

# Ways Forward

Progressive Approaches to Providing Therapy with Autistic  
Individuals

**Dr Britt Couchman**

Autism Approach

**Cognitive Science and Psychology**



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# Introduction to the editor



**Dr Britt Couchman** started her career as a teacher of Autistic students. She went on to complete research looking at behaviour approaches for Autistic children, which followed an action research approach and included parents as co-researchers. Britt then created her own unique consultation practice where she assisted parents and collaborated with allied health professionals to support Autistic individuals in a holistic sense.

Britt also spends much time training and supporting inclusion specialists who work in schools with neurodivergent students. The next stage of her career has included providing psychosocial support directly to Autistic individuals to assist with developing independence and self-advocacy skills. Britt then went on to complete higher education studies in counselling and now offers neurodivergent clients a service to support them with healing, processing past events and developing additional strategies to achieve greater wellbeing. Britt is passionate about neurodivergent people being change agents within structures in society that have been limiting and oppressive. She is part of a network of neurodivergent practitioners who work hard to develop purposeful and tailored services to support neurodivergent community members. This network aims to combine lived experience with industry experience and research to improve accessibility, inclusivity and culturally appropriateness of therapy services.



## List of contributors

**Dr Wenn Lawson** is an Autistic Researcher and British Psychologist living in Australia. Wenn is a key theorist of the Monotropism theory of Autism and resides on a number of boards, including 'Autism in Adulthood', the Autism Research Institute (ARI) (US), and The American Autism Association.

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**Yenn Purkis** is an author, public servant and passionate advocate for Autistic people and their families. Yenn has authored a range of text, including an autobiography and a guide to mental health for Autistic individuals.



# **Introduction to autism and therapy approaches**

Dr Britt Couchman

*Autism Approach*

Ways Forward is a text that acknowledges the dearth of literature available on therapy approaches specific to the needs of Autistic clients. It also asserts that historical pathologizing practices have been inadequate, harmful and necessitates a movement toward a paradigm shift for research and practice. This book explores less commonly acknowledged approaches to providing therapy and healing approaches that aim to be codesigned, holistic and foster wellbeing. All the contributors and authors who share their perspectives in this book are neurodivergent. Collectively, authors aim to share their experiences of being Autistic, service users and service providers whilst endeavouring to add to the literature possible ways forward for mental health services. Authors will note barriers and challenges that are faced when accessing support as neurodivergent people. Criticisms of deficit-focused research will be shared in the way that it limits, categorises and diminishes lived experience. These chapters have been developed to foster further consideration of current practices, so that in the future, Autistic people may gain greater access to strength-based, adaptive, person-centred and codeveloped methods of therapy. This text calls for a change in ideology and practice when providing therapy. There will be a chance to contrast outdated approaches to research and service provision, detailing more appropriate solutions that are increasingly becoming a part of a new landscape in the field. Autistic people have been subjected to well-documented inappropriate, harmful, stigmatising and deficit-focused approaches for decades. Contributors to this book will offer detailed lived experience accounts of neuro-affirming practices that are as diverse as the people who utilise them.

## **First, thoughts**

This text will centre on the concept of neurodiversity concerned with human rights, and is linked to the disability rights movement (Lipinski et al., 2022).

Variances in cognition will be viewed as natural and often beneficial to society. Through a neurodiversity lens, Autistic people are not viewed as disordered, instead, there is acknowledgement that Autism is a disability caused by the disconnect between individual experience and society. This interplay results in societal barriers and people being marginalised (Lipinski et al., 2022). The movement also esteems equal human rights for all citizens through eradicating discriminatory policies and practices, which is a challenge upheld by this text (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Another critical consideration of Ways Forwards is the barriers that are experienced when neurodivergent people try to access mental health services. The barriers result from the following factors: knowledge gaps; misconceptions; and outdated beliefs about Autism (Lipinski, 2022). There is growing acknowledgement that practitioners who have well-developed knowledge of Autism, are more open and accepting (Lipinski et al., 2022). Informed practitioners are able to empower clients to take charge of their own well-being and enhance greater control of their lives (Lipinski et al., 2022). The practices and viewpoints shared in Ways Forward are centred on approaches that enable empowerment and fulfilment needed for greater well-being. Another barrier pertinent to this text is to move away from research practices that study Autistic people through the lens of abnormality and efforts to normalise behaviour. Instead, we value research such as that completed by Lilley et al. (2022), which was co-produced by Autistic researchers and offered insight into lived experience. This study was able to explore perceptions of self, difference, identity, and suffering (Lilley et al., 2022), which adds to the literature in a more enriched manner. This research approach is in line with broader research practices that emphasise lived experience perspectives. Within Australia, peak body, the Association for Assessment Research Counselling (AARC), has prioritised Autism research, which asks Autistic communities what research they value. They also seek to give the Autistic community greater input into poignant decisions around research, including consideration of social policy, rights, justice and accessibility, which will be raised throughout this book (Poulsen, 2022). Experiential expertise is increasingly sought in an effort to move societal attitudes toward an understanding of capabilities (Poulsen, 2022). Neurodiverse individuals are seeking to be viewed as unique and worthwhile individuals, who live with meaning and purpose and can, through improved research practices (Poulsen, 2022). In summary, shared decision-making power should be necessitated during research, practice and policy development (Poulsen, 2022).

