

# Eating Disorders in Autistic Women





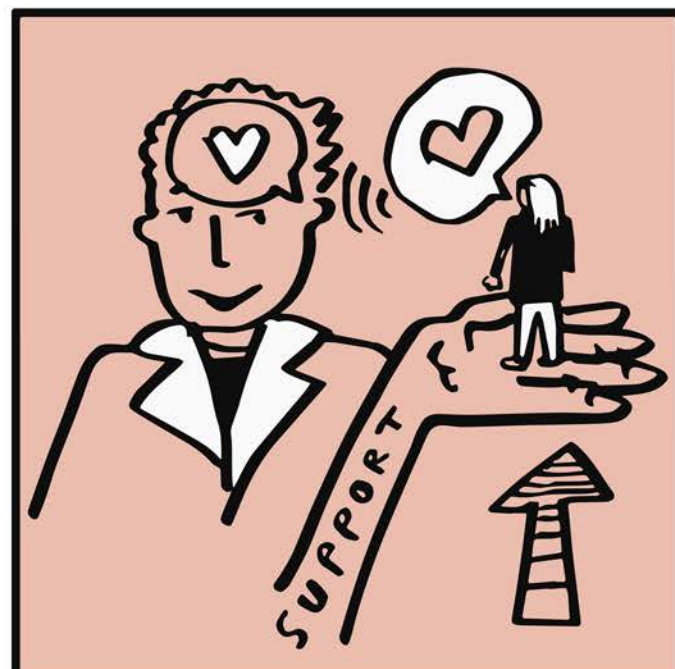
**This guide has been produced for healthcare professionals and others supporting autistic women with restrictive eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa.**



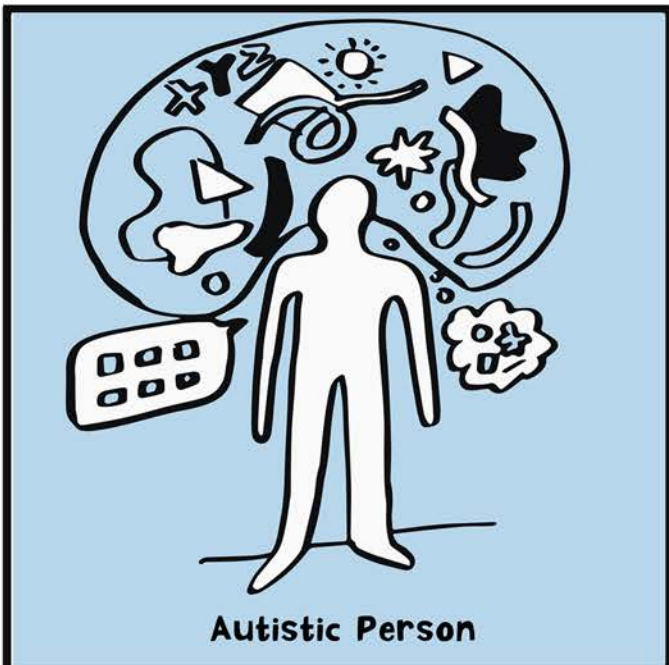
**It has been created with autistic women with lived experience. It aims to raise awareness of restrictive eating disorders in autistic people.**



**It has also been produced through the research undertaken by SEDAF (Study of Eating Disorders in Autistic Females) at UCL and Cardiff University.**

