention patterns, and regulatory responses. Each of these areas may differ in intensity and expression from one individual to another.

This variation is why Autistic experience cannot be described by a single characteristic.

Phrase 03. - Unique Profiles

Because the areas within an Autistic profile vary independently, no two Autistic individuals share the same overall combination.

Each person's profile reflects a distinct pattern of strengths, sensitivities, and processing characteristics. These patterns influence how environments are experienced and how participation in different situations may unfold.

For this reason, Autistic individuals cannot be understood through a single general description.

Phrase 04. - Context Sensitive Profiles

An individual's profile does not express itself in exactly the same way in every environment.

Environmental conditions such as sensory input, social demand, and cognitive load can influence how strongly different characteristics are experienced in a given situation.

As a result, the same person may appear very different across different environments or at different points in time.

This variation does not reflect inconsistency in the individual. It reflects the interaction between their neurological profile and the conditions of the environment in which participation is occurring.

2.2.1. Sensory Processing and Regulation

This section introduces how sensory input and regulation shape Autistic lived experience.

All environments generate sensory information. Light, sound, movement, temperature, and physical contact are continuously received and processed by the nervous system. This information forms the background conditions through which any activity or interaction takes place.

For Autistic individuals, sensory processing can operate differently from neuronormative patterns. Certain forms of input may be experienced more intensely, less intensely, or in ways that vary depending on the situation. These differences influence how environments are perceived and how much regulatory effort is required to remain engaged within them.

Regulation refers to the way the nervous system manages incoming demand in order to maintain internal stability. Sensory input is one source of that demand, but it is not the only one. Social interaction, cognitive effort, and environmental unpredictability can all contribute to the overall load being managed at any moment.

Because regulatory capacity is finite, the amount of demand being processed affects how much capacity remains available for other functions such as communication, attention, and decision making.

The following segments explain how sensory input is received, how Autistic sensory processing may differ, and how regulatory demand builds across time.

Phrase 01: How Sensory Input Is Received

The nervous system continuously receives information from the surrounding environment.

This information arrives through multiple sensory channels at the same time. Visual input, sound, physical sensations, movement, temperature, and other environmental signals are all processed simultaneously.

Most of the time this processing occurs automatically. Individuals may not be consciously aware of every signal being received, but the nervous system is still responding to it.

These signals form the sensory environment within which any activity takes place.

Phrase 02: Sensory Processing in Autistic Neurology

In Autistic neurology, sensory processing may operate differently from neuronormative patterns.

Some forms of sensory input may be experienced more intensely. Other forms may be experienced less strongly or may require more input before they are noticed. The same individual may also experience both patterns depending on the sensory channel involved.

These differences do not occur uniformly across all sensory systems. Each person's profile includes its own pattern of sensory sensitivity and responsiveness.

Because of this variation, environments that feel ordinary to some individuals may be experienced as highly demanding by others.

Phrase 03: What Regulation Is

Regulation refers to the processes through which the nervous system maintains internal stability while responding to incoming demand.

As sensory information and environmental signals are received, the nervous system continually adjusts attention, arousal, and physiological responses in order to remain within a manageable range.

This process allows individuals to continue engaging with their surroundings without becoming overwhelmed or disengaged.

Regulation therefore acts as the system that manages how incoming information is handled across time.

2.2.2. Sensory Processing and Regulation

Phrase 01: Sensory Processing and Regulation

Sensory input contributes directly to the regulatory demand being managed by the nervous system.

When sensory information is intense, unpredictable, or continuous, it requires additional regulatory effort in order to remain engaged within the environment.

This effort uses the same capacity that supports other activities such as concentrating on a task, communicating with others, or responding to new information.

As regulatory demand increases, less capacity remains available for those other functions.

Phrase 02: How Regulatory Demand Accumulates

Regulatory demand does not occur only in isolated moments. It builds across the duration of exposure to an environment.

Sensory input, social interaction, cognitive effort, and environmental unpredictability all contribute to the total demand being managed at any given time.

When these sources of demand continue without sufficient recovery, the overall load increases gradually across the course of participation.

This accumulation can influence how easily an individual can continue engaging with the environment.

Phrase 03: Capacity Thresholds

When accumulated demand approaches or exceeds personal capacity limits, the individual may experience increasing difficulty maintaining engagement with the environment.

This may affect concentration, communication, emotional regulation, and the ability to respond to new demands.

Understanding these thresholds is important because many behavioural responses associated with Autism occur when regulatory demand exceeds available capacity.

2.3. Behavioural Expression and Interpretation

This section explains how Autistic lived experience becomes visible through behaviour and communication, and how it is often interpreted by others.

Behaviour and communication are not separate from the processes described in the previous section. They emerge from the same interaction between sensory input, cognitive processing, and regulatory state. What an individual expresses in a given situation reflects how the nervous system is currently processing and managing the demands of the environment.

