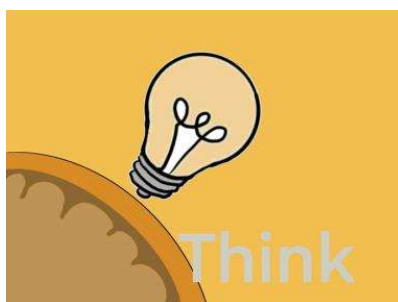


Stigma

Stigma is a mark of social disgrace that sets a person or class of people apart from those around them. Autistic people often experience stigma because their way of being in the world is different to that of non-autistic people. The application of stigma to autistic people can arise from the stereotyping of autistic traits in the media, books and film. The stereotype of an autistic person is of someone who “lacks social skills” and has “communication difficulties”, talks incessantly about their favourite topic and has no understanding of other people’s points of view. These stereotypes are wide of the mark. Autistic people’s way of being in the world may be different to that of non-autistic people in part because they are dealing with the experience of being stigmatised.



Autistic people may mask or camouflage their autism in order to offset the marginalising impact of stigma and so be able to take part in activities. This means their real needs may go unnoticed and hence unmet. Masking is damaging to our health and wellbeing.



When people are stigmatised and experience poorer outcomes because of their differences (such as disability, race, gender, neurology), they may feel worthless which in turn can lead to shame. Autistic people have poorer outcomes at school, in relationships and in the labour market because of the stigma they experience.



Stigma involves making assumptions about what a person is capable of or why they may be doing something. One thing that each of us can do to avoid stigmatising autistic people is to ask the person what they are capable of, give them an opportunity to show us what they are capable of ask them or why they are doing something. In other words, to simply engage with the autistic person.