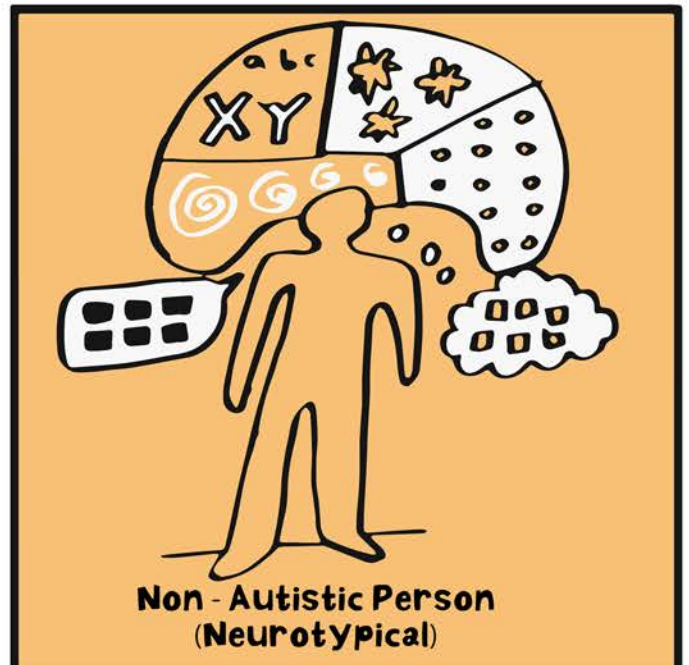


**The SEDAF research aims to create better support and understanding specific to autistic women with restrictive eating disorders.**



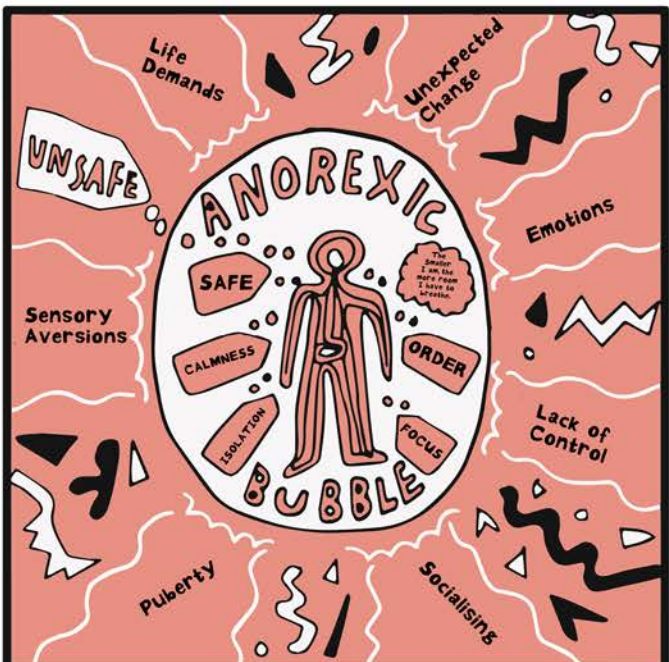
**Autistic Person**

**Being autistic affects the way a person experiences and interacts with the world around them. Every autistic person is different.**



**Non - Autistic Person (Neurotypical)**

**Autistic people may communicate and engage with others in different ways. Routine and predictability tend to be important to them, and many autistic people experience sensory sensitivities.**



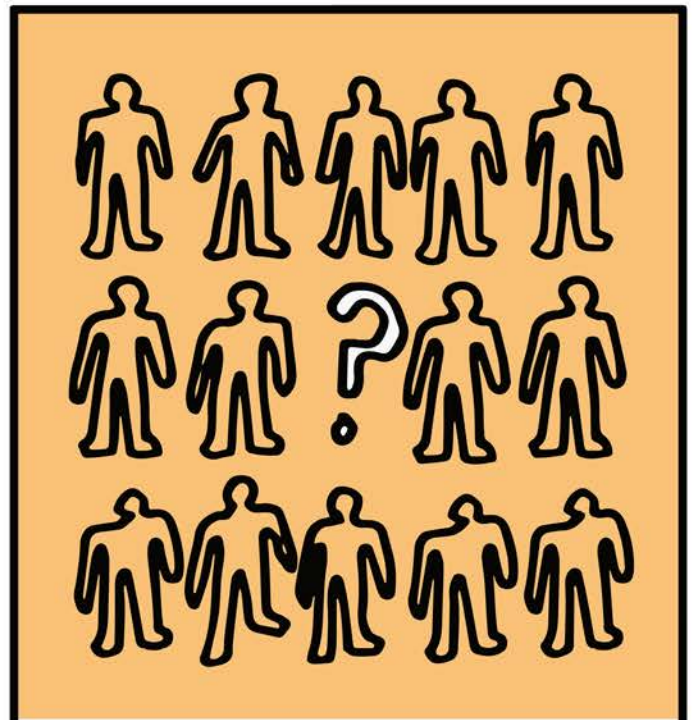
**For some autistic people restrictive eating disorders may feel like they help them to function in a world that is overwhelming for them. However, they are harmful to their health and keep the person stuck.**



