

LEARNING MADE EASY



Autism

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Enrich your
understanding of autism

Create inclusive and
empowering communities

Support every
autistic journey

John Marble
Khushboo Chabria
Ranga Jayaraman

Foreword by Dr. Temple Grandin and
Hari Srinivasan



Autism

**by John Marble
Khushboo Chabria
Ranga Jayaraman**

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and Hari Srinivasan

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Foreword: Unique Journeys, Common Ground

Autism isn't a single experience. While a common thread connects each autistic journey, it shapes each person differently. We are both autistic, but our lives have been very different.

One of us grew up at a time when almost no one understood autism. There were no books, no online communities, and few resources for families. Figuring things out meant trial and error — learning firsthand what worked and what didn't. The other grew up in a world shaped by those who came before — where autism was better understood, families had more information, and autistic voices were finally being heard, thanks to those who pushed for awareness, acceptance, and support.

Our experiences may differ, but we both know what it's like to navigate a world that isn't always built for us. We've both faced challenges, found strengths, and learned the importance of support. It's why we share the same goal: a world that values and includes autistic people.

Dr. Temple Grandin

Today, I am a distinguished professor at Colorado State University, but as a child, I had no speech until the age of four. Loud sounds — like school bells — felt like a dentist's drill hitting a nerve. Fortunately, I had an excellent early education program that started at two and a half, focusing on speech, patience, and daily living skills like brushing teeth and using utensils. No one forced eye contact — that would have been overwhelming. Therapy should help a child progress, not cause distress. There are plenty of debates about the best approaches, but starting early makes a difference.

Autism specialists agree that early support is important for all autistic children. For those like me who don't speak at the typical age, it can be an early sign that leads to support. But it's just as important to pay attention to the needs of kids who do speak on time because early understanding and accommodations help all autistic kids grow and succeed.

When I grew up in the 1950s, my family had structured routines, with three sit-down meals a day. If I forgot to say thank you, my mother reminded me. After lunch, I was allowed to stim, twirling objects in my room for an hour. My mother also encouraged my artistic ability, which later shaped my career. I spent hours drawing, tinkering, and building kites, figuring out through trial and error how to make them fly better. Being allowed to experiment — and make mistakes — helped me learn.

Adolescence was much harder. I was bullied, called names, and had no motivation to study. Eventually, I was expelled for throwing a book at a girl who bullied me. That turned out to be a pivotal moment: I was sent to a special school where I cleaned horse stalls and cared for horses. The work gave me structure and purpose, but I was still an unmotivated student until a science teacher finally got through to me. A good teacher makes all the difference. The best ones are gently insistent and know how to engage a child, and he did exactly that. He made learning exciting, showing me that studying was the key to becoming a scientist. That gave me a reason to care, and my motivation changed overnight.

By the time I graduated college, I had strong work experience. I interned in a research lab, worked as an aide for an autistic child, and spent summers on my aunt's ranch, building gates and leading trail rides. Hands-on learning shaped the skills that defined my career. In designing cattle handling facilities, I've collaborated with talented metalworkers — two almost certainly autistic. Their inventions are still in use today.

Having an interesting career has made my life fulfilling. I am what I do. I've replaced emotional complexity with intellectual complexity — I find it fascinating to figure out how to build things. I've always been more drawn to solving mechanical problems than navigating social ones. I've also seen how much autistic people vary in their social priorities. Some focus on relationships, while others, like me, are more invested in their work.

The most successful careers come from building on an autistic person's natural strengths. The autistic brain is often great at one type of skill while struggling with another, and that's okay. The key is to focus on strengths.

As I point out in my book *Visual Thinking*, some autistic people, like me, think in photo-realistic images, which makes them great at art, design, and mechanical problem-solving but not so much at abstract math. Others think in patterns and excel in math and music. Meanwhile, other autistic thinkers are great at memorizing facts about their favorite subjects and can thrive in jobs that require deep knowledge, like specialized retail.

I emphasize these differences because developing strengths made my life fulfilling, and I want other autistics to have the same chance to build meaningful, satisfying lives.

