



AUTISM AWARENESS FACTSHEET

Introduction

Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how the individual relates to people, situations and their immediate environment. The term **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** is often used because the impact of autism varies from person to person.

The word “spectrum” is used because, while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty (outlined below), their condition will affect them in very different ways. Some people are able to live relatively “everyday” lives: others will require a lifetime of specialist support.

Autism affects the way a person interacts and communicates with others and experiences the world around them. 1 in every 100 people in the UK is on the autism spectrum. There are an estimated 20,000 people in Northern Ireland with autism (more than one in every 100 people). This means if you are not autistic yourself, you may know someone who is.

According to current diagnostic criteria, people with autism show a set of core behaviours or characteristics, including difficulties in social communication and rigid and repetitive ways of thinking and behaving. Unusual reactions to some sensations (such as the feel of clothes or the smell of perfume) are common, as are co-occurring mental health problems, especially anxiety and attentional difficulties.

There is, however, much variation in the way that children, young people and adults with autism manifest these different behaviours. Some individuals may also have a severe learning / intellectual disability, while others will have average or advanced intellectual abilities. For some individuals, spoken language is limited or absent altogether while for others, speech can be fluent, but their use of language to communicate with others can seem awkward and often one-sided to non-autistic people. Some individuals want to be around others and to have friends, while others prefer to be alone. The autism spectrum therefore includes children, young people and adults who vary considerably. In addition, the capabilities and difficulties of any individual will also change with age, waxing and waning as the person develops.

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism. While there are similarities with autism, people with Asperger syndrome have fewer problems with speaking and are often of

average, or above average, intelligence. They do not usually have the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism, but they may have specific learning difficulties. These may include dyslexia and dyspraxia or other conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and epilepsy.

With the right support and encouragement, people with Asperger syndrome can lead full and independent lives. There are three main areas of difficulty which all people with autism share. They are:

Difficulty with social communication

People with autism have difficulties with both verbal and non verbal language. Many have a very literal understanding of language and think people always mean exactly what they say. They can find it difficult to use or understand:

- Facial expressions or tone of voice
- Jokes and sarcasm
- Common phrases or sayings.

People with autism will usually understand what other people say to them but may prefer to use alternative means of communication themselves such as sign language or visual symbols. Others will have good language skills, but may still find it hard to understand the 'give-and-take' nature of conversations, perhaps repeating what the other person has just said or talking at length about their own interests.

It helps if other people speak in a clear, consistent way and give people with autism the time to process what has been said to them.

Difficulty with social interaction

People with autism often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings and expressing their own, which can make it more difficult for them to fit in socially. They may:

- Not understand the unwritten social rules which most of us pick up without thinking: 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 the company of other people.
- Not seek comfort from other people.
- Appear to behave "strangely" or inappropriately, as it is not always easy for them to express feelings, emotions or needs.

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.

Difficulty with social imagination

Social imagination or empathy 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 means that people with autism find it hard to:

- Understand and interpret other people thoughts, feelings and actions
- Anticipate reactions or implications of their decisions or actions
- Understand the concept of danger, for example that running on to a busy road poses a threat to them
- 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.

Other related characteristics

Love of routines – The world can be a very unpredictable and confusing place to people with autism; they often prefer to have a fixed daily routine so that they know what is going to happen every day. This routine can extend to always wanting to travel the same way to and from work or eat exactly the same food. Rules can also be important; it may be difficult for a person with autism to take a different approach to do 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.

Sensory sensitivity – People with autism may experience some form of sensory sensitivity. This can occur in one or more of the five senses - sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. A persons' senses are either intensified (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hypo-sensitive).

A person with autism may find certain background sounds, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or physical pain.

Autism and employment

People with autism can make effective and highly valued employees. As is the case with all employees, it's important to match the person's particular skills to the

requirement of the post. People with autism are often very focused and have considerable skills in specific areas. Some of the transferable skills include attention to detail, a methodical approach, strong research skills, good long term memory and excellent record keeping.

Supporting people with autism in the workplace

By making some simple adjustments in the workplace you could provide a person with autism with the environment and support they need to excel at their job. The type and level of support required will depend on the person's individual needs, but could include:

- Appointing a colleague to act as a mentor to the employee with autism.
- Bringing in help from external support organisations that offer job mentoring, coaching and general and specific job assistance to people with autism.
- Arranging autism awareness training for staff who work with the employee.

Managing someone with autism

Good support from a manager is the key to successful employment for both the employee with autism and the employer. Effective communication is central to this support. Some communication strategies for managers include:

- Not making assumptions
- Using direct and precise explanations.
- Giving detailed instructions for tasks.
- Being clear about your expectations of the employee.
- Avoiding figurative speech or idioms.
- Showing respect for difference.
- Using written as well as oral instructions.
- Checking that you have been understood.

In addition to these communication strategies, successful management of a person with autism can include:

- Holding regular one-to-one meetings for feedback and monitoring.
- Making sure that the person is involved in the team.
- Giving one-to-one training rather than group training.
- Raising staff awareness of the employee with autism's particular strengths, difficulties and needs.

Many of these strategies are applicable to managing any team but will especially contribute towards a successful employment experience for a person with autism.

There may be occasions where problems do arise, either for the person with their job tasks or between the person with ASD and their colleagues. Many of these are easy

to deal with swiftly and tactfully. For example if a person seems aloof or uninterested in talking to colleagues, or says the wrong thing, remember (and remind staff/colleagues if necessary) that this is unlikely to be intentional, but is simply a manifestation of the difficulties that the person has with communication.

Remember that each person with ASD is an individual, so not all techniques will be necessary or appropriate for every employee with this condition.

If you would like more information about this Factsheet you can contact:-

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Alternative formats of this Factsheet are available on request.