

## **What is autism?**

Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them.

Autism is a spectrum condition meaning that it affects people in different ways.

People with autism are affected to differing degrees but all will experience difference in the areas of: social interaction, processing information, sensory processing and communication. This means that they will have problems in understanding the world in the way others do. Their development is likely to be uneven, and those on the autism spectrum will have a range of abilities within each of these areas.

Autism is much more common than most people think. There are around 700,000 people in the UK living with autism, which is more than 1 in 100. People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can be autistic, although it appears to affect more men than women, with boys being four times more likely to receive a diagnosis of ASD. People with autism are more likely than the rest of the population to have additional learning difficulties and to suffer from epilepsy and additionally, some people with ASD can also experience high levels of anxiety.

## **HISTORY AND CAUSES**

The exact cause of autism is still being investigated. Research into causes suggests that a combination of factors - genetic and environmental - may account for differences in development. Autism is not caused by a person's upbringing, their social circumstances and is not the fault of the individual with the condition.

Autism was first described by clinicians in the forties and has been the subject of much research, particularly over the last twenty years. Early studies wrongly attributed the cause to poor bonding with parents, resulting in incalculable anguish for blameless mothers and fathers. The evidence does *not* support this view; rather it favours a pre-natal cause, which is likely to have a genetic component. Several biological factors may converge in causing a psychological problem which results in a range of characteristic behaviour. Viral infection, pollution or other trauma may act on a genetic predisposition to cause autism in an unborn baby.

Consequently, autism must be seen to be the result of an organic problem, and not caused by the way a child is brought up. The physiological nature of this problem is still not clearly understood. While work in the field of human physiology continues, psychologists have wrestled with the problem of explaining the collection of disparate, though characteristic, behaviour shown by people with autism.

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### Characteristic behaviour and areas of difference

The characteristics of autism vary from one person to another, but in order for a diagnosis to be made, a person will usually be assessed as having had persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests since early childhood, to the extent that these "limit and impair everyday functioning".

### Social communication

Autistic people have difficulties interpreting both verbal and non-verbal language like gestures or tone of voice. Many have a very literal understanding of language, and think people always mean exactly what they say. They may find it difficult to use or understand:

- facial expressions
- tone of voice
- jokes and sarcasm
- figurative language and idioms

Some people with autism may not speak, or have fairly limited speech. They will often understand more of what other people say to them than they are able to express, yet may struggle with vagueness or abstract concepts. Some autistic people benefit from using, or prefer to use, alternative means of communication, such as sign language or visual symbols. Some are able to communicate very effectively without speech.

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

It often helps to speak in a clear, consistent way and to give autistic people time to process what has been said to them.

### Social interaction

Autistic people often have difficulty 'reading' other people - recognising or understanding others' feelings and intentions - and expressing their own emotions. This can make it very hard for them to navigate the social world. They may:

- appear to be insensitive
- seek out time alone when overloaded by other people
- not seek comfort from other people
- appear to behave 'strangely' or in a way thought to be socially inappropriate.

Autistic people may 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 it.

### Repetitive behaviour and routines

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to autistic people, who often prefer to have a daily routine so that they know what is going to happen every day.

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They may want to always travel the same way to and from school or work, or eat exactly the same food for breakfast.

The use of rules can also be important. It may be difficult for an autistic person to take a different approach to something once they have been taught the 'right' way to do it. People on the autism spectrum may not be comfortable with the idea of change, but may be able to cope better if they can prepare for changes in advance.

### **Highly-focused interests**

Many autistic people have intense and highly-focused interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time or be lifelong, and can be anything from art or music, to trains or computers. An interest may sometimes be unusual. One autistic person loved collecting rubbish, for example. With encouragement, the person developed an interest in recycling and the environment.

Many channel their interest into studying, paid work, volunteering, or other meaningful occupation. Autistic people often report that the pursuit of such interests is fundamental to their wellbeing and happiness.

### **Sensory sensitivity**

Autistic people may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain. For example, they may find certain background sounds, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain. Or they may be fascinated by lights or spinning objects.

## **THE AUTISTIC SPECTRUM**

Autism may affect an individual more or less severely. Some children will need specialist provision while others will do well in mainstream education. From these observations it is possible to imagine a spectrum stretching from the most profoundly impaired individual with autism to the most able. Autism can be more or less severe and many children are likely to progress along the spectrum as they get older.

More information about [understanding the spectrum](#).

## **A TRIAD OF IMPAIRMENTS**

Environmental and genetic factors play a part in determining character. This goes some way to explain why people with autism are such a diverse group. There seem, at first glance, to be far more differences than similarities between such people.

For autism to be recognised as a true condition, psychologists needed to look at large sections of population, considering all those people who had difficulties with

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communication and socialisation in order to isolate characteristic symptoms which might define a syndrome.

A small number of people were found to demonstrate weaknesses in three areas: they had difficulties forming relationships, tending not to make approaches to others, or approaching in odd ways; they had problems with communication, both at the level of language and gesture and they tended to limit their interests to the familiar and narrow. In other words they had problems with **social interaction**, **social communication** and **social imagination**.

The psychiatrist Lorna Wing coined the term '**Triad of Impairments**' to describe this conjunction of problems. It is now recognised throughout the world that all three must be present before a person can be said to have autism.

This idea is central to the way we try to understand autism today, although the word 'impairments' finds little favour with many people with autism, and some professionals, who prefer 'differences.'

## SENSORY INTEGRATION

The **triad of impairments** accounts for some of the worldview of people with autism, but not all. When some people with autism talk about their experience they frequently mention difficulties with sight, hearing, touch and taste. This is not because there is anything wrong with the way their senses work, but how the sensory information is interpreted by the brain.

Words may make sense for a little while then dissolve into a meaningless whisper or swell into a deafening thunderclap. They might seem unconcerned by extremes of temperature. Some qualities of touch may be unbearable: a light caress may be excruciating but a firm grip perfectly tolerable.

This unpredictability of their sensory experience would be baffling and disturbing at the best of times, but coupled with an unstable social awareness, could be extremely frightening.

## Conclusion

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects all aspects of a person's social understanding. As yet there is no cure and, while there are many approaches which people have found to be beneficial, there is no one approach which matches the needs of all. Much can be achieved through education that is sympathetic to individual needs and well informed about the nature of the condition.

## Further information:

[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

<http://www.leicestershireautism.org.uk>

[www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk](http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk)

<https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk>