

EXPLORE YOUR SELF

Summary of the project

Autistic Young Adults often face many obstacles on their way to become independent. Many resort to the use of assistive technologies to aid them with these obstacles, but these are often not tailored well enough to the needs and wishes of the autistic individual, if at all. Even assistive technologies specifically designed for autistic people often fail to meet their goal, which is problematic.

The Design Your Life (DYL) project aims to support and empower these individuals by supplying them with design tools, allowing them to create their own solutions. To streamline their design process, by going through a design process together with a close one, called the co-designer, without the need for an external designer. The DYL toolkit guides the user and their assigned co-designer throughout the entirety of the design process in the form of a user guide.

There is already a lot of research and literature available focussed on autism. Unfortunately, the majority focusses on the medical definition of autism. This definition explains autism as a sum of deficits, listing difficulties with communication, social interaction and the processing of stimuli. This is a shame, as the autistic individual has a disharmonious profile, meaning they may struggle in certain areas, but often excel in others. When looking at autism as a mere deficit, the value these individuals have is completely lost.

Being diagnosed with autism myself, I wanted to change this, or at least contribute to change in this specific area. Literature research was conducted to become even more familiar with autism, design frameworks and neurodiversity. To do so, I combined the existing literature with my own experience, the experience and feedback of fellow autistic young adults and the foundation of the Design Your Life toolkit. From this foundation, I designed an addition to the toolkit in the form of a booklet, called the Explore Your Self booklet.

A more recently developed perspective on autism is neurodiversity. Neurodiversity describes autism as a different way of functioning instead of a deficit. This means that it still acknowledges the difficulties that the autistic individual may have, but also the skillset the individual may have, making sure the aforementioned value is not lost.

The booklet was developed by first doing an extensive literature study, followed by meeting with the young adults at the Dr. Leo Kannerhuis. With this input, I designed a first, basal prototype of the booklet. This was then tested with another group of autistic young adults, care professionals and experience experts. Their feedback was finally processed into a redesigned prototype, which is also the end result of this project.

The main goal of the booklet is to inform the user about neurodiversity and activate them to reflect this perspective on themselves and their own diagnosis. At first, this is done in a quite general sense, but then followed by a link to the DYL toolkit. This is achieved by relating their neurodiverse traits to those of a designer and thinking which of their skills and so-called pitfalls (difficulties) could be relevant and used in the context of a design process.

The booklet guides the user through a short process with some information and some activities, aimed to break the stigma around autism and convince the autistic individual that being autistic is not just a deficit, but that it is a part of you as a person and something you do not have to hide.