

Autism

What is autism?

Autism is a developmental condition which affects how a person interprets and interacts with the world. You may hear it referred to as autism spectrum condition or autism spectrum disorder. The terminology that an autistic person uses to describe their condition (and which you should use when discussing it with them) should be up to them and what they feel comfortable with. For ease, we use the term autism throughout this factsheet.

While all people with autism share certain difficulties, they will be affected in different ways and to varying degrees – hence the term ‘autism spectrum’, which we will look at in more detail later.

Autism itself is not a learning disability, although some people with autism may also have a learning disability (or cognitive impairment), meaning they are likely to need more support in different areas of their life. Others have average or above intelligence, which can initially mask some of their difficulties. Other neurodiverse conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia, are sometimes associated with autism and in particular with Asperger syndrome.

Autism is also not a mental health condition, but again, some people with it may also experience mental health issues, such as anxiety.

How common is autism?

In the UK, it is estimated that 1.1% of people have a diagnosis of autism, which equates to around 700,000 people. Between three and four times more males are diagnosed than females, although it is not completely clear why this is. The difference may be explained by the way that symptoms present differently in boys and girls. Girls are thought to be better able to mask symptoms and mimic ‘normal’ behaviour, meaning they are not referred for assessment as often.

The language we use when talking about autism

When talking about disability, and neurodiversity in particular, there are conflicting views about whether person-first language (for example, ‘a person with autism’) or identity-first language (for example, ‘an autistic person’) should be used. Neurodivergent people usually prefer identity-first language.

You will notice in this factsheet that we use both. It is always best to ask the individual how they prefer to refer to themselves when talking about their condition.

A note on Asperger syndrome

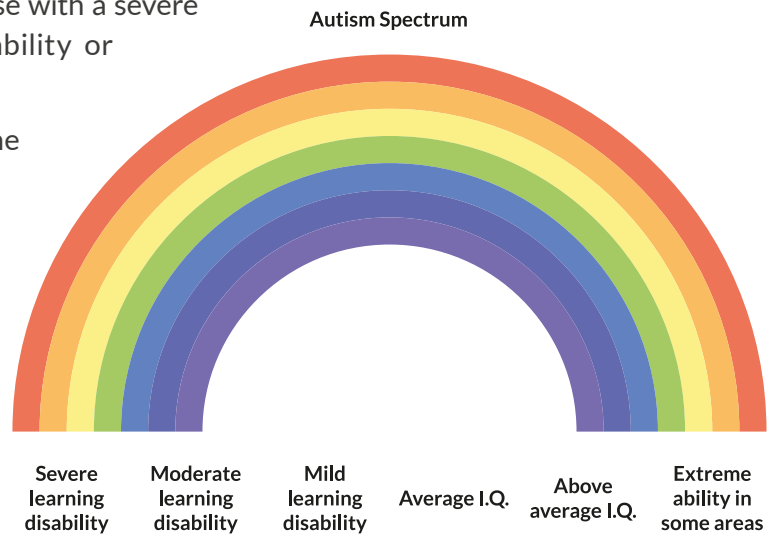
Some autistic people describe themselves as having Asperger syndrome (or Asperger’s). This term was previously used as a diagnostic term for people with autism who have normal language development and average or above average IQ but who struggle with social communication and show some repetitive behaviour and a special interest in a particular subject. It is not a term used in diagnosis today, and many people who fit the profile for Asperger syndrome are now being diagnosed with autism instead. Some people with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome may choose to keep using the term, while others may prefer to refer to themselves as having autism or being on the autism spectrum.

Understanding the autism spectrum

People with autism are referred to as being on the autism spectrum. The two diagrams below help explain what we mean by the term 'spectrum'.

The first diagram, which depicts a rainbow, shows that autism can affect people across all intelligences, from those with a severe learning disability to those with extreme ability or above-average IQ.

When describing where somebody falls on the autism spectrum, the terms 'mild' and 'severe' or even 'high functioning' and 'low functioning' are sometimes used. However, some argue that labelling people who have autism in this way is unhelpful, as it assumes that people who are 'high functioning' are only mildly affected by their condition, when this may in fact not be the case. Rather, they may just have been able to use their average or above-average intelligence to develop better coping strategies and mask the impact.