**There are many factors that might contribute to restrictive eating disorders in autistic people. Not all factors will be relevant to all autistic people with restrictive eating disorders.**



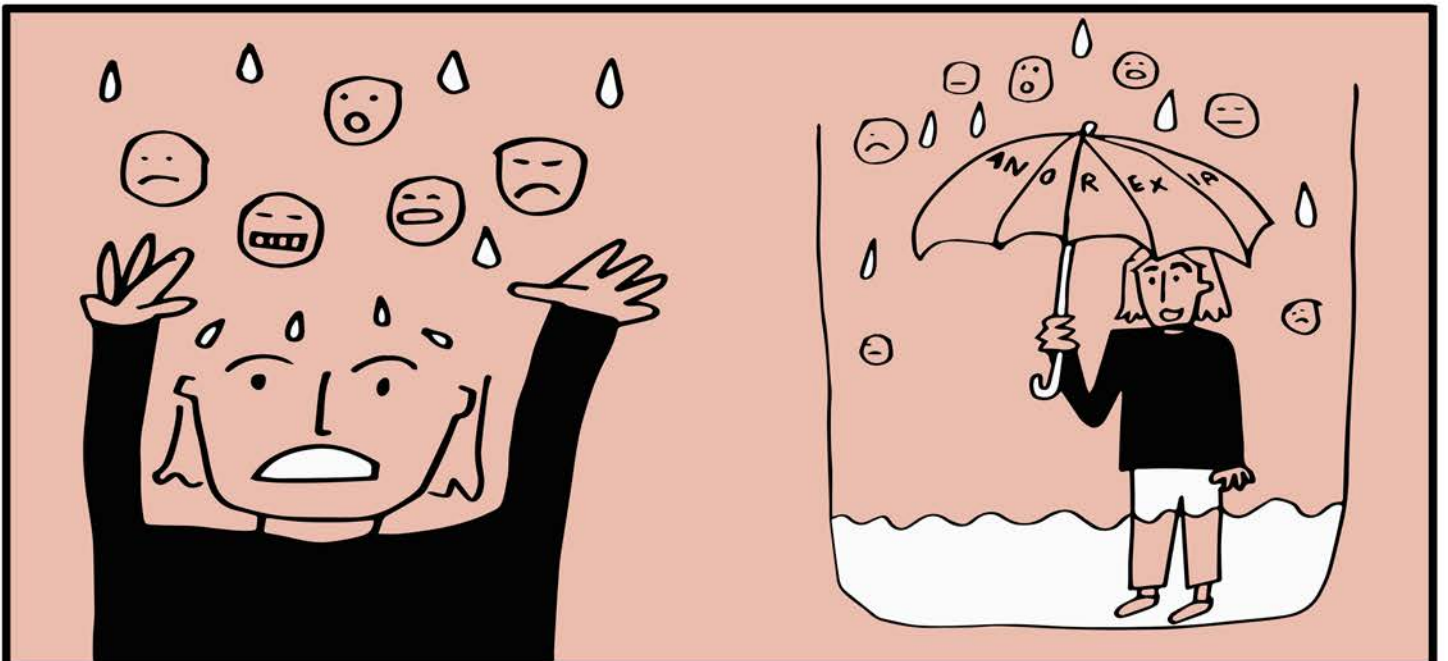
Sensory sensitivities can make autistic people's day-to-day life very stressful. For some, restricting their eating might dampen their sensory sensitivities. Others may avoid foods with unpleasant smells, tastes or textures.



