



AUTISTIC IDENTITY ART THERAPY GROUP OVERVIEW, GUIDELINES & FAQs

The Autistic Identity Art Therapy Group is a structured 12-week online group art therapy program dedicated to celebrating and strengthening autistic people through art practice and process, mutual exploration and community connection.

IS THE GROUP RIGHT FOR ME?

WHO FACILITATES THE GROUP?

The program is facilitated by Mahlie - a clinically qualified, registered and regulated Art Psychotherapist and academic. Mahlie (she/they//we/us) is a First Nations Wiradjuri queer person, diagnosed later-in-life with autism and ADHD. Mahlie lives with complex trauma and dissociation, chronic illness and physical disabilities. Mahlie is a trained and qualified member of the ISSTD and ISSPD and experienced to work with expressions and experiences of complex trauma and dissociation.

WHO CAN ATTEND THE GROUP?

Participants should:

- Be over the age of 18
- Identify as autistic (more information on 'identification' is below)
- Be hoping to explore their autistic identity (suitable for people newly diagnosed and/or late diagnosed)
- Have access to art materials and a genuine interest in art making (no art 'skill' required)
- Have capacity and ability to commit to a weekly 2 hour online session for 12 consecutive weeks without break – *Mahlie will confirm this with you on application.*
- Have skills and strategies to manage activation and distress as we are unable to manage crisis situations in this space – This will be discussed on application.
- Have access to other supports outside of the space
- Have capacity to share a space with others for a 2-hour period (with short breaks)
- Have capacity to use typical zoom online meeting functions (such as chat, audio and video)
- Have capacity to provide weekly online feedback (this is a requirement of the program) as this enables us to continue to build better programs moving forward as well as participate in valuable and underrepresented research.

PLEASE BE AWARE THAT OUR GROUP SPACE IS LIMITED TO 10 PARTICIPANTS.

WHAT DOES 'IDENTIFY AS AUTISTIC' MEAN?

We understand that there are significant barriers to people obtaining clinical and medical diagnosis of autism in Australia that may be financial, social, political, personal, and emotional. As such, our space is open to **all autistic people, regardless of their ability to access medicalised models of diagnosis. Those who would benefit from our program:**

- Have received either a clinical (neuropsych) or medical (GP / paediatrician) diagnosis of autism
- Have received an informal diagnosis of autism via an occupational therapist, counsellor, psychotherapist or other allied health professional and openly identify as autistic to people in their lives
- Have self-identified using the [RAADS-R](#) and openly identify as autistic to people in their lives
- Have received peer-diagnosis as autistic and openly identify as autistic to people in their lives.

Please be aware our group is not currently appropriate for people questioning if they have an autistic neurotype. Please discuss with Mahlie on application if you have any questions about whether this group is right for you.

ARE OTHER NEURODIVERSITIES RIGHT FOR THE GROUP?

Due to the lack of available spaces tailored especially for *autistic adults*, we're choosing to focus on autism as a neurotype specifically. Other neurodivergence, such as ADHD, brain injury, intellectual disability, neurological conditions, trauma and other mental health issues differ from autism in many ways and will not be covered in our group. We understand that many of these may be co-diagnosed alongside autism and welcome in those with multiple diagnoses.

HOW ARE PARTICIPANTS CHOSEN?

In response to our social justice framework and ethical practices, autistic people who also live with intersections that put them at further disadvantage within society will be prioritised. These include (in no order):

- First Nations/Blak people
- LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse people
- People of colour
- Refugees
- People living with chronic and complex illness and disability
- People living in rural and remote areas
- Older people, including later-in-life diagnosed autistic people

WHAT CAN I EXPECT FROM THE PROGRAM?

WILL THE GROUP TEACH ME SPECIFIC SKILLS LIKE DBT, ACT, STEPS?

- No, this is not a skills-based group.
- Whilst we may look at psychoeducation materials, discuss strategies and management techniques, you will not learn manualised skills-based therapy in this group.

DOES THE ART MATTER?

