

Autism and The Autism Spectrum

This handout is designed for someone seeking a starting point. You might be someone who has recently received a diagnosis of autism, identify with the label or characteristics, a supporter of someone. This handout will provide you with some information regarding autism and the spectrum.

The autism spectrum being the intensity and variety of characteristics which a person might present with. Before 2013, the autism spectrum was an umbrella term of different labels such as Asperger's syndrome, atypical autism, Rett's syndrome. Now, these terms have been removed leaving one label of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The intensity of the characteristics defines the level of support which is given within health and social services (levels 1, 2 and 3).

Some Terminology

- Cognitive style – a person's style of thinking, reasoning, imagining and processing.
- Communicative style – a person's way of communicating.
- Neurotypical – in this case, someone considered to not be autistic.
- Sensory profile – how our different senses (sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing, balance, body position etc.) work within our body and environment.



What Autism Is and Isn't

- An individual cognitive and communication style.
- It is not bad parenting or lack of boundaries
- Individual's with autism have a unique sensory profile, characterised by intense sensitivity or intense lack of different senses.
- The environment and support networks can have a significant impact on how autistic traits can impact an individual.
- Individuals with autism do not lack empathy or the ability to feel. In fact many individuals have heightened sensitivity to others and their own feelings. There may be noticeable differences in how they communicate empathy and emotions compared with neurotypical individuals.

Characteristics of Autism

Social communication and interaction

- Difficulty in sharing social interaction with others.
- Difficulty understanding and applying contexts in a way neurotypical people might.
- Difficulty applying facial expressions to relevant contexts.

Repetitive, restricted interests

- Repetitive motor movements e.g. hand flapping.
- Extreme sensitivity or lack of, with regards to sensory stimuli.
- Highly restricted interests in a particular subject or object.

Anxiety and Autism

Many people consider anxiety to be a 'co-morbid' condition of autism. Of course this insinuates both autism and anxiety are disabilities. Where they do have disabling traits in some ways, they are not completely disabling.

Anxiety is one of our most ancient defence mechanisms. It has many important purposes such as helping us know when we are in danger or should evaluate a situation.

However, it can become out of control. There are many reasons for excessive anxiety. This can be from genetic, past history to specific events. For some, (not all) individuals with autism anxiety can come as a result of conflict between their cognitive style and the environment. For example, when you understand the world through structure, predictability and functionality, it can be unsettling when life changes rapidly.

Considerations for Supporters

- Allow for processing time – you may have to give longer for someone to respond to a comment or a task.
- Provide structure and security where you can.
- Have open communication about changes, make plans to face unpredictability together.
- Be mindful of sensory needs, many websites and support networks for sensory integration. But ultimately learning and understanding what environments help and hinder can improve quality of life.
- Use specialist interests to your advantage – if trains is an interesting topic utilise it to explain certain topics such anxiety or distress for example.