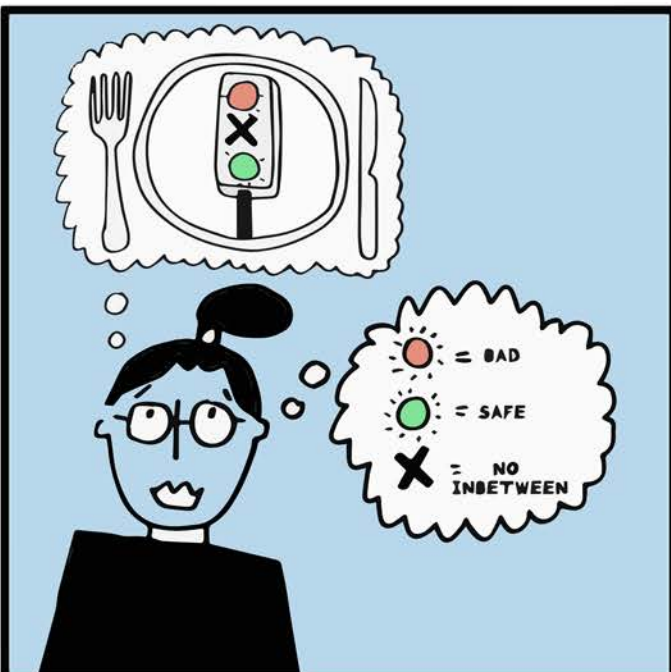
Autistic people may experience difficulties with other people, including maintaining friendships, being bullied, and feeling lonely. Their eating disorder may distract them from their worries.



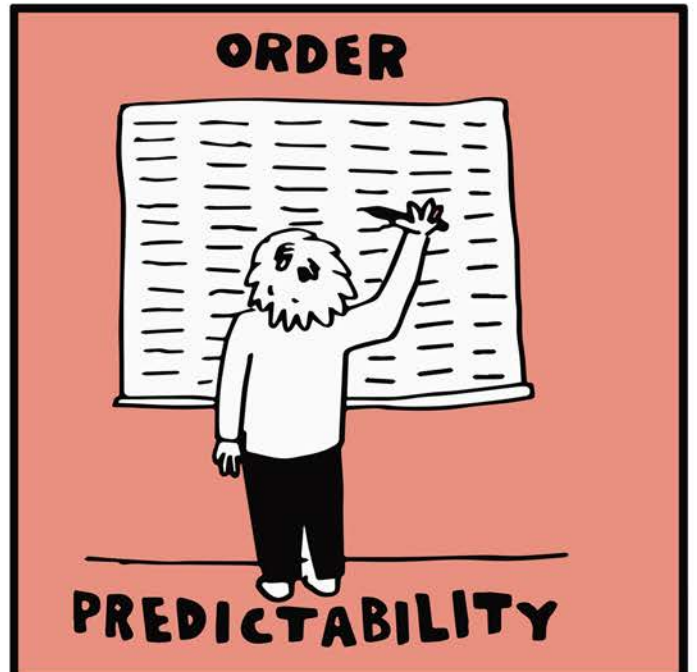
Some autistic people struggle with their sense of self. Their eating disorder might help them to cope with feeling different. Anorexia might give them a sense of purpose and belonging.



**Restricting their eating and engaging in other eating disorder behaviours might help autistic people to dampen down and control difficult emotions.**



**Certain thinking styles, such as rigid thinking or focused interests in eating disorder related topics, might contribute to the development of an eating disorder or might make it harder for autistic people to recover.**



**Eating disorders may help autistic people to cope with uncertainty. It may give them a sense of control and introduce structure to their lives.**

