

# Understanding Autism

General information about autism spectrum disorders  
Key facts and challenges that some people may face



Developed in partnership with



# Contents

**What is Autism?**

.....  
**Social communication**

.....  
**Social interaction**

.....  
**Social imagination**

.....  
**Sensory differences**

1 & 2

2

3

3

3 & 4

# What is Autism?

**Autism is a lifelong development disorder which affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them** – National Autistic Society

**A**round 1% of population are believed to be autistic, which means that there are over 700,000 people living with autism in the UK.

It is estimated there may be around 7,800 people in Derbyshire County and 2,500 people in Derby City living with autism.

Everyone on the autistic spectrum is different and unique, but all share three core social difficulties:

- social interaction
- social communication
- social imagination.

As a result people on the autistic spectrum can struggle in social situations. For example they may:

- find it hard to begin or carry on a conversation
- not understand how far to stand from somebody else
- find it difficult to make friends.

People with autism may also display restricted and/or repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. For example they may:

- develop an overwhelming interest in something
- follow inflexible routines or rituals
- make repetitive body movements
- be hypersensitive to certain smells, tastes or sounds.

Autism is not a mental health condition; however, due to the social difficulties that people living with autism face, many may suffer with mental ill health.

Autism is not a learning disability, however, around half of people with a learning disability are also diagnosed as having autism. People with autism that do not have a learning disability may experience learning difficulties because of their autism, for example, they may find it harder to structure tasks.

Awareness of autism in society is good, but understanding of the condition and the way the condition affects communication, sensory experience and behaviour, is not as good.

Too many myths about autism still exist, including the belief autistic people lack empathy or that everyone with autism is the same.

There are neurological differences between people with autism and people who are viewed as 'normal'. Autism is an example of neurodiversity. People without autism are often referred to as 'neurotypical' by people within the autistic community. Some people with autism use these terms to explain and make sense of the neurological differences that exist between them.

## Social communication

**M**any people living with autism have problems with communication, both verbal and non-verbal. They may find it hard to process language and could find it difficult to follow long or complex sentences, or to follow instructions. People with autism can find it difficult to interpret a person's tone of voice, their body language or their facial expression. They may also find it difficult to maintain eye contact with others.

In some cases, autistic people may have no, or very limited speech, but can understand what people say to them. They may prefer to use a different form of communication, such as symbols or sign language.

People with autism often take information very literally and they may not be able to understand sarcasm, jokes, hidden meanings, and figures of speech that people use in everyday life.



## Social interaction

**M**any people living with autism have difficulty in understanding social rules and interactions. They find it hard to recognise and understand the emotions that other people display, and find it difficult to communicate or explain their own emotions and feelings. They may also find it difficult to manage their emotions.

People with autism may appear to behave strangely or inappropriately due to the way they express feelings, emotions or needs. They may, for example, stand too close to another person, accidentally invading their personal space.

Many people with autism prefer to spend time alone or isolate themselves from others, they may not seek comfort from other people and may not show any interest in other people's opinions or interests. This can come across as rudeness, withdrawal from, or disinterest in the people they meet, making it hard for them to make and keep friends.

## Social