

Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. It is a spectrum condition meaning that individuals will share certain difficulties, but their condition will affect them in different ways. Some people with autism require lifelong care, whereas others may require little or no extra support. It is estimated that one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum. Below is a list of difficulties autistic people may share:

1) Social Communication

Autistic people have difficulty with interpreting verbal and non-verbal language. Some autistic people are unable to speak or have limited speech while other autistic people have very good language skills but struggle to understand tone, sarcasm or idioms.

2) Social interaction

People on the autism spectrum often have difficulty recognising and understanding emotions (both their own emotions and others' feelings). Complex and abstract concepts like love and fear can be overwhelming for autistic people to understand. This might make people with autism:

- appear insensitive
- have difficulty forming friendships
- seek time alone
- appear to behave in a socially inappropriate way

3) Repetitive and restrictive behaviour (Social Imagination)

People with autism often prefer to have set routines. Their thinking styles display a degree of inflexibility and focus. This might manifest in them wearing the same clothes, travelling the same route to work every day or eating exactly the same food for breakfast. Autistic people can become highly focused on particular topics or interests; their attention to detail and focus can be used as a learning strength. However, sometimes, this restrictive behaviour can mean:

- repetitive activities which may be obsessive
- refusing to give attention to a topic that doesn't interest them
- difficulty seeing another person's point of view
- a lack of understanding that other people may not share their interests
- becoming anxious and distressed with unexpected changes in routine.

4) Over sensitivity or under sensitivity to light, sound taste or touch

Autistic people can have difficulty in processing and filtering out sensory information. They may have an over or under sensitivity to sound, touch, smell, light, colours,

temperature or pain. For example, the noise in a shop might be unbearably loud and distracting to someone with autism, causing anxiety and sometimes physical pain.

5) Extreme anxiety and Meltdowns

Individuals may also suffer from anxiety and low self-esteem, particularly in social situations or when facing change. If everything becomes too much for an autistic person, they can go into meltdown or shutdown. A meltdown manifests itself as temporary loss of behavioural control, whereas a shutdown appears more passive to the outside world: the person might go quiet or 'switch off'. Meltdowns and shutdowns are intense and exhausting experiences.

Asperger syndrome

In the past Asperger syndrome and autism disorder were classed as separate disorders; they were classed as sub-categories within the diagnosis of Pervasive Development Disorders. This is no longer the case, and both are now under the category of autism spectrum disorder. Asperger syndrome is considered to be on the higher end of the autistic spectrum. Individuals are usually of average or above average intelligence.

Implications for learning

- Learners with autism benefit from structured learning activities that have clear objectives with the session divided into short, focused tasks. This helps the pupil feel secure because uncertainty and lack of structure increases anxiety, which will have a negative impact on attention, concentration, communication and learning.
- An impaired ability to link concrete learning experiences to abstract concepts impacts on the learner's ability to apply learning to new contexts. They may need to learn the same kind of skills in multiple contexts. Over-learning is necessary to help secure knowledge into long-term memory which can take longer.
- Learners may also have difficulty in finding the appropriate words to say and in how to verbally communicate something. This is why images or symbols help support communication.
- Auditory processing and memory issues may mean the learner does not hear what is said to them correctly. They may hear and latch on to one piece of information out of a longer list of information.
- Group work can be more challenging for people with autism. Clear rules, boundaries and roles in paired and group working can provide a structure.
- People with autism may not feel comfortable with other people in their personal space; they may be more sensitive to the proximity of others or how another person approaches them. Similarly, they may have a poor awareness

of the personal space of others and the social conventions around this. They may move in too close to others.

- Making a transition to college, university or starting on an apprenticeship will always cause a young person anxiety and stress, but this will be amplified in an individual with autism.
- Develop a profile of the learner, identifying likes and dislikes, as well as areas that could create anxiety. This should also include support strategies.

Tips for sensory issues

Many people with autism find it difficult to filter out background sights, sounds, scents and touch, which can build up to a sensory overload. Many learners may be over-sensitive, known as hypersensitivity or under-sensitive, known as hyposensitivity. A learner with autism may show discomfort by covering both ears and may show an emotional response.

- Provide headphones that cover the ears to block out background noise.
- Set up a work area with no visual distractions.

Tips for communication

- Before speaking, use the learner's name to get their attention. Make sure they have heard and acknowledged you, although remember not to insist on eye contact.
- Think about your vocabulary. Speak clearly and concisely.
- Give one instruction at a time. When they have completed that task give out the next one.

Tips to format written instructions

- Left align all text.
- Keep text to a minimum on work sheets.
- Remove unnecessary borders, graphics and formatting.
- Use numbered lists to sequence steps.
- Use relevant images, symbols or icons that match the text.