# AREAS OF AUTISM RELATED DIFFICULTY

Restrictive eating and effect of starvation



Food specific sensory sensitivities



General sensory sensitivities



Social interactions and relationships



Intolerance of uncertainty



Understanding and regulating emotions



Black and white, literal thinking around food, weight and diet



Interoceptive ability related to eating, digestion and bodily changes



Rigidity and routinized behaviours



Focussed interests related to food, weight and exercise

## DIRECT PATHWAY

## ENVIRO



Stressful Life Events



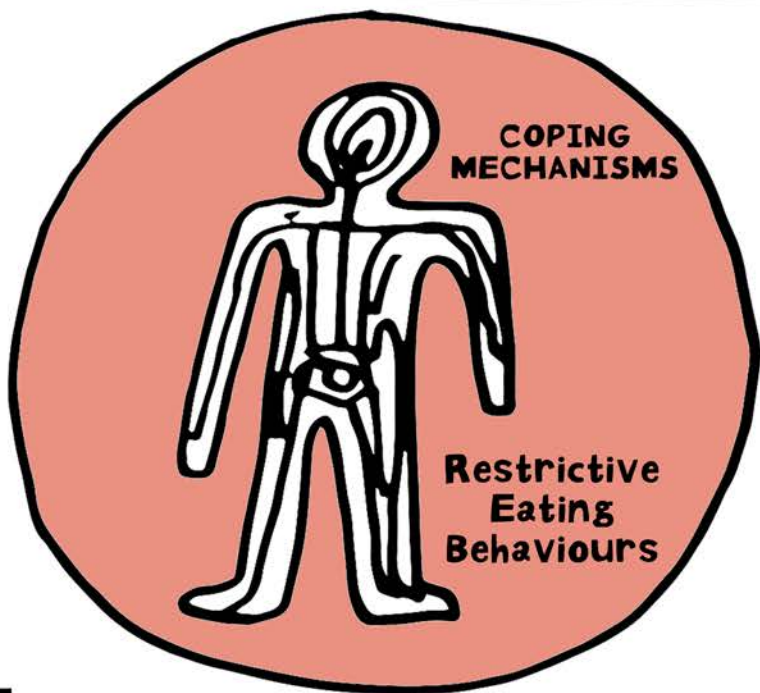
Unrecognised Autism

## NEGATIVE EMOTI



Reduction of initial difficulties and negative

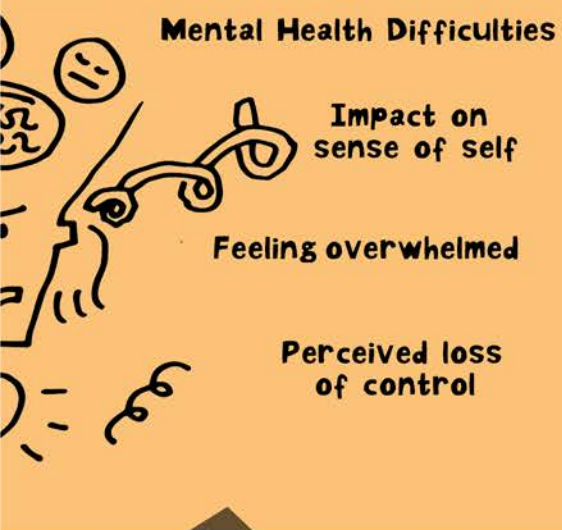
ation reinforce initial difficulties



### ENVIRONMENT



### EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES



### OUTCOMES

Numbering down/resolving sensory and emotional experiences



Introducing calmness through control and predictability

ve emotional consequences

# Supporting autistic people with an eating disorder.

Lets work together to support autistic people to overcome eating disorders and find more helpful ways of coping with challenges in their lives.

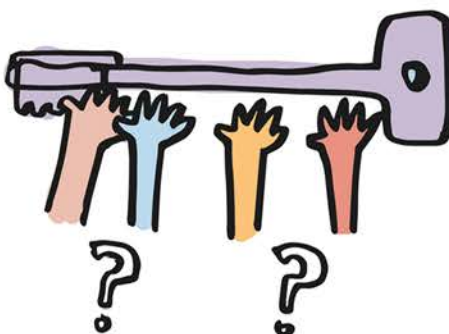
You're not wrong, just different.