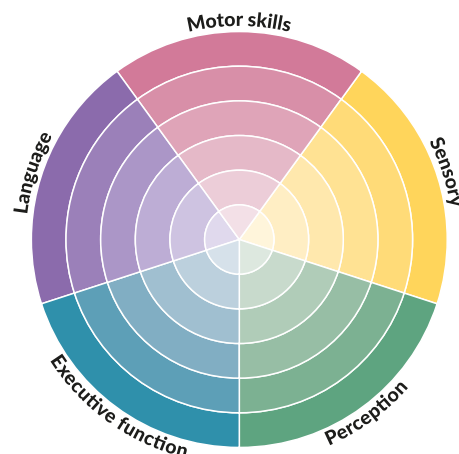
The below diagram, which is based on a design by autistic comic artist and illustrator Rebecca Burgess, offers a more helpful way of looking at the autism spectrum that avoids making generalised assumptions. It shows how while we often think of the autism spectrum as linear, it is instead best depicted as a circle. The circle idea reflects the fact that although people with autism share some common areas of difficulty, their pattern, or 'traits', will be different, and they will therefore be affected differently by their condition.

For example, some autistic people might have strengths in language and be confident in conversation but may experience sensory difficulties, so would likely struggle in a loud and busy environment. Whereas others with the condition would feel fine in such an environment but may have real difficulty starting a conversation.

What people think the autism spectrum looks like:



What it actually looks like:



What skills and strengths do autistic people have?

People with autism have a different way of thinking, which can be a distinct advantage in the workplace. Indeed, many companies specifically recruit employees who are on the autism spectrum because of the strengths and skills they can bring to the table.

Strong attention to detail

Autism is associated with the ability to pay close attention to detail, which means people with the condition are often better able to spot patterns in information and pick out errors that others may miss.

Hyperfocus and strong memory skills

While people with autism might find the formal and informal communication elements of work a challenge, this does mean that they are less likely to be distracted by social dynamics and 'office politics'. As a result, they are often highly productive.

They also often have an excellent memory for facts and display a high level of concentration and focus, especially if a task is of significance or interest to them. Many autistic people have what is known as a 'special interest' – a topic that they are intensely interested in and passionate about – and will go on to develop a highly detailed knowledge of that subject. These traits and abilities are highly transferable to and valued in the workplace, especially in research roles and jobs where a high level of expert knowledge is needed.

Diligence and accuracy

Autistic people usually prefer routine and structure and are known to be thorough, methodical and meticulous about routines, rules and accuracy. They therefore tend to be very diligent and precise in their work and are likely to be good at following specific instructions or processes and well suited to structured or repetitive tasks that others may not enjoy. These same characteristics also mean they tend to be reliable, conscientious and consistent.



What challenges do people with autism encounter?

Autism affects how an individual communicates with and relates to other people and how they make sense of the world around them. It impacts people differently, so it is important not to assume someone will experience all of the potential challenges below. You will need to take time to find out from them and anyone supporting them about the particular difficulties they face.

Communication and social interaction

Many people with autism find social communication and interaction difficult, particularly non-verbal communication. For example, they can find it hard to interpret body language, facial expressions and tone of voice and often don't use these in the same way as other people, either. They may also struggle to maintain eye contact and actually find it quite uncomfortable.

The challenges autistic people experience in interpreting non-verbal information can affect their ability to notice social cues, read people's reactions and understand how their messages are being received. This may mean they struggle with turn-taking in conversation and may talk for too long or not realise they have chosen an inappropriate topic to speak about.

These difficulties with communication and social interaction can also make relationships challenging, in a number of different ways. In the past, it was thought that people with autism did not feel emotion or empathy, but actually, that is not the case. It is now understood that they simply struggle to express their emotions in the same way as other people. Small talk is not something that many autistic people understand or can partake in, and seeking comfort and affection does not always come naturally, so they can often find themselves on the edges of social groups. They tend to interpret language literally, so may also find it hard to understand jokes, humour, sarcasm, colloquialisms and sayings. Linked to this, it can also be difficult for some people to understand words with double meanings or the difference between similar-sounding words.

Flexible thinking and managing change

Autism is also associated with difficulties in social imagination and flexible thinking, which can have an impact on communication and relationships, too. It is not easy for people with autism to understand what someone might be thinking, why they act a certain way and how others' views and opinions could be different from their own. As noted above, some autistic people have an intense interest in a certain topic and go on to develop detailed knowledge of that subject. While this can be a fantastic asset, it can also pose issues if this subject dominates their focus and affects their ability to concentrate on other necessary tasks.