Hari Srinivasan

I'm awestruck to coauthor this foreword with Dr. Temple Grandin, a trailblazer who shattered expectations and paved the way for many, including myself. Now, on my PhD journey in neuroscience, I'm walking a path that once felt unimaginable. It still feels surreal.

I am autistic with limited spoken communication (though improving — proof that learning isn't just for childhood), ADHD, sensorimotor processing issues, OCD, social anxiety, and co-occurring health challenges. Navigating my body feels like driving with a loose steering wheel — a constant battle between intention and execution. This unease fuels anxiety, avoidance, and social isolation.

Autism brings unique ways of thinking, perceiving, and innovating but also real obstacles. That's why I believe in a dual *opportunities-solutions* approach: creating opportunities that build on strengths while also addressing challenges. This means providing individualized support (therapy, education, and addressing needs) alongside external changes (accommodations, environmental modifications, and shifts in attitudes).

Education became my door to opportunity. UC Berkeley and Vanderbilt gave me structure, meaning, and growth, allowing me to stay curious and engaged. Now, as an autistic neuroscientist researching sensorimotor systems, I get to contribute to both knowledge and solutions.

The solutions side of the approach is just as critical. Much of my childhood was spent in grueling 40-hour therapy weeks with little meaningful return for the effort involved. Instead of forcing autistics into standardized programs, support must fit the individual. A wider range of approaches is needed to address communication barriers, sensory distress, and health challenges. Without real solutions, many autistics with higher support needs will remain stuck at the threshold of opportunity.

Dr. Grandin and I were shaped by different worlds: She grew up when autism was little known, while I grew up in a time when it became an everyday word. Yet despite growing awareness, our understanding is still incomplete. When I was diagnosed at three, only six children were identified as autistic in my school district; within a few years, that number grew to hundreds.

Just as Dr. Grandin highlights the power of early support and structured opportunities in unlocking autistic potential, it's equally important to recognize that not every autistic person benefits from the same approach. Too often, systems assume early struggles mean lifelong limitations, reducing the future to basic care instead of meaningful development. But people learn in different ways, and growth is possible at any age — which is why support must be flexible, informed by the full range of autistic experiences, and available throughout life.

I don't have to love every part of my autism to appreciate how it shapes me — and that's okay. Autism is both an ability and a disability, a strength and a challenge. This book understands that autism isn't a singular experience and offers practical tools to support people in ways that truly meet their individual needs. Because within the vast range of autistic experiences, there lies endless possibility.

Why This Book Matters

As our own lives demonstrate, there's no single way to be autistic, just as there is no single way to support autistic people. But one thing is clear: With understanding, acceptance, and the right support, autistic people can thrive. That's why this book is an essential resource for anyone looking to better understand autism. It offers tools, insights, and practical advice — whether you're autistic, a parent, a teacher, or an ally.

This book isn't about labels or fitting autism into a box. It's about real understanding and strategies that make a difference in daily life. Whether you're supporting an autistic person or simply trying to learn, you'll find useful tools, new perspectives, and maybe even some surprises. Keep reading, stay curious, and get ready to see autism in a broader light.

Introduction

If you're here, you likely have big questions. Maybe you're wondering what autism really is or whether it applies to you or someone you know. If you're a parent, you might be searching for ways to best support your autistic child. If you're a friend, spouse, teacher, or coworker of an autistic person, you may be hoping to understand their perspective more deeply.

Curiosity, uncertainty, and even apprehension are natural when trying to understand something as vast as the human mind. After all, we're explorers of our own consciousness, yet no one hands us a map at birth. That's why this book exists.

This is your guide to autism — its wonders, its challenges, and the vast spectrum of human thought. In this book, we cut through jargon and outdated ideas, offering clear explanations, practical insights, and perspectives from autistic people, experts, and families.

Autistic people have always been part of the human story. But for much of history, the assumption has been that every mind worked in the same way. Only recently have we begun to grasp the complexity of the human brain — and with it, the many ways people think, feel, and engage with the universe.

So, let's begin. Find a comfortable place, take a deep breath, and get ready to explore the vast and fascinating landscape of the autistic experience.

About This Book

You are here because you are curious — because you want to understand autism — for yourself or someone you love or simply to see the world more clearly. That curiosity is a remarkable thing. It is the foundation of discovery, empathy, and connection. And that is exactly what this book is about.

Autism is not a distant concept. It's woven into the human experience. It shapes how people think, communicate, and interact with the world. It's not something

to fix or fear but something to understand. And when we understand, we see more. We see the brilliance in different ways of thinking, the challenges imposed by a world not built for every mind, and the importance of acceptance.

This isn't a textbook. It's not a lecture. It's a conversation. We will cut through unnecessary complexity, set aside outdated ideas, and focus on what really matters: the experiences of autistic people, the science that explains them, and the practical insights that make a difference in daily life.

Whether you're autistic, a parent, a friend, or someone simply seeking knowledge, you're not alone. The search for clarity, for understanding, for connection — it has brought you here. And that's a wonderful place to begin.

Foolish Assumptions

None of us are dummies. You're here because you want a clear, honest understanding of autism — free from stereotypes and misconceptions. We won't talk down to you, and we ask you to approach this book with curiosity and an open mind. Be ready to rethink what you've been told, question long-held beliefs, and consider how you can help build a world that better includes and supports autistic people and their families.

That brings us to assumptions. We all make them, often without realizing it. Some are harmless, but others get in the way of real understanding. Maybe you've heard that autism is only about social struggles or that autistic people don't feel emotions deeply. Perhaps you've been told that all autistic people are either brilliant or incapable, or that autism is something to “overcome.” These ideas are common, but they do not reflect reality.

If you're autistic, your brain isn't broken. It's not *less than*, and it's not *more than*. It simply *is*. The same is true for every brain. Autism is not a flaw to fix, nor is it a mysterious superpower. It's a natural way of experiencing the world. Different doesn't mean better or worse; it just means different.

Autistic people exist in every walk of life — thinking, creating, and contributing in ways that shape the world. Their experiences are as vast and varied as the universe itself. They're not puzzles to solve. They're human — fully, wonderfully human.

In this book, we help you understand the beautiful complexity of the autistic experience, recognize the strengths that come with autism, and see autistic

people and their families as ordinary, valued, and deserving of support — just like everyone else. But it would be foolish to assume that this means dismissing the difficulties that often come with navigating a world that isn't built for autistic people.



REMEMBER

At the same time, no single book can capture every autistic experience. Autism is different and unique for each person, and the information here won't apply to everyone in the same way. What works well for one autistic person or family may not work for another. Keep that in mind as you read and remember that the best way to understand autism is to listen to autistic people themselves.

Being autistic in our world today presents many challenges. For many, this can be incredibly tough. But if you're not autistic, ask yourself what makes life difficult for you? Whatever it is, those struggles don't make you any less worthy of respect.

Being alive means facing difficulties, but also having strengths, perspectives, and experiences that matter. We are more than our challenges; we are our ideas, passions, and the connections we build. We are *human*. And so are autistic people.

Autism does not make a person less capable, less worthy, or less human. Just as your challenges don't define your worth, neither do theirs. By understanding autism — not as something to fix, but as a natural and meaningful part of life — we move closer to seeing one another with the clarity and respect we all deserve.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book, we have used a set of icons in the margins to highlight the most critical things we want you to take away.



REMEMBER

When you see this icon, you know that the information that follows is important enough to read twice! Information in these paragraphs is often conceptual.



TIP

This icon indicates practical information that often translates key concepts into actionable advice.



WARNING

This icon highlights information that could be detrimental to your understanding and actions if you ignore it. We don't use this one much, so pay attention when we do.

Beyond the Book

One of the biggest things we hear from autistic people and their families is the need for more resources. That's exactly why this book exists — it's your foundation for understanding autism, supporting autistic people, and finding the tools that work best for you. It gives you the core knowledge and strategies you need, but there's always more to explore.

For quick tips and key takeaways, check out the Cheat Sheet, which you can find by searching for **Autism For Dummies Cheat Sheet** at www.dummies.com. To help you go even further, we've put together Neurodiversity Resources, a carefully curated collection of resources, tools, information, and community connections designed to help you navigate challenges, access support, and find what works best for you. You can find it online at www.pivotdiversity.com/resources.