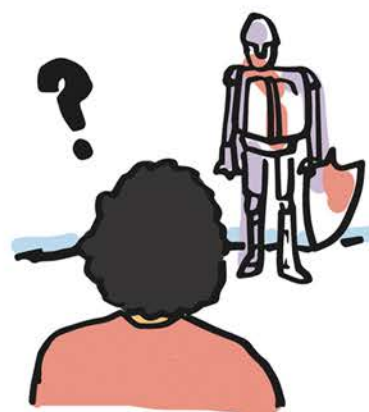
Having a restRICTIVE eating disorder is a bit like wearing armour.



The armour gets stuck and you can't take it off.



How do we help people to take it off?



How can we help you to develop a new sense of self?



How can we support you to cope in better ways?



There isn't one size fits all.



# Improving eating disorder service provision for autistic people.



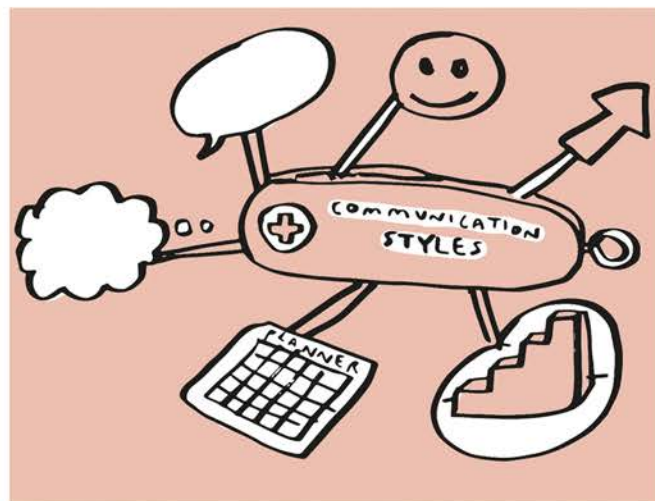
We can improve service provision for autistic people with restrictive eating disorders by listening to and learning from their experiences.



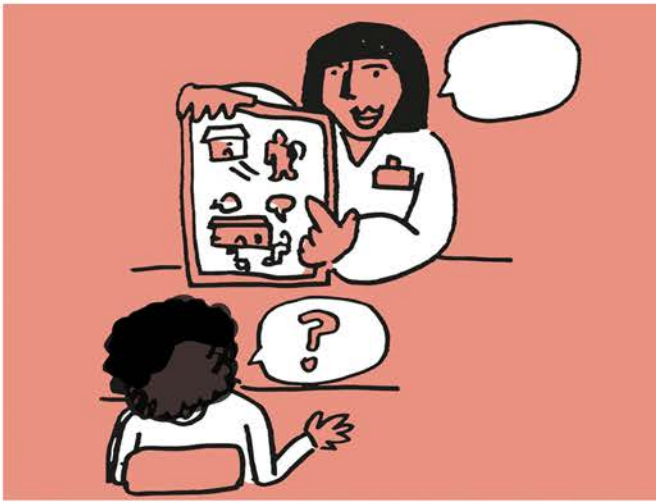
Many autistic women with eating disorders may not know they are autistic when they first access services. Sometimes autistic traits are misinterpreted as eating disorder related behaviours. We need to improve recognition, so autistic people and staff supporting them can better understand their needs.



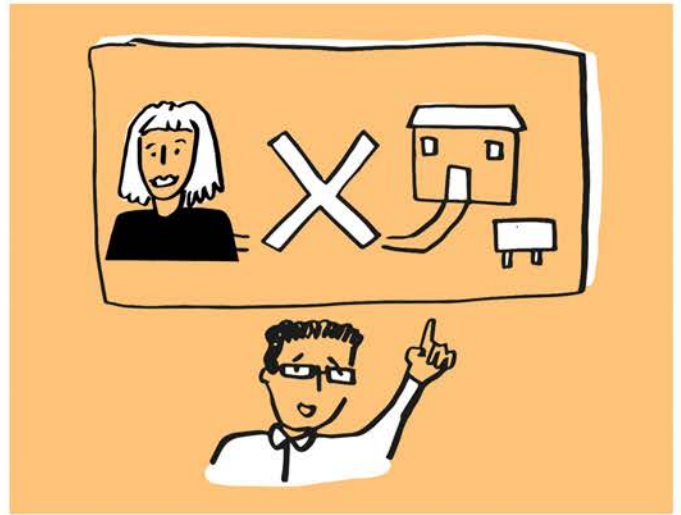
Autistic traits can make it difficult to engage with commonly offered treatment. We need to adapt treatment approaches to fit with the persons needs, abilities and strengths, and help them to develop new skills.