For Autistic individuals, differences in cognitive processing and communication style can shape how information is organised, how responses are formulated, and how interaction with others unfolds. These differences are not simply matters of preference or personality. They arise from the underlying neurological organisation that shapes how information is processed.

At the same time, many environments interpret behaviour through neuronormative expectations. When Autistic expression does not align with those expectations, behaviour may be misunderstood or interpreted inaccurately.

Understanding how Autistic expression is produced, and how it may be interpreted by others, is therefore essential for understanding participation experiences in everyday environments.

The following segments explain how cognitive processing operates, how communication may vary across Autistic individuals, how regulatory state influences expression, and why misinterpretation often occurs.

Phrase 01: How Cognitive Processing Operates

Cognitive processing refers to how information is received, organised, and used by the nervous system.

In Autistic neurology, patterns of attention, information organisation, and cognitive load may differ from neuronormative patterns. These differences can influence how quickly information is processed, how details are prioritised, and how responses are formulated.

In environments where multiple demands occur at the same time, cognitive processing also interacts with regulatory demand. When regulatory capacity is heavily engaged in managing sensory input or environmental complexity, less capacity may remain available for processing additional information.

As a result, behaviour and responses in a given moment often reflect the combined effects of cognitive processing and regulatory load.

Phrase 02: How Communication Operates

Communication across the Autistic population varies widely.

Some Autistic individuals communicate primarily through spoken language. Others may communicate through writing, assistive communication systems, or a combination of methods depending on the situation.

Communication style may also differ from neuronormative expectations. Autistic communication is often more direct, more information focused, and less reliant on implied social cues or indirect phrasing.

These differences reflect neurological organisation rather than a lack of communication ability. They represent alternative patterns through which information is expressed and shared.

Phrase 03: Regulatory State and Communication

Communication ability can vary depending on the individual's current regulatory state.

When regulatory demand is high, more capacity is required to manage sensory input and environmental conditions. This may reduce the capacity available for communication and interaction.

In situations where demand exceeds available regulatory capacity, individuals may experience responses such as shutdown or meltdown. These responses reflect the nervous system reaching a limit in its ability to manage incoming demand.

In these states, communication may become limited or temporarily unavailable until regulatory stability is restored.

Phrase 04: Autistic Expression and Interpretation

Behaviour and communication are often interpreted through neuronormative expectations about how individuals should express themselves.

When Autistic expression differs from those expectations, behaviour may be misunderstood. Direct communication may be interpreted as abruptness, reduced eye contact may be interpreted as disengagement, or regulatory responses may be interpreted as intentional behaviour.

These interpretations occur because observers are applying familiar social conventions to expressions that arise from a different neurological organisation.

Recognising this difference is essential for understanding Autistic behaviour accurately.

2.4. Masking and Presentation

This section explains how Autistic individuals may adapt their outward presentation in response to social expectations, and how that adaptation interacts with regulatory capacity.

In many environments, behaviour and communication are interpreted through neuronormative conventions. When Autistic expression differs from those expectations, individuals may encounter misunderstanding, correction, or pressure to adjust how they present themselves.

Over time, some Autistic individuals learn to modify aspects of their behaviour or communication in order to align more closely with those expectations. This process is commonly referred to as masking.

Masking can involve conscious effort, learned behavioural strategies, or adjustments that occur without deliberate awareness. It may influence how a person communicates, how they manage facial expression and body language, or how they suppress behaviours that would otherwise support regulation.

Because masking requires effort, it draws on the same finite regulatory capacity already managing sensory input, cognitive demand, and environmental complexity.

Understanding masking therefore requires understanding both its purpose and its regulatory cost.

The following segments explain what masking is, how it interacts with regulatory capacity, how self-regulating behaviours such as stimming function within the same system, and why outward presentation does not always reflect the internal state of the individual.

Phrase 01: What Masking Is

Masking refers to the process of adapting outward presentation in order to meet expected social conventions.

This can include modifying communication style, adjusting facial expression or body language, or suppressing behaviours that may be perceived as unusual within the surrounding environment.

Masking may occur consciously when individuals deliberately attempt to align their behaviour with expected norms. It may also develop gradually through repeated social experiences, becoming an automatic response to particular environments.

The purpose of masking is often to reduce misunderstanding or negative responses from others.

Phrase 02: Masking and Regulatory Capacity

Masking requires effort because it involves actively monitoring and adjusting behaviour.

This effort uses the same regulatory capacity that is already engaged in managing sensory input, cognitive processing, and environmental demand.

When masking is sustained across time, it increases the overall load being managed by the nervous system.

As regulatory demand accumulates, the effort required to maintain masking may become increasingly difficult to sustain.

Phrase 03: What Stimming Is

Stimming refers to repeated sensory or motor behaviours that occur in response to regulatory demand.

Examples may include rhythmic movement, repeated hand motions, vocal patterns, or interaction with objects that provide sensory feedback.

These behaviours may occur consciously as a way of supporting regulation, or they may occur automatically as the nervous system responds to increasing demand.