### **Oppositional and oppressive stances**

These emerging accounts of research practice are deemed essential when contrasted with litanies of deficit-based research. Whilst it is essential to consider broader, dominant research practices, it should be noted that the intention of this text is not to divide the community but to reflect on current practice and innovation. That said, there continues to be research that focuses on limiting capacity with a view to assisting individual to regulate their emotions, behaviour, tantrums, and meltdowns without sharing any real insight into these occurrences, which could be far better understood by using lived experience methodologies (Albaum et al., 2023). In situations where the Autistic individual is researched rather than a co-contributor, it may impact practice by perpetuating an outdated delineation between therapists and service users who are othered and problematised. Instead, the focus of practice should be on developing skills that assist with achieving greater well-being, such as developing assertiveness, self-advocacy skills, deeper self-reflection and understandings of self (Loftus et al., 2023). The majority of research in the field asserts that deficits should be overcome, normalised and reduced, through structured practices such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) or Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) (Petty et al., 2023). Clearly, the argument for more balanced, well-informed approaches to therapy is evident and will be brought to life through the chapters to come.

### **Challenges with accessing appropriate services**

There is recognition that therapy approaches can and should be offered to Autistic people as a matter of priority. Clinicians report limited experience and training in working with this cohort (Petty et al., 2023). Barriers that remain are that there is inconsistency and a lack of guidance when providing adaptations in inconsistent and missing detail (Petty et al., 2023). Additional barriers to service provision are waitlists, financial considerations, limited knowledge and skill sets of practitioners and the disconnect between health and services to include those with developmental disabilities (Roudbarani et al., 2023). In order for barriers to be reduced in accessing services, practitioners can increasingly collaborate with individuals and stakeholders to tailor make approaches, seek feedback and constantly reshape therapy to suit the intended audience. Possible ways of consulting, adapting and shaping powerful therapy practices are shared within the chapters of this book. New stances in research and practice: Further to capturing lived experience is the acknowledgement of the need to understand satisfaction levels of services and developing commentary

on how services have met or are meeting perceived needs in relation to how they are impacting life-long functioning (Dickson et al., 2021). It is essential that better mental health services avail themselves to Autistic individuals who are at increasing risk of experiencing a co-occurring mental health condition at some stage in their lives (Lipinski et al., 2022). Another concerning factor is that there are high rates of suicidal ideation, attempts, and suicides in this cohort. It is perplexing, considering the severity of mental health conditions that often co-occur for individuals, that there is barely any attention paid to adult Autism in clinical psychology and psychiatry in some countries (Lipinski et al., 2022). That withstanding, many practitioners have revealed limits to their knowledge of Autism. This lack of practitioner knowledge by Autistic individuals who express dissatisfaction with the knowledge levels of practitioners (Lipinski et al., 2022). Naturally, clinician knowledge, attitudes, confidence and beliefs can impact their decisions and ability to provide care (Roudbarani et al., 2023). Some research necessitates adapting and modifying existing therapy practices. It has been acknowledged that adaptations to therapy are increasingly being applied to better suit individual needs, however, research into possible adaptations remains sparse (Cooper., Loades., & Russell., 2018). There is an acknowledgement that accommodations should be made around executive functioning considerations and Alexithymia. Alexithymia involves difficulty with noticing and labelling emotions, which would obviously impact therapy approaches. Adaptions can assist interactions, providing comfort and increased ease for clients (Cooper., Loades., & Russell., 2018). What's more, traditional therapy is viewed as social in nature and may be daunting for people who have social communication difficulties. This consideration highlights several changes to practice that are in order to lessen anxiety in sessions (Cooper., Loades., & Russell., 2018). When considered, therapy sessions include many social challenges, such as meeting a new person, providing personal information, building rapport and being aware of body language, which may be daunting when someone does not feel confident in social niceties (Cooper., Loades., & Russell., 2018). Psychotherapists can improve practice by being aware of their communication patterns depending on the client's needs. It is essential to seek feedback from clients regarding how they are receiving verbal and non-verbal communication and refine practices throughout the process. Here are just a few possible considerations for practice, and many more will be unearthed throughout the text, such as assisting with discovering self and advocacy practices.