- *REAL TALK: You will struggle in this group if you don't like artmaking/craft*
- We will engage in substantial creative practice every single session.
- Art will be a large part of the program. Interest in creativity is key.
- You will be invited to participate in a structured art task each week to give context and direction, but it is your choice whether to participate in them.
- Creative expression is encouraged in all its forms. We appreciate and encourage any and all visual, written and/or performance art.
- There is no "right" or "wrong" art practice or process in our space. We place value on expression, process and practice over conforming to social ideas of valid art practices.

IS THIS A SOCIAL SKILLS GROUP?

- *REAL TALK: This isn't a social group. People can (and often do) choose to not engage with each other.*
- We do not expect neurotypical social behaviour in our space where this feels harmful.
- This group operates under a neurodivergent social framework. This means there is no need to mask highly or perform neurotypical functions.
- This space encourages proxy socialisation, parallel play and independent learning, where helpful.
- We do hope that people find connections with each other through being their authentic autistic selves.

HOW AM I EXPECTED TO BEHAVE IN THE SPACE?

- *REAL TALK: You do need to participate and be part of the space, but what that looks like can be up to you.*
- Our values require us to be kind, compassionate, respectful and self-aware in space. No one in our space is more important than another.
- It's important to be mindful of sensory input in the online space. Microphones can amplify background noise and cause others distress. If your environment is loud, busy or shared it is a good idea to switch off your microphone unless speaking.
- You are not required to participate in neurotypical or stereotypical communication social behaviours. This means that you are NOT REQUIRED to: be visible, use your voice, provide eye contact, suppress "tic" behaviours, respond to requests for social contact from others, follow suggestive practices or activities, or stay seated.
- You are encouraged to stim openly in this space. "Stimming" is a way of self soothing and regulating the brain. It can sometimes look like: repetitive movement, sensory reduction and sensory induction. Things you might want to bring into the space might include: fidget toys, plushies (soft) toys, squish toys, pets, visual aids (lights, moving objects), warm and cold drinks, snacks, blankets, important and comforting clothing, headphones, earphones, art supplies, etc.
- You are encouraged to lean into your needs in the space and unmask as much as you feel comfortable.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR THE GROUP?

- *REAL TALK: Each week we focus on a different area and suggest a task or two, you can work with it how you like.*
- Our group program is running on a "thematic art psychotherapy framework" meaning through our experience and information gathering within our community we have noticed regular themes for challenges and celebrations often experienced in the autistic community.

- We will spend our 12 weeks focusing on one theme a week.
- Our session structure and process is not set in stone. It will be flexible depending on the suggestions of the group.
- Structured activities and templates will be offered throughout the program for those who feel more comfortable with direction. These are optional at all times.
- Any process we do is optional, although we encourage people to attempt the theme agreed on by the group.
- As a social justice act to reduce the power/control mechanism found in 'therapy' spaces and to practice Peer ways of working, Mahlie and Chloe make art visibly alongside the group and engage in all processes equally.
- You will find a session layout and overview below.

Session number	Session focus	Session overview	Session date & time
1	Hello / landing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome. • Introductions. • Setting up space • What are your first thoughts/current feelings about belonging to this community? Do you identify with intersections? 	TBA
2	What is my story of autism?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking in to how we see 'autistic people' and how we might be carrying a narrative / Self-stigma check • Debunking myths about autism - Where do we get information/what are our current sources? (academia, social media/advocates, GPs/clinicians, diagnosing team etc) • Artwork about how being 'autistic' feels (what kind of animal is autism for me?) 	TBA
3	Sensory profiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Window of Tolerance - What are some of the things we hold and experience alongside autism? • Looking at our unique sensory challenges and needs • Creating a sensory plan for increase and decrease (structured activity/template) 	TBA
4	Alexithymia / communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding communication internally and externally • Finding a non-verbal language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Colour, shape and line as communication ▪ Using emotions wheels ▪ Creative writing / self-processing 	TBA
5	Masking and unmasking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying what our masks looks like • ways to reduce the impacts of masking • Creating our 'two masks' and looking for the in-between (structured art activity) 	TBA
6	Burnout / Meltdown / Shutdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we mean by burnout, meltdown and shutdown? What do these things look like for us specifically? • Identifying what can lead to burnout, meltdown, and shutdown. • how to avoid and manage them effectively • Creating a plan or reminder artwork 	TBA
7	Special interests (Splns)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the importance Splns • Finding safe spaces to encourage Splns • Making art about our Spln or using the space to practice Spln 	TBA

