Neuro-Affirming Glossary

Key Words and Terms Supporting the Neurodivergent Community



How to Use Guide · Free activity guide

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HOW TO USE THE GLOSSARY

Welcome

This free guide is for anyone using the Neuro-Affirming Glossary: the e-book (as a PDF, with paperback and Kindle editions coming in November 2026), the Card Deck 2026, or the free Glossary page on autisticrealms.com. It brings together ideas for using the words on your own, in therapy and coaching, in schools and classrooms, and in workplace and practitioner training.

The glossary has 222 words, each with a short definition and its own symbol. Every word is marked **Starting point** (sage) or **Going deeper** (gold). These levels are suggestions only: start wherever is most useful for you, and for the people you are working with.

The words are a starting point for conversation. Everyone's experience is different, and language keeps changing.

Invitations for individuals: learning and journalling

Many Autistic and neurodivergent people say that finding the right word for something they have felt all their life brings relief and a sense of belonging, but there may also be some grief mixed up in that, and it is OK to acknowledge it. If you need support, see the support and crisis lines at the end of this guide. You might find yourself in Monotropism, Interoception, Alexithymia, Meerkat Mode, Stuck States, Flow States or Spiky Profile.

- **A word a day.** Pick one card each morning, or let one pick you. Notice where it shows up during your day.
- **Your own word list.** Keep a page of the words that fit you, and the words that do not. Your list can change over time.
- **Words to communicate.** You could point to a card such as Shutdown, Processing Time or Sensory / Social Overload to show what is happening and what you need, or use your preferred alternative and augmentative communication (AAC).
- **Go further when you are ready.** The Going deeper words and the references at the end of the e-book lead to the Autistic writers, researchers and communities behind the words.

Journal prompts

Choose one card, then pick any prompt that feels right. You can write, draw, voice note, stim or simply think. There are no right answers.

- When have I felt this? What was happening around me?

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- What does this word help me understand about myself?
- What does my body notice when I read this word?
- Does this word fit me, partly fit, or not fit? What word would I use instead?
- What helps me when I am in this state? What gets in the way?
- What would I like the people around me to know about this?
- Which card feels like the opposite of this one? What moves me from one to the other?
- What need might be underneath this experience?
- Which card describes a place, person or activity where I feel most like myself?
- If I could change one thing in my surroundings this week, what would make this easier?
- What brings me joy, flow or a glimmer, and how could I have more of it?

If reflection brings up distress, stop, rest and reach out to someone you trust or a professional who understands neurodivergence. The support and crisis lines at the end of this guide are there too.

Before you start: 1:1 or group work

- **Go at the person's pace.** Let people choose which words to look at, how much to share, and when to stop. Anyone can pass.
- **Use the words or symbols to help develop understanding.** A card is an invitation to talk, not a diagnosis or an assessment.
- **Respect each person's own words.** If someone describes their experience differently, use their words. They may have a different word for a similar experience or meaning. If you or the person you are working with need support, see the support and crisis lines at the end of this guide.
- **Go gently with heavy words.** Some cards, such as Trauma, Sensory Trauma, Burnout, PTSD or Hallucinations, can bring up strong feelings. Agree how to pause or stop before you begin, and leave time to settle afterwards.
- **Notice joy and strengths too:** Autistic Joy, Glimmers, Passions, Flow States, Neurokin and Belonging are part of this language.
- **Make the space work for everyone:** think about light, sound, seating, movement breaks and processing time before you begin and throughout.

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For therapists, counsellors and coaches

The cards can help when feelings and experiences are hard to put into words. The person can choose a card, point to a symbol, or sort cards, instead of having to explain everything out loud.

- **Let the person lead.** Offer the cards; do not hand out words. The person chooses which cards to look at and which words fit.
- **Sorting.** Ask the person to sort a small set of cards into “This is me”, “Sometimes” and “Not me”. Talk about what surprised them.
- **Mapping a day.** Lay out cards for the states someone moves through in a typical day, such as Flow States, Stuck States, Meerkat Mode, Shutdown and Glimmers, and look for what helps them move between them.
- **Needs, not behaviour.** When a person describes a hard moment, look together for the need underneath, using cards such as Unmet Needs, Sensory Processing, Interoception or Processing Time.
- **Shared language for others.** Some people like to choose a few cards to show family, school or work what they need.
- **Practise what you name.** Use identity-first language unless someone tells you otherwise, and respect self-identification.

In educational settings

Language can help children and young people understand themselves and each other, and help staff see needs rather than behaviour.

- **Key words poster.** Print the poster of 35 key words from the e-book, at any size, or make your own from a set of cards. Ask, “Find the word that matches how you feel”, or “Find the word for what helps you when it is too loud”.
- **Word of the week.** Print a card as a poster for the classroom, staff room or noticeboard, and come back to it through the week.
- **Sensory room cards.** Put a few cards, such as Sensory Seeking, Sensory Avoidance, Co-Regulation and Low Demand, where young people can reach them, so they can show what they need.
- **Find a card you relate to.** Spread out a small set of Starting point cards. Each person picks one that feels close to their own experience, and shares only if they choose to.

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- **Pick a pair.** Choose two cards that connect, such as Monotropism and Flow States, or Sensory Seeking and Sensory Avoidance, and explain the link to a partner.
- **Staff briefings.** Use one card at the start of a staff meeting, and ask what it means for the way the school works.
- **Make them last.** Laminate the cards, or print them on thick card (160 to 250 gsm). The posters work well on a wall or noticeboard.

Workplace training

The cards work well for warm-ups, small-group discussion and reflective practice in any workplace that wants to be neuro-inclusive.

- **What does this word mean to you?** Lay the cards word-side up. Each person picks one, says what it means to them, then turns it over to read the definition. What is the same, and what is different?
- **Sort into piles.** “I use this word”, “I am learning this word” and “This is new to me”. Talk about one card from each pile. Try it at the start and end of a session to see what has changed.
- **Change the language.** Find cards that would change how you write a job advert, a policy, a meeting invite or an appraisal, and decide what you would write instead. Try Accommodation, Identity First Language, Processing Time and Neuronormativity.
- **Environment check.** Use Sensory Processing, Shared-Air Space, Cavendish Space and Psychological Safety to look at your own workplace: what is easy, what is hard, and what could change?
- **Centre lived experience.** Many of these words were named by Autistic and neurodivergent people. Where you can, involve and pay neurodivergent people in your training and decisions.

Practitioner training: education, health and care

Language shapes practice. The words we use in reports, plans and meetings affect how children, young people and adults are seen and supported.

- **Rewrite a report.** Take an anonymised paragraph from a report or plan. Find the deficit words and replace them with descriptions of needs and strengths. Use Functioning Labels, Challenging Behaviour, Pathology Paradigm and Unmet Needs to explain why.

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- **Policy review.** Use Behaviourism, ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis), PBS (Positive Behaviour Support) and Low Demand to review behaviour policies, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Trauma-Informed Approach to review approaches to learning and support.
- **Going deeper for supervision.** Use the gold Going deeper cards, such as Epistemic Injustice, Neuronormative Paradigm and Minority Stress, in supervision and reflective practice.
- **Credits and sources.** Where the origin is well documented, a credit in brackets points to the people or community who coined or named the word. Read their work, cite it, and share it.

A sample 45-minute session

1. **Arrive (5 minutes).** Explain that anyone can pass, and agree how to pause. Set up the space: light, sound, seating and movement.
2. **Warm-up (10 minutes).** Find a card you relate to, from a set of 15 to 20 Starting point cards. Share in pairs, only if people choose to.
3. **Sort (10 minutes).** In small groups, sort a set of cards into “I use this word”, “I am learning this word” and “This is new to me”.
4. **Apply (15 minutes).** Choose one: Change the language (rewrite a sentence from a real document), Pick a pair, or Environment check.
5. **Close (5 minutes).** Each person names one word they will take away, and one thing they will do differently.

Printing and getting the cards

- The free Glossary page has all 222 words, levels, credits and references: autisticrealms.com/guides/glossary/
- The Card Deck 2026 is one complete deck of 222 cards. Buyers get four card files: the complete deck for screens (one card per page), a single-sided print version (4 cards per A4 page, 9 to 12 pt text), a double-sided print version for training, and A4 posters (one card per page).
- The e-book has the full definitions, guidance, a poster of 35 key words, the references and the sources for definitions, with a plain-text Word version of the definitions and a one-page guide to the files.
- Print at actual size (100%) on card (160 to 250 gsm), and laminate cards you will use often.

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If you are able to print these as a physical card deck, so that we can publish the Neuro-Affirming Glossary cards as a boxed set, I would love to hear from you. Please contact me at helen@autisticrealms.com.

Support and crisis lines

Autistic Realms is not able to provide professional or crisis support. If you, or someone you are working with, are finding things hard, please reach out to services who can help. Many let you text, email or chat instead of calling, and you can tell them you are Autistic and how you communicate best.

- **If a life is in danger now:** call your emergency number. UK 999, Ireland 999 or 112, US and Canada 911, Australia 000, New Zealand 111.
- **UK:** Samaritans, call 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org. Shout, text SHOUT to 85258. NHS urgent mental health support, call 111 and choose option 2 in England and Wales, NHS 24 on 111 in Scotland, or Lifeline on 0808 808 8000 in Northern Ireland.
- **Texting 999 in the UK:** register first by texting the word register to 999. BSL users can use 999 BSL.
- **Ireland:** Samaritans Ireland, call 116 123. Text About It, text HELLO to 50808.
- **United States:** 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, call or text 988. Crisis Text Line, text HOME to 741741.
- **Canada:** call or text 988.
- **Australia:** Lifeline, call 13 11 14 or text 0477 13 11 14.
- **New Zealand:** call or text 1737.
- **Children and young people (UK):** Childline, call 0800 1111 or chat online.
- **More support:** LGBTQIA+ and trans support, text and BSL options, helplines around the world, neuro-affirming practitioners and Autistic-led organisations are listed at autisticrealms.com/support-and-crisis-lines/

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