Adapting communication and working collaboratively can make treatments more accessible for autistic people with eating disorders.



**Eating disorder services can be overwhelming for autistic people for many reasons. Considering sensory needs and predictability can help to create a more supportive environment.**



**Research suggests that existing eating disorder services and treatment approaches are often not helpful or inaccessible for autistic women.**



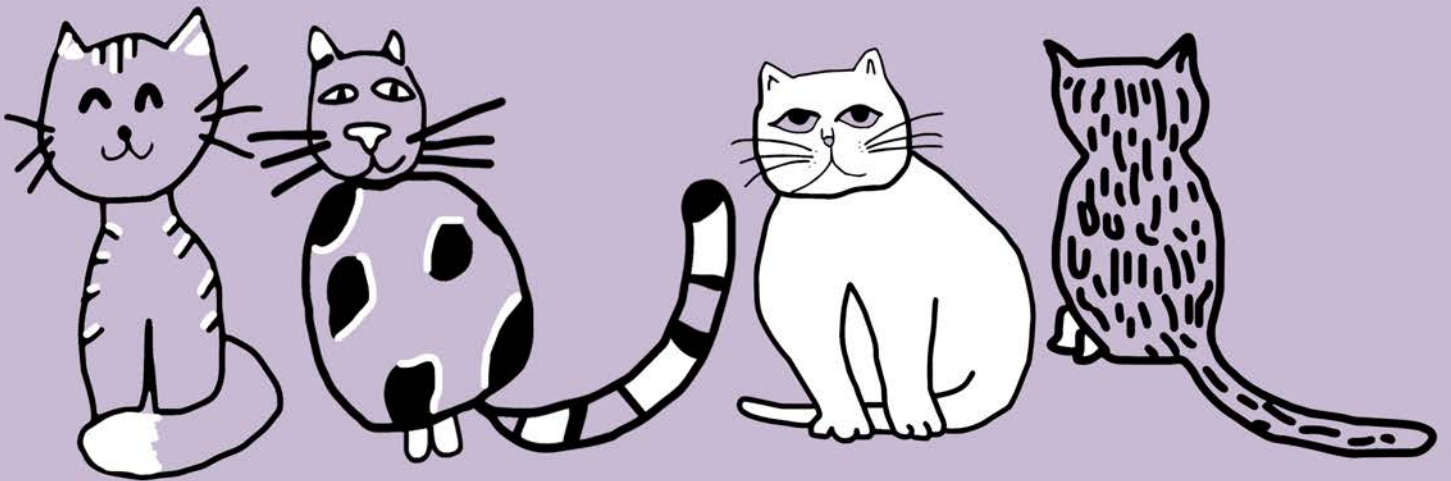
**Eating disorder services need to improve their understanding of the needs of autistic people in their care. Supporting staff and providing training and resources is vital for this to happen.**



**The research of the SEDAF team focused on women and those with restrictive eating disorders. However, some of the information in this leaflet might also be helpful for those with other gender identities and those with other forms of disordered eating. More research needs to be done to inform support for members of the autistic community, who are currently underrepresented in research. It will also be important to develop and test autism-informed adaptations to existing eating disorder treatments, new treatments, and preventative approaches.**

**The SEDAF team would like to thank everyone who participated and supported our research.**

**You can find information about our work via  
Twitter- @SEDAF18  
and our blog- <http://sedaf18.blogspot.com>.**



**Thank you to all the workshop participants  
who helped to create this.**