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sharing Spln in our space 	
8	Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Values systems ● Internal and external boundary setting ● Needs vs Wants ● Communicating needs 	TBA
9	Social interaction and connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding proxy communication / parallel play ● Being alone vs lonely ● Finding “people like us” ● Connecting to the world around us ● Circle of support/connection (structured art activity) 	TBA
10	Self-protection and Self-care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rest, respite and self-connection. ● What are some of the things we experience alongside autism that need protecting and care? ● Building a nest (structured art activity) 	TBA
11	Autistic joy and strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Has my story of autism changed? ● Tree of life (structured art activity) 	TBA
12	Ending	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Processing feelings and thoughts around ending through art ● Discussion and questions around contact and communication after the program ends ● Finding spaces to continue to grow ● Saying ‘see you later’ 	TBA

WHAT DOES ‘SHARING’ MEAN?

- Non-verbal participation in groups is respected, understood and will not be judged negatively.
- It is your choice whether you share your art making process with the group.
- You can share your artwork physically, by simply holding it up to the camera for the group to see.
- You can use the chat function to upload a digital image of your work and I will share it on my screen to the entire group.
- You can speak specifically about your work.
- You can speak generally about how comfortable/uncomfortable the activity was for you.
- You can ask others about their work or respond to a comment from someone else.
- As a general rule, you can practice the “full stop” technique. This is where you make a statement about your work and say “full stop” if you do not wish to discuss it anymore or have others comment or inquire about it further. EVERYONE (including me) must respect the “full stop”.
- You can email your work to us: We LOVE that!

WHAT CAN I SHARE/BRING INTO THE SPACE?

- This is a therapy group and art psychotherapy is primarily a processing therapy. This means that people do sit with complex emotions and challenging events.
- We use the “community view of safety” and ‘dignity of risk’ models (see below).—We’re mindful about how we share details of traumatic events. This is done with care and concern for others whilst also respecting our own right to the stories of our lives.
- All emotions and mental states are welcome in our space as long as people are remaining respectful and not actively self-harming in our space. We welcome emotions here and people do cry, sit with emotions like sadness, anger, loneliness, grief, confusion, happiness and joy.
- Use of language: Our identity is fact, not choice or preference and is honoured here. Abusive or offensive language, including racism, sexism, and homo/queer/trans-phobia, will not be tolerated. This includes intentional misgendering and deadnaming. These are human rights violations, not political opinions.
- We ask that people do not bring alcohol or drugs (including tobacco or vape) into our space or enter the space under the influence of any substance that is not prescribed for a health concern by a doctor. Please treat this space as you would a physical therapy space within the community.

GROUP LOGISTICS AND GUIDELINES

WHEN IS THE GROUP?

- The group schedule will be announced after the intake period. We are hoping to begin mid-June 2025.
- The group takes place online via zoom for 2 hours weekly

HOW WILL WE GET SENT THE LINK TO OUR GROUP SESSION?

- The link will be emailed to you by Mahlie (mahlie@livingartstherapy.com) once your registration is confirmed.
- You will receive a reminder email with the link the morning before each session - the link does not change week to week.

HOW DO I LOG IN?

- Log-in at least 3 mins before we start and make sure you have art supplies ready to go, we will start **on time**
- Zoom can be annoying, if you can't get in, check your details carefully. If it still won't work, email me and I will try my best to help.

CAN I ACCESS THE GROUP FROM ANYWHERE?

- You have to be able to maintain the privacy of your fellow group members. This means you should not be zooming from a public place or with other people around you (this includes children) who could breach the privacy of your group mates. If you have another person in the space with you (even if they are not visible) you will be removed from the group. This is a breach of the privacy act and there are vulnerable people in our group spaces.
- **You should not be zooming from within a mental or public health facility.** This would be against the policy and procedure that all mental health professionals (MHP) agree to. When a person is engaging with more than one therapeutic program, it should be openly communicated with each MHP.
- You can use a laptop, desktop or iPad within the Zoom platform. Phones are highly challenging in this environment. Do not use a proxy program, server or device. These have faults in encryption.

WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC SITUATION WITH BEING “VISIBLE”?

- Your camera must be active at all times. This is a legal requirement when providing a therapy service via telehealth.
- You have two choices – focus the camera on yourself or art-making space.
- You can leave the room/space and not take your camera with you, but you must return before the session ends for a visual check-out.
- You are free to move around as you need – take a break, stretch, get some fresh air – just as long as you return.
- You can let the group know if you need to leave early or take a longer break.
- If you switch off your camera for an extended period of time, we will ask you (via private chat) to switch it on.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I'M LATE

- If you think you might be late, let Mahlie know BEFORE THE GROUP. Email mahlie@livingartstherapy.com
- **If you're unsure if you're “too late”, always come anyway. There is no ‘locking out’ in the group.**
- If you come into the room late, then do so quietly if someone is speaking. If you have any questions, feel free to ask. Most likely, we will catch you up when this is appropriate.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I NEED TO LEAVE EARLY?

- Preferably, let us know beforehand. This way we can inform you when is the best time to go and/or we can provide you with any follow up information you may need.
- Keep in mind your commitment to the space and your respect for other group members.
- Try not to make it a regular thing.

WHAT MATERIALS ARE NEEDED FOR EACH GROUP?

- Whatever you have you can use. There are no set requirements.
- Creative practices are diverse, and we welcome them all! That could be drawing and painting supplies, knitting and crochet projects, textile projects, collage materials, make-up and body art products, sculpture, clay and found objects, colouring books, digital creativity.
- It is helpful to have access to writing materials, such as pens and notepaper.
- Stimming and self-regulating tools are important to have with you, as well as functional needs such as fluids and snacks if needed for regulation and wellness.

HOW DOES THE CHAT FUNCTION WORK?

- You can use the chat to speak to the entire group or to specifically message Mahlie if there is an emergency.
- I prefer to keep private messages at a minimum and cannot actively respond when I am facilitating.
- The chat function is not an avenue for crisis intervention or 1:1 therapy support. If you wish to speak to Mahlie privately you can do this via email or in person (at request) before or after the session begins/ends and we can schedule an individual session (which will incur a fee).

CAN I RECORD (AUDIO OR VIDEO) OR TAKE PHOTOS OF THE GROUP INFO OR MEMBERS?

- Absolutely not.
- This is a breach of Federal and State privacy and confidentiality laws as well as a breach of copyright.
- *This content of the groups, including the members and artworks should **IN NO WAY** be shared or viewed outside of this space.*

DO I HAVE TO COME TO ALL OF THE SESSIONS?

- This group is a closed group, meaning that everyone we start the group with should be aiming to completing it.
- We ask that no one take a space that they cannot commit to holding across the twelve weeks as this restricts access to others.
- There will be no new members entering the group if anyone decides to leave.
- There will be no refunds for sessions that are missed. NDIS participants will be charged as per the NDIA cancellation policy.

ARE WE ALLOWED TO BE FRIENDS WITH EACH OTHER?

- Yes. You are adults. Refer back to the group rules on the last page.

HOW MUCH DOES THE GROUP COST?

- The cost of the group sessions is \$2,160 for all 12 weeks (24 hours of service) which equates to \$180 each week. This includes a digital (print-at-home) participant booklet, activity templates and psychoeducational resources.
- There is an optional \$80 one-off fee for a physical booklet available for those who would like to have materials sent to them pre-printed. It is full colour and bound.
- There is an optional \$100 at-home-art-kit available for those who would like to have materials sent to them.
- Please be aware that because this is a closed group program **refunds will not be available for missed sessions under any circumstances** as we cannot fill a space that becomes vacant.
- Payment terms: Invoices will be sent weekly to all participants (for NDIS participants, invoices can be sent directly to plan managers). Invoices must be paid within 10 days of issue.

WHAT IF I'M ON THE NDIS?

