A fact sheet about

Your need for autonomy

UnderstandingZoe

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Your need for autonomy

Why autonomy is a need, not a flaw, and one way to build in choice.



Key points

- Autonomy (definition below) means having a say over what you do, how and when. Everyone needs it, and for some people the need is much stronger.
- A strong need for autonomy is not a flaw or a sign that you are difficult. It is part of how you work, and you can plan around it.
- What may help is building choice into everyday demands: turning "have to" into "choose to", asking for invitations rather than instructions, and adding something new.
- Start with one demand you face often, and change one thing about how it reaches you.

Why autonomy is a need, not a flaw

The bins go out on Tuesday night. You know it every week, and every week it turns into a fight with yourself. Or a friend says "you should come on Saturday", and now you want to do almost anything else, even though you like them.

When a thing feels like an order, it can stop feeling possible. You can read more about why a request you want to do can feel impossible here. This page is about what you can do with that.

Researchers who study motivation see autonomy as a basic need for everyone. When people feel they have chosen what they do, they tend to enjoy it more and keep going for longer. When they feel pushed, even things they like can start to feel like work. This research is with adults in general.

For some people the need is much stronger. Adults with a PDA profile say that more choice and flexibility, in every part of life, helps them live well. Researchers have also started to describe PDA in terms of a drive for autonomy. If you are ADHD, autistic or neurodivergent in another way, you may find that demands go better when they feel like your own idea.

So you do not need to push harder, or try to need choice less. It may help more to set up your days so that choice is already built in.

Research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: put choice into one everyday demand

Pick one demand that comes up often and that you often find hard. It might be a meal, a shower, a reply to a message, the washing or a phone call. Then try one of these with it, whichever feels easiest today:

- Turn "have to" into "choose to": "I have to do the washing" becomes "I could put a load on now, or leave it until tomorrow". Some people say what is true instead, like "the basket is full", which leaves the choice with you.
- Give yourself two real options, like a text instead of a call, toast instead of a full meal, or a shower at night instead of in the morning.
- Choose which part comes first, or whether it happens now, after a cup of tea or tomorrow.
- Add something new, like a different route, new music, another place to sit, or a way of doing it you have not tried. For some people, something new makes a task feel like their own again.
- Find your own reason: "I want clean sheets because they feel good" may sit better than "I should change the sheets".

You can write tasks in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app as options, not orders. Adding "maybe" or "if I feel like it" can help.

When the demand comes from someone else, you can ask the people you live with for invitations rather than instructions. "Would you like to..." or "the bins go out tonight" may land better than "take the bins out". Notice ahead of time, a message in writing, or the choice of when can help too. You can read more about explaining to a partner what helps you here.

These ideas come from what PDA and other neurodivergent adults say helped them. They have not been tested in research yet, so they are anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about them. Something new can wear off after a while, so it helps to have a few ideas to swap between. Some days no change will be enough, and resting is a fair choice then too.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this comes up every day or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you find ways to build choice into your days, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

for more information, you can contact

hello@understandingzoe.com

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