

Interests and hobbies

As you go through your journey you may hear terms like 'special interest', 'intense interests', 'fixated interests', or even 'restricted interests'. These terms are used to describe an intense or passionate focus on things of interest. While everyone has interests and hobbies the difference here is the frequency, intensity and function it serves in a person's life.

An example that was shared to differentiate the two was from a young autistic man who took up tennis. Initially he played tennis twice a week which developed quickly into him knowing the names of all the British tennis players, collecting a wide array of tennis rackets and watching old Wimbledon repeats on TV for four hours a day. He would also speak of very little else but tennis.

These types of intense interests are often vitally important in the person's life and serve a very specific function. While everyone is different, some reasons include:

- Creating a sense of happiness and fun.
- Calming mechanism
- Blocking out negative thoughts.
- To learn
- Creating a sense of predictability in an often-chaotic world.
- Reducing social isolation.
- Providing a safety mechanism in social interactions.
- Building confidence and self- esteem.

Points to consider:

- Start by understanding the importance of the interest in the person's life. Without this fundamental understanding and respect, you may find it difficult to offer meaningful support.
- You may be able to use the interest as an opportunity for learning but be aware that some people may not want to use their interest in this way. It is important to be respectful of this.
- If the person wants to connect with others, it may be worth finding groups that focus on the specific interest. This will provide a safe basis in which to develop connections and form relationships.

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- Interests can be used as tools for self- regulation. Are there ways in which you can include this into daily life?
 - Be respectful of interests and try not to use them as sanctions and rewards. For some the activity may be their only coping strategy, using it in this way will take the security and safety it provides.
 - Remember that sometimes these interests can turn into obsessions and may have a negative impact on their life. It is important at this point to seek appropriate professional support.
 - Also remember that the interest may serve as the main source of fun. It may be difficult for you to understand this, but you need to try and see things from the person's perspective.