- The above pricing information and no-refund policy still applies.
- You should send this information to your support coordinator or plan manager to ensure that your plan allow you to charge this group.
- The fees for services are not set by the NDIS, this is a private practice service. Please make sure you are aware if the NDIS will require you to co-pay the fee.
- The NDIS may cover this program IF it's covered in your specific plan outline. You need to check with your plan manager.
- There are four typical line codes that can be used for the group (information is correct as of June 2025)
 - ◇ **NDIS line-item no:** 04_104_0136_6_1 (funded under core)
Service: Group Activities in The Community - Standard – Saturday (code will change dependant on day of service)
 - ◇ **NDIS reference:** 01_741_0128_1_3 (funded under core)
Service: Therapy (other professional) session for psychosocial support, planning, wellbeing and capacity building.
 - ◇ **NDIS reference:** 15_610_0128_1_3 (funded under capacity building)
Service: Art psychotherapy session for psychosocial support, planning, wellbeing and capacity building.
 - ◇ **NDIS reference:** 15_043_0128_1_3 (funded under capacity building)
Service: Psychotherapy/counselling session for psychosocial support, planning, wellbeing and capacity building.
- The group ratio will be advised after the intake period and numbers are finalised.
- Please contact Mahlie to discuss accessibility and invoicing.

- Please note: Living Arts Therapy does not engage in Service Agreements with the NDIS. Service Agreements *are not legally required* to access support under the NDIS structure and the decision to not engage in one should not affect or restrict access to support in any way for participants.

THINGS WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND & ACCEPT:

- **We see and celebrate colour and culture.** This is a safe space to be who and how you are. We come into this space seeing your colour, race and culture and celebrating and honouring how that shapes and enhances your lived experience.
- **We see and celebrate lived experience.** The program is facilitated from a place of 'knowing' using our lived experiences. The voice of lived experience is expert, safe, respected and celebrated here.
- **This aims to be an accessible and inclusive space.** Activities are written into the chat and made visible at all times during artmaking for those who have diverse hearing levels. Activities will always be explained verbally for those who have diverse sight range. Any other adjustments can be made where possible and requested. For those with sensory diversity, warnings will be given before loud noises/music.
- **Safe spaces aren't always achievable.** We aim at all times for the groups to be as "safe as possible", using the 'community view of safety' model, but this is not simple. This space is created in a way that reflects our own value systems. This means that we practice from our own values of inclusion, non-judgement, social justice, equity and the belief that all people have the right to safe and expert health care.
- **We must be respectful and kind at all times.** There will be no second chances when it comes to things like racism, queerphobia, xenophobia, classism, ableism, ageism, invalidation, misogyny, misandry, medicalisation, stigmatising or discrimination surrounding political views, religion or culture. Verbal violence, such as body shaming, gaslighting and bullying will not be tolerated.
- **A political view is different from a human rights breach.** Matters of gender, sexuality, religion, race, culture and equity access are NOT POLITICAL VIEWS. They're human rights. A political view is about how much tax you pay, your nation's leader being an idiot, whether parking fines are too expensive or if the roads should be tolled. Breaches of the UN Convention of Human Rights are not "political views". Pronouns and names will be respected and decided by the individual. Any behaviour that seriously invalidates or threatens the life of another person will result in a report to relevant state-based hate-crime organisations.
- **We will run out of time.** It's likely you might not "finish" your artwork. This is common and annoying, we know. We will give you a time frame before we start each task. Try not to let it frustrate you. If possible, schedule some time outside the group to finish your work.
- **We will need to wait for others.** There will be times when you might finish before everyone else. That is fine. There is no need to keep working on something when you are done. Be done. You can start working on something else, go and get a drink, have a stretch, etc and wait for the majority to be ready to share.
- **Decisions are made by majority rule.** We work as a team as much as we can.
- **The process is more important than the product.** Frustration over not being able to create on paper what is in our mind is common. Keep in mind that although the end product matters, what we are trying to capture is how you feel and think whilst making art, let that be your focus.
- **Praise for art skill and technique is not encouraged.** This is not an art class. You won't ever hear us comment on your art skill. That's not because we are unkind, it's simply not why we are here. And also, we already think you're all remarkably talented. There is no such thing as "good" or "bad" art. Art is subjective and personal.
- **Do NOT compare your art skill and technique to others or make judgemental comments about yourself or others.** This is simply self-invalidation and it's exactly what we are trying to learn not to do. You are you. You draw how you draw; you paint how you paint. That is just the facts. You can of course make art about this self-judgement and discuss how you notice these judgemental thoughts.
- **You can comment on the artwork of others and this is encouraged.** You *can* make comments about the colours used or the images created, you can complement the work, just do it in a way that brings in the actual aim of the activity. *Good example – "I love the way you used the ocean as a metaphor here, and that teal colour is wonderful". Bad example – "You draw so well. I could never draw like that. I wish I had the talent you have."*
- **You can ask questions about art materials or technique.** This is fine. In a normal group you would be watching each other create and would learn by osmosis, just make sure it doesn't dominate the conversation.
- **Different personalities and ways of being might cause discomfort.** This is normal in groups and is to be expected. Not everyone will be "our people". It's important to stay respectful and kind at all times. Learning to stay calm and kind in these situations is part of the skills we are building.
- **This is a space to critically reflect, question and be curious.** Ask us why, how come and who said. This is not a perfect program. By discussing what works and what doesn't, in respectful ways, means we all learn.
- **All people are seen, heard, celebrated, welcomed and loved in this space.**