Where to Go from Here

You don't have to read this book cover to cover like a novel. Think of it as a buffet: pick and choose what interests you most. Start by skimming the table of contents and jumping to the chapters that catch your eye.

Short on time? Head to any chapter that interests you — or to Part 7, where we've rounded up key takeaways and tips for quick reference. New to the topic of autism? Start at the beginning for a solid foundation before diving into the rest.

However you choose to read, we hope this book helps you see that the world — and the people in it — is even more varied, complex, and fascinating than you might have imagined.

1

Understanding Autism

IN THIS PART . . .

Understand autism as a lifelong journey and embrace the diversity of autistic experiences through a neurodiversity-affirming lens.

Reflect on autism as a neurotype and consider how cultural and social contexts shape perceptions of disability.

Familiarize yourself with the autism diagnosis process, including criteria, regional differences, and how to navigate barriers to access.

Explore the unique ways autistic individuals think, communicate, and experience the world to deepen your understanding and empathy.

- » Exploring current understanding
- » Getting to know the autistic person
- » Examining how autism develops
- » Changing how we talk about autism

Chapter 1

What Is Autism?

Autism is a natural way of thinking, experiencing the world, and connecting with others. It's not a disease or a flaw — it's just one of the many ways brains work. Autistic people often think, communicate, socialize, and respond to their surroundings in unique and meaningful ways.

Autism lasts a lifetime — you're born with it and live with it through every stage of life. While an autistic person may face challenges, they also have amazing strengths, fresh ideas, and talents. No two autistic people are the same — just like no two other people are — but there are common experiences many autistic people share. Understanding what makes autistic people unique and what connects their experiences helps us support them better.

Science has taught us that autism isn't something to “fix” or “cure.” It's part of who a person is — and that's a good thing! We've moved away from harmful approaches that tried to change autistic people into someone they're not. Now, the focus is on understanding, accepting, and supporting autistic people with tools and resources that help them live happy, meaningful lives.

In this chapter, we explore the modern understanding of autism, the science behind it, and how autism shapes an individual. To fully understand autism, you need to know about neurodiversity — how variations in the human brain like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia are natural parts of human life.

Understanding Neurodiversity

For much of history, people assumed all brains worked the same way, and differences were seen as defects. This mindset led to harmful practices like forced institutionalization, discrimination, and attempts to “fix” those who didn’t conform. Entire groups were misunderstood and excluded, causing significant harm.

Thankfully, we’ve come a long way. We now understand that every brain is unique, like fingerprints, and that diverse ways of thinking are essential for a thriving society (see Chapter 2). These differences help us innovate and find solutions for problems — solutions not possible if everyone thought the same way.

“The world needs a neurodiverse workforce to help solve some of the big problems of our time,” wrote Virgin Group founder Richard Branson in a 2024 LinkedIn post. Branson, an advocate for neurodiversity, highlights how his dyslexic brain processes information uniquely, benefiting his ventures and society. He makes it clear: “neurodiversity should be embraced.”

Branson’s insight underscores that recognizing neurodiversity doesn’t just help individuals who think differently. It helps all of us.



REMEMBER

Neurodiversity acknowledges both the challenges and strengths of different brain types. Both are normal parts of being human.

Organizing brains into neurotypes

Each of our brains is unique; we all process information and interact with the world differently. To make sense of this diversity, we categorize brains into groups, known as *neurotypes*.

Neurotypes are labels for clusters of brains that typically process information or respond to stimuli in similar ways. Examples include autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. These categories help us better understand the incredible variety of human brains.

Everyone has a neurotype — including you! People with brains that function like most others have a neurotypical neurotype, whereas those with different thinking styles — such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia — have neurodivergent neurotypes. At least 20 percent of people are neurodivergent, which means these differences aren’t uncommon.



REMEMBER

Neither neurotypical nor neurodivergent neurotypes are “broken”; they simply reflect different ways of experiencing and understanding the world.