A fact sheet about

# Detail-focused thinking

UnderstandingZoe

https://understandingzoe.com

Copyright 2026

Understanding Zoe

# Detail-focused thinking

**What detail-focused thinking is, why it is not lesser, and what helps.**



## Key points

- Many autistic people take in the details first and build the big picture from them. This is called a detail-focused thinking style (definition below).
- The big picture still comes, but it can take a little longer to form.
- For autistic, ADHD and more broadly neurodivergent people, thinking differently is not thinking less well. The same way of thinking can help in one setting and get in the way in another.
- What may help is asking to be told things in the way that suits you, and giving yourself the time your thinking needs.

## What detail-focused thinking is

A relative calls about a family trip and runs through the plan fast. They want a yes or a no before they hang up. You are still on the details: which day, which train, and where everyone will sleep. You can tell something does not fit, but you cannot yet say what the whole plan adds up to.

An hour later, once you have gone over each part, your answer is clear. You may also have found the gap nobody else saw. What you were short of on the call was time, not understanding.

Some people take in a whole room first, and the things in it later. Others take in the things one by one, and the room comes together from them. A detail-focused thinking style is the second way. You notice the parts, how they differ and what does not fit, before the overall shape.

You may meet an older name for this: weak central coherence. That name suggests something is missing. But a big review of the research found a better fit. It is a leaning towards detail, not a gap in seeing the whole.

Later research found the same thing in another way. Autistic people saw the whole picture just as well as others did. The difference was that the whole picture took a little longer to form, most of all when the details pointed somewhere else.

Much of this research looked at how people see shapes and pictures. So it tells us less about how people think through a plan or a talk. And not every autistic person thinks this way.

## Why a different way of thinking is not a lesser one

For a long time, research on neurodivergent thinking looked mostly for what was wrong. A newer review looks for strengths too.

When autistic adults were asked what being autistic brings them, many named deep focus, an eye for detail and a good memory. But they also said the same trait could help in one setting and get in the way in another. Noticing every detail may help when you fix a bike or follow a recipe. It may wear you out in a busy room where everyone talks at once.

Research on ADHD points to other strengths, such as having lots of new ideas and deep focus on what interests them. If your attention goes deep into one thing at a time, you can read more about monotropism here.

If you are neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

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

## The one thing to try: ask to be told things in the way that suits you

Think of one place where things come at you too fast or in the wrong order. It might be a phone call, an appointment, a family plan, a meeting or a class. Then ask for one change there. Here are some lines you could save on your phone:

- "Can you tell me the main point first, and then the details?"
- "Can you send me that in writing?"
- "Can we go one step at a time?"
- "I need some time to go through this. Can I get back to you tomorrow?"

You can share these in whatever way suits you: speaking, typing, signing or using AAC. A line written on a card or on your phone works with no speaking at all. You can read more about asking people to put things in writing here.

Give yourself the time as well. When something new lands, you may need to go through the parts first, because that is how your answer forms. "I will get back to you" is a full answer.

If you have higher support needs, a support person can help. They can share things one step at a time, with pictures or written steps. They can also give you more time to answer, and check what you understood without rushing you.

At work or in study, you can ask for written instructions or more time to respond as adjustments. You can read more about asking for adjustments in study here.

You can keep your lines in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, ready for a call or an appointment. Afterwards, you can log the details there, by talking or typing, and go over them at your own pace.

This step comes from what neurodivergent adults say helps them, in health care and in daily life. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid 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 understand how you think and what helps, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

## Sources


Happé and Frith (2006). "The weak coherence account: detail-focused cognitive style in autism spectrum disorders." Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders 36(1), 5-25. doi:10.1007/s10803-005-0039-0

Van der Hallen, Evers, Brewaeys, Van den Noortgate and Wagemans (2015). "Global processing takes time: a meta-analysis on local-global visual processing in ASD." Psychological Bulletin 141(3), 549-573. doi:10.1037/bul0000004

Maw, Beattie and Burns (2024). "Cognitive strengths in neurodevelopmental disorders, conditions and differences: a critical review." Neuropsychologia 197, 108850. doi:10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2024.108850

Russell, Kapp, Elliott, Elphick, Gwernan-Jones and Owens (2019). "Mapping the autistic advantage from the accounts of adults diagnosed with autism: a qualitative study." Autism in Adulthood 1(2), 124-133. doi:10.1089/aut.2018.0035

Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman and Hutman (2013). "Deficit, difference, or both? Autism and neurodiversity." Developmental Psychology 49(1), 59-71. doi:10.1037/a0028353

Nicolaidis, Raymaker, Ashkenazy, McDonald, Dern, Baggs, Kapp, Weiner and Boisclair (2015). "'Respect the way I need to communicate with you': healthcare experiences of adults on the autism spectrum." Autism 19(7), 824-831. doi:10.1177/1362361315576221

ADHD Guideline Development Group (2022). Australian Evidence-Based Clinical Practice Guideline for ADHD. Australian ADHD Professionals Association, Melbourne

# 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*

*Copyright 2026*