COMMUNITY VIEW OF 'SAFETY'

- If it's not safe for everyone, then it's not safe.
- We're open to being reminded of safe sharing practices by other group members.
- We're supportive of group members who need to speak up if they feel unsafe.
- We understand we have shared experiences that may not need to be detailed in this space.
- Sharing safely means we don't describe traumatic events. These stories are precious and best had with your private mental health professionals, but we can talk about the *feelings* connected to them. (This is for both verbal and visual sharing. It might mean we choose to practice community safety and don't share actual imagery, but describe its meaning.)

A quick self-check-in can help. Ask yourself:

1. **Does this help me?**
2. **Does this help someone else?**
3. **If I was hearing this from someone else how would this make me feel?**
4. **How can I explain myself without describing or detailing events? What emotions can I share instead?**

DIGNITY OF RISK FRAMEWORK

- Aims to restore empowerment and choice to people in distress.
- Places the responsibility of safety with the person experiencing distress directly.
- Accepts that people may exercise the choice to end their life and it is not the responsibility of any other human to remove this choice with excessive or unwanted force, punishment or control.
- Allows us to sit alongside a person experiencing suicidality calmly and openly and respond in ways that move beyond traditional fear-based attempts to control, manipulate or "fix" a person.
- Is a non-punitive and non-coercive practice.
- Allows us to hold the strength, skills and ability of the person experiencing distress and support them to identify their own needs, wants, requests for guidance or support.
- Allows us to provide optional resources to people and support them to reach for them in ways that work for them.

PROSPECTIVE BOUNDARIES FOR IN-SESSION SPACES

What we ask of you:

- 'What is discussed in the room, stays in the room': Maintain confidentiality, therefore what's discussed in group should not be repeated or shared with others beyond the group.
- Talk about yourself and your experiences. Share your feelings and experiences. Sharing is encouraged, though not compulsory.
- Being heard and hearing others is supportive and shows respect and compassion towards others: Listen intentionally to everyone as we can learn from each other.
- Avoid interrupting others: One person speaks at a time and avoid other (chat) conversations whilst participants are talking.
- Everyone is welcome and valued here: This is an open and inclusive, non-judgmental space where we are free to be who and how we are without fear.
- Turn mobile phones to silent and do not have them in your immediate area during group.
- Participants should have their microphone switched off when others are sharing to avoid background noise interference
- Participants can signal wanting to share verbally or by using the "raise hand" feature on zoom.
- Participants can offer support to other participants outside of our space as long as this is mutually agreed to and feels safe for everyone
- Advise facilitator of any intimate relationships you have with another participant: This includes siblings, family members (including chosen family), partners, and sexual relationships. These will not cause exclusion automatically.
- We are aware of judgements (including self-judgement) around perceived art making "skills" or "ability" and work mindfully to avoid making statements that praise one form of expression over another. All forms of creativity are powerful, important and welcome here.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO CONTACT YOU?

- Email: mahlie@livingartstherapy.com