Stimming can therefore function as a way of stabilising regulatory state in demanding environments.

Phrase 04: Presentation and Internal State

When masking is effective, outward presentation may not reflect the internal demand being experienced by the individual.

An environment may therefore appear manageable from an external perspective while the nervous system is managing significant regulatory load internally.

In many cases, the consequences of that load become visible only after participation ends, when the individual is no longer actively maintaining outward presentation.

Understanding this difference between presentation and internal state is important when interpreting behaviour in participation environments.

2.5.1. Participation Experience

This section explains how participation in everyday environments is shaped by the interaction between an individual's regulatory profile and the conditions present within the environment.

Participation is often discussed in terms of access. If an individual can enter an environment and take part in an activity, participation may appear to have been achieved.

For Autistic individuals, participation involves more than physical presence. The experience of participation depends on how the sensory, cognitive, and social demands of the environment interact with the individual's regulatory capacity.

Environments vary widely in the demands they generate. Sensory intensity, unpredictability, social interaction, and cognitive load all influence how demanding a situation may be for a given individual.

At the same time, regulatory demand builds across the duration of exposure to an environment. As demand accumulates, the capacity available to manage new information or interactions may gradually decrease.

Recovery from that demand is a physiological process that requires time and a reduction in environmental load. If sufficient recovery does not occur between exposures, the remaining demand may carry forward into subsequent situations.

Understanding participation therefore requires recognising that experience is shaped by the interaction between an individual's regulatory profile and the conditions present in the environment.

The following segments explain how environmental demand is generated, how it accumulates across time, how recovery operates, and why participation experience differs from one individual to another.

Phrase 01: Environmental Conditions and Demand

Every environment generates conditions that place some level of demand on the nervous system.

Sensory input, social interaction, cognitive requirements, and environmental unpredictability all contribute to the overall level of demand present in a situation.

The same environment may therefore produce very different experiences for different individuals, depending on how their neurological profile interacts with those conditions.

Participation experience begins with the conditions an environment generates.

Phrase 02: Demand Accumulation

Demand does not occur only at the beginning of an activity. It builds across the duration of exposure to the environment.

As sensory input, social interaction, and cognitive effort continue over time, the regulatory load being managed by the nervous system gradually increases.

When exposure continues without sufficient reduction in demand, the capacity available to manage new information or interaction may decrease.

This accumulation influences how long participation can be comfortably sustained.

Phrase 03: What Recovery Involves

Recovery refers to the process through which the nervous system restores regulatory capacity after exposure to demand.

This process usually requires a reduction in sensory input, social interaction, and cognitive effort so that regulatory load can gradually decrease.

The time required for recovery varies between individuals and situations. In some cases recovery may occur relatively quickly, while in others it may take longer periods of reduced demand.

Recovery is therefore a physiological process rather than simply a matter of rest or preference.

2.5.2. Participation Experience

Phrase 01: Residual Load

If recovery between exposures is incomplete, some of the previous regulatory load may remain present.

This residual load reduces the capacity available at the beginning of the next experience.

As a result, environments that were previously manageable may become more demanding when participation occurs before recovery has been completed.

Understanding residual load helps explain why experiences may vary across different days or situations.

Phrase 02: Individualised Participation

Participation experience is shaped by the interaction between an individual's regulatory profile and the conditions generated by the environment.

Because both elements vary, participation cannot be understood as a single standard experience.

What is manageable for one individual may be highly demanding for another. Likewise, the same individual may experience the same environment differently depending on current regulatory state and accumulated demand.

For this reason, the individual remains the reference point when considering participation experience.

Phrase 03: Accessibility and Inclusion

Accessibility and inclusion refer to different aspects of participation.

Accessibility refers to whether an individual can enter or physically access an environment.

Inclusion refers to whether the conditions within that environment allow the individual to participate without exceeding their regulatory capacity across the duration of exposure.

An environment may therefore be accessible without being inclusive.

Recognising this distinction is important when considering how participation environments are designed and evaluated.

2.6. Recap

Autistic lived experience reflects the ongoing interaction between neurological profiles and the environments in which participation occurs.

Sensory input, cognitive processing, communication patterns, and regulatory capacity all influence how situations are experienced. These factors vary across individuals, and environments generate different levels of demand. Participation experiences therefore emerge from the relationship between the individual and the conditions present in the environment.

When environmental demand remains within the individual's regulatory capacity, participation can be sustained across time. When demand exceeds that capacity, participation becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

Understanding this relationship allows behaviour, communication, and participation experiences to be interpreted more accurately.

Phrase 01: Central Principle

Participation experience reflects the interaction between neurological profiles and environmental conditions.

Environmental demand influences regulatory load.

Regulatory capacity influences how participation unfolds.

Phrase 02: Transition to the Research

The next part of this course examines research exploring Autistic participation experiences in golf environments.

The study investigated how environmental conditions influenced participation and what this revealed about Autistic experience in sport settings.

The concepts introduced in this module provide the framework for interpreting those findings.