

What is autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a lifelong developmental disorder that affects the way a person:

- **Communicates and interacts with others**
- **Experiences their senses**
- **Thinks and behaves flexibly**

This means that autistic people often have difficulties with everyday life. Some people experience extreme anxiety. Many find change very difficult. However, with the right understanding and support, autistic people can lead full and rewarding lives.

Autism can affect people of any intellectual ability and is sometimes accompanied with other diagnoses, like “associated learning difficulties”.

There are lots of names used to describe autism; Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), High Functioning Autism, Asperger Syndrome, and the Autism Spectrum. In recent years the separate diagnoses of autism, Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism have been brought under the one diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. This means that children and adults who receive a diagnosis now are usually diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism is referred to as a spectrum because each person is different. But it is also important to remember that each person will have their own strengths and weaknesses. For example, a person could be classed as extremely intellectually able, but still not be able to cross the road on their own because they cannot judge the speed and distance of cars. Another person may be completely nonverbal, but have excellent computer skills, allowing them to communicate and advocate.

A third person may have severe learning difficulties but can complete a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle extremely quickly. Understanding each person’s strengths and weaknesses allows us to support them appropriately and can help them to find work which is suited to them.

Key facts about autism:

- It is life-long.
- It affects people from different backgrounds all over the world.
- The brain of an autistic person develops and functions in a different way from the brain of a non-autistic person.
- Autistic people tend to see, hear, taste, touch and smell the world differently, their balance can also be affected.
- Autism is genetic; it can affect more than one family member.

Some autistic people may find it hard to:

- Make sense of the world
- Make conversation
- Understand some of the subtleties of social language
- Be adaptable to new situations
- Understand emotions
- Reason and make decisions
- Maintain good mental health and wellbeing.

Autism and the senses

Many autistic people have difficulty processing everyday sensory information like sounds, sights and smells. They might be over- or under-sensitive to any of their senses, and this can have a profound effect on a person's life. Small changes to the environment can make a big difference.

Special interests

Autism can also mean people develop a particular strength or focused interest. Sometimes, the autistic person can appear to be "obsessed" with their special interest. However, autistic people will often say their interest brings them pleasure and allows them to relax. When they are anxious, they may feel they need to spend more time on their special interest to cope. Understanding the person you support will help to ensure their special interest is well managed, bringing them pleasure, calm and even sometimes employment. In some cases, a person's special interest leads them to become quite famous, for example the artist Stephen Wiltshire or the scientist Temple Grandin.

Tips to support an autistic person

- Keep language simple and allow time for a response.
- Say the person's name to get their attention.
- Explain social rules and how to behave in different social situations as clearly as possible.
- Provide structure and routine to give predictability. This will help reduce anxiety.
- Some people really benefit from visual support like symbols, pictures and photographs to add meaning to the spoken or written word.
- Social stories' can be helpful in preparing a person with autism for a change.
- Look at the environment to see if it is creating difficulties for autistic people, can you change anything?
- Always try to be prepared: tell people with autism in advance about possible sensory stimuli they may experience in different environments.