If you consider the fact that the unwritten rules of social interaction are a bit of a mystery to people with autism and add in their tendency towards inflexible or rigid thinking, it is no wonder that their condition can lead to a need for predictability and routine, as well as difficulties with change. Autistic people can really struggle with a change of activity or when something occurs outside of their normal routine, and this may be linked to their inability to imagine the outcome of that change. It is therefore not easy for them to prepare for change and plan for the future, and they may have trouble coping with new or unfamiliar situations. This difficulty, in particular, can be linked to high levels of anxiety.

Sensory sensitivity and managing emotions

One of the lesser-known effects of autism is sensory sensitivity – where people are either more or less sensitive than others to sensory input, such as light, noise, touch or temperature. People may experience over-sensitivity (hypersensitivity) or under-sensitivity (hyposensitivity) to one or more of the seven senses: taste, touch, sound, vision, smell, body awareness (proprioception) and balance. For example:

- Someone who is hypersensitive to sound may find a fire alarm ringing physically painful
- Someone who is visually hypersensitive may find a room overwhelming if it has a lot of colours and posters
- Someone who is hypersensitive to touch may not be able to wear certain fabrics
- Someone who is hyposensitive to touch could burn themselves on a hot iron or stove without realising
- Someone with hyposensitive body awareness may bump into people or objects.

Some autistic people may also experience sensory overload, where they feel constantly bombarded by sound, light, colours, patterns, numbers, temperatures, textures and smells and become overwhelmed. It is as if they have no sensory filter, which means their brain tries to process all the information they are receiving at the same time.

It can be difficult for autistic people to recognise a build-up of emotion or manage their emotions. Some people express emotion through repetitive movement known as stimming, which could manifest as rocking, hand flapping or using a fidget toy. On occasion, for some people, emotional or sensory overload can cause either a meltdown or a shutdown. A meltdown could present as a verbal or physical outburst, whereas a shutdown is the opposite – people may go quiet or become passive and withdrawn.



Other challenges

Autistic people may also struggle with confidence and self-esteem. They may avoid social situations, doubt their own abilities, or show a fear of trying new things due to their difficulties coping with change. There is some evidence that people with autism are at higher risk of developing an anxiety disorder or depression.

Helpful tips for supporting someone with autism at work

Whether you have an employee, colleague or customer with autism, there are some simple things you can do to make their life easier and support them with some of the key areas they may struggle with.

Distractions and sensory stimulation

When allocating workspaces, try to minimise distractions and sensory stimulation as much as you can. Consider the following:

- Avoid bright strip lights and close blinds if there is bright sunlight
- Remove unnecessary clutter from desks and remove or cover any posters
- Where possible, shut windows and doors or turn off air conditioning to reduce noise
- Provide a quiet area for them to work in if they begin to feel overwhelmed by the noise in a shared office space
- Try to avoid the use of strong smells, for example, from air fresheners or cleaning products.

Routine and structure

- Try to keep to the same days and times for meetings and ensure these start promptly
- Set a clear structure for meetings and stick to it
- If plans need to change, try to give plenty of notice and a clear explanation of the reasons.

Organisation and time management

- Be clear about any tasks you need them to complete - break these down into small steps
- Help them with planning and prioritising their work
- Highlight important information or appointments by writing them down
- If they need reminding about meetings and tasks, encourage the use of diaries and checklists.

Communication

- Provide information visually as well as verbally, for example, through handouts and diagrams, and provide easy-read versions of more complex documents
- Be clear, precise and direct in how you communicate
- Use plain, literal English - avoid terms with multiple meanings
- Avoid idioms, metaphors, sarcasm and other turns of phrase
- Don't rely on body language or tone of voice - say what you mean
- Avoid abstract terms and hypothetical questions or scenarios
- Allow plenty of time for them to give answers to questions - avoid repeating the question.

Social interaction

- Be aware that they may find social situations difficult and may actively avoid them
- Support them to integrate into a new team or group; consider allocating a work buddy whom they can speak with about any concerns or difficulties they encounter
- Be prepared to discuss what is appropriate or expected behaviour in a given situation, as they may not instinctively know.

Remember, the individual is the expert in their condition – if in doubt, check with them!