

Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. It is the result of a neurological condition which affects how the brain processes information, particularly how you communicate and interact with the world.

There are approximately 700,000 people in the UK with autism, more than 1 in 100 people. People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can have autism, although it appears to affect more men than women.

The exact cause of autism is still unknown. However, research suggests there is no single cause but rather a combination of genetic and environmental factors which account for changes in brain development. Autism is not caused by upbringing, social circumstances or by any fault of the individual. There are different strategies and approaches to support people with autism and enable learning and development. Autism typically appears during the first two years of life.

Autism is part of the spectrum which is sometimes referred to as autism spectrum condition, or ASC. The word 'spectrum' is used because, whilst all people with autism share areas of difficulty, each person with autism is unique and their condition will affect them in different ways.

Characteristics of Autism:

Social communication

People with autism have difficulties understanding and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal language. They can find it difficult to understand gesture, tone of voice, facial expressions and jokes and sarcasm.

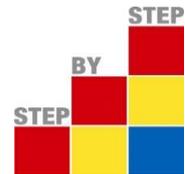
Some people with autism may not speak, or have fairly limited speech and have limited comprehension of language. Some autistic people prefer or need to use alternative means of communication themselves, such as sign language or visual symbols.

Others will have good language skills, but they may still find it hard to understand the reciprocal nature of conversations, perhaps repeating what the other person has just said (this is known as echolalia) or inappropriately talking at length about their own interests.

Social Interaction

People with autism often have difficulty expressing their feelings and also have problems recognising or understanding others. This can make it difficult for them to fit in socially and can make them appear insensitive and socially inappropriate.

They may:



- not understand the unwritten social rules which come naturally to most people. For example, they may stand too close to another person, or start an inappropriate subject of conversation
- appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling
- prefer to spend time alone rather than seeking out the company of other people
- not seek comfort from other people
- Difficulties with social interaction can mean that people with autism find it hard to form friendships; some may want to interact with other people and make friends, but may be unsure how to go about this.

Social Imagination

Social imagination allows us to understand and predict other people's behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine. Difficulties with social imagination mean that people with autism find it hard to:

- understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and action
- predict what will happen next, or what could happen next
- understand the concept of danger, for example that running on to a busy road poses a threat to them
- engage in imaginative play and activities: children with autism may enjoy some imaginative play but prefer to act out the same scenes each time
- prepare for change and plan for the future
- cope in new or unfamiliar situations

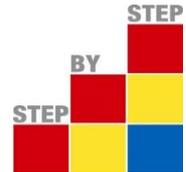
Difficulties with social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination; many people with autism are very creative and may be, for example, accomplished artists, musicians or writers.

Restricted and Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to people with autism, who often prefer to have a fixed daily routine so that they know what is going to happen from one day to the next. This routine can extend to always wanting to travel the same way to and from school or work, or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

Rules can also be important; it may be difficult for a person with autism to take a different approach to something once they have been taught the 'right' way to do it. People with autism may not be comfortable with the idea of change, but can cope well if they are prepared for it in advance.

Many people with autism have special interests which they pursue with great intensity, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong, and can be anything from art or music, to trains, numbers or computers. These interests can lead people with autism into study, paid work, volunteering or different occupations.



Sensory Processing

People with autism may experience some form of sensory processing difficulty. This can occur in one or more of the senses including sound, touch, taste, smell, light, colour, temperature or pain. A person's senses are either intensified (hyper-sensitive) or under-sensitive (hypo-sensitive).

People who are hypo-sensitive may not feel pain or extremes of temperature. Some may rock, spin or flap their hands to stimulate sensation, to help with balance and posture or to deal with stress and anxiety.

People with sensory processing difficulties may also find it harder to use their body awareness system. This system tells us where our bodies are in relation to the immediate environment. For those with reduced body awareness, it can be harder to navigate rooms, avoid obstacles, stand at an appropriate distance from other people and carry out 'fine motor' tasks such as tying shoelaces.

A sensory overload can cause stress, anxiety and physical pain which can lead to withdrawal and challenging behaviours.

Other Conditions

Other conditions which are sometimes associated with autism include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia, epilepsy and mental health conditions.