### **The direction and considerations underpinning this text**

This book is developed in the knowledge that people experience Autism in varying ways and also experience societal barriers at differing levels. It also acknowledges that Autistic people have varying abilities to self-advocate and be a part of a change process in the field. Authors aim to represent Autistic individuals who do not yet have a voice and stand alongside those who do. It is hoped that this book will reach those who can assist with changing practices and research in therapy. Whilst much of the material presented is coming from a lens of building empowerment, contributing and sharing knowledge, it is understood that more limiting approaches have stemmed from dominant medical models of categorisation and pathologizing people. The intention of this text is to disseminate perceptions about the lived experience of Autistic people who have long been marginalised and subjected to normative practices. It is hoped that this text will add to the growing literature about counselling practices that aim to assist people to feel visible and included while accessing therapy that is informed by their personal perceptions and needs. *Ways Forward* will also consider strategies that enable Autistic individuals to direct and shape their own therapy approach whilst working alongside skilful and knowledgeable psychotherapists. This book will share multiple perspectives on Autism and rally for a change in practice for therapy. It will build on notions of reformed practices that are mentioned above, where the voice of the Autistic community will be shared through lived experience to move away from the dominant deficit-focused practices in this field. There is regard paid for autobiographical writing and personal narratives similar to those captured in this text and it is an aim of the text that these narratives will comprise practical applications along with adding to ideology in the field.

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# Conclusions and addressing key themes

Dr Britt Couchman

*Autism Approach*

This text has provided a range of perspectives on Autism lead therapy. It has moved beyond traditional constructs of therapy and research practices. It is hoped that the voices of the Autistic community have been captured in an initial sense to offer ways forward for therapy. We witnessed research that speaks of Autism as a serious developmental disorder with a focus on dysfunction, barriers within communication, restricted interests and limiting behaviours. Similarly, other research stagnates in areas such as social skill development and reducing aggressive behaviours (Loftus et al., 2023). Other preoccupations are with treating restrictive patterns of thinking, inattention, executive dysfunction and oppositionality (Albaum et al., 2023). There is extensive focus on research that evidences the need for behaviour modification for intolerance of uncertainty and a vulnerability to anxiety (Loftus et al., 2023).

In contrast, we have considered more hopeful directions where researchers conclude that through including disabled people in the design of research can lead to optimism, hope and resilience (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023). Additional research developments have cast light on the need for Autism researcher to alter their scope and provide new approaches to work, thereby changing the research focus and tone (Leadbitter et al., 2021). These researchers acknowledge that some interventions are able to reduce Autistic behaviour, however, individuals are often left without coping mechanisms and at risk of mental health challenges, deeming the intervention pointless (Leadbitter et al., 2021). This reframes the concept of effectiveness of services by further concentrating on the outcomes of therapy, which are linked to long-term well-being and autonomy for those involved. Mechanisms of change can include social and family relationships that support positive development.

Research and therapy approaches should show greater regard for Autistic developmental processes, coping strategies, autonomy and well-being (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Client-directed, codeveloped, strength-based approaches are essential. Concepts such as identified self-determination lead

to better client outcomes through supporting autonomy and harnessing motivators that are intrinsic in nature (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023). This determination can lead to improvements in well-being and satisfaction (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023). Approaches must be flexible and individually tailored because of different abilities and strengths across the spectrum (Cherewick & Matergia, 2023), (Gowen, Crane, & Felter-Wagner., 2022).

When examining the field more broadly, partnership with Autistic people, alongside caregivers and stakeholders, can take place within research steering committees and advisory boards through engagement, involvement and co-production processes (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Close attention should be paid to the stated needs, preferences and priorities identified by Autistic clients. This focus will lead to a movement beyond historical divides, misunderstandings and wrongdoings to a place where the expertise of Autistic people is valued (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Future practice can also assist with embracing approaches that not only accept but respect individual neurotypes and ensure that approaches, most importantly, address what matters most to the recipient (Leadbitter et al., 2021). Whilst conceptualising these ways forward that have been summarised in this conclusion, this book has comprised reflections of practice around advocacy, narrative therapy, educative approaches, cultural healing practices and creative therapies which offer value for Autistic communities. This text offers personal insights, professional insights and voices of Autistic people who intend to lead the way towards a broad adoption of culturally appropriate practices that are informed by research that values the lived experience of counselling approaches.

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### Resources

- The Autism and Mental Health MOOC (massive Open On-line Course) facilitated by Curtin University is a free course and can be found at: <https://www.edx.org/learn/mental-health/curtin-university-Autism-and-mental-health>
- Wenn Lawson's Youtube Chanel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD8L-Ht\\_jSQxBmWe6MzZvJA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD8L-Ht_jSQxBmWe6MzZvJA)
- Wenn Lawson's web site: <https://www.buildsomethingpositive.com/wenn/>
- Monotropism: One step at a time: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOe1fliDs0I>