

AUTISTIC FLOW AND WELLBEING

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A Qualitative Study: Presenting a Non-Pathologising Approach to Autistic Well-Being and Conceptualising Autistic Ways of Being.

01. INTRODUCTION

Autistic flow is a term that has been used to describe the autistic experience of being deeply immersed in an activity.

Autistic flow theory (Heasman et al., 2024) proposes that **autistic people may be uniquely positioned** to access and manage flow states due to enhanced sensory feedback, monotropic focus, and the drive to regulate experiences.

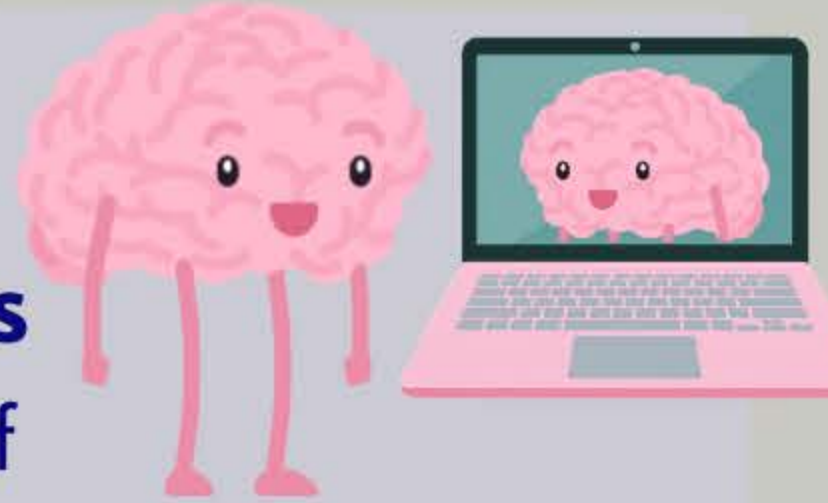
However, given its importance to wellbeing, more research is needed to understand **how autistic people transition** into and out of flow.

02. METHODOLOGY

1) We conducted 10 **semi-structured interviews** with autistic people, exploring their experiences of flow. The interview guide used synonyms for 'flow'.

2) **IPA** (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) method was chosen for understanding personal experiences, leading to three themes characterising flow transitions.

3) **Member checking** (listening to participant feedback on initial results) was used.



03. RESULTS

1

Flow is enjoyable and essential for autistic wellbeing

The positive experience of flow contrasts with the discomfort of being out of flow

Calming and regulatory effects can last after transitioning out of flow

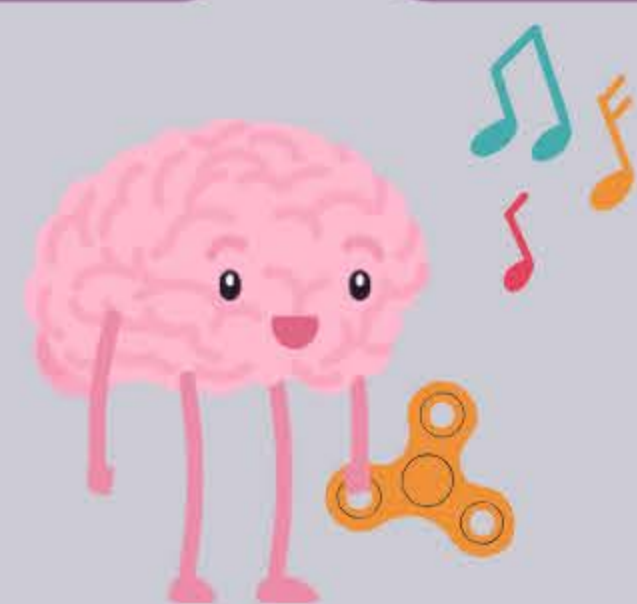


2

Autistic ways of being can amplify experience both in and out of flow

Enriched sensory sensitivity provides routes into flow

Deep focus can block out distractions, and make transitions between flow states difficult



3

Predictability is important for feeling safe to enter flow

Unpredictable interruptions are intensely uncomfortable and damage future flow potential

Autistic strategies seek to enhance predictability to make flow feel safer



“ If I can't do it (flow) ... my anxiety levels do go up and I don't deal with stuff as well as I would normally. I seem to be more sensitive to... sensory stuff than I would be if I was more regulated ”

“ It's not about whether it's going well or going badly... it's all about the physicality... That feels very comforting... and very calming and very secure ”

“ I might just, say, avoid getting stuck into things... so I don't have to deal with the feeling of when it gets interrupted ”

04. CONCLUSIONS

- **Flow is important for autistic wellbeing.** It can provide a sense of control, enhance sensory and emotional regulation, and lower anxiety levels.
- **Predictability is the foundation for feeling safe to enter flow.** This could be established through stimming, using headphones, establishing social boundaries etc.
- **Environments can play a role in wellbeing outcomes.** Interruptions can cause distress, and the mere anticipation could prevent flow from happening at all.

05. IMPLICATIONS

- Practitioners should move away from deficit-focused interpretations of autistic behaviour.
- Practitioners should create predictable and sensory-considerate therapeutic environments.

AUTISTIC TRAITS ARE STRENGTHS THAT CAN FACILITATE FLOW

Stimming behaviours:

- can induce flow states in and of themselves, potentially explaining their role in cognitive and emotional regulation (McDonnell and Milton, 2014).
- can help block out distractions by providing a predictable sensory environment.

Sensory sensitivity:

- can provide routes into flow.
- can help identify environmental distractors, as well as increase the likelihood of interruption.

Monotropic attention:

- can block out distractions.
- can make interruptions uncomfortable due to having to completely switch tasks.

New practitioner resource available!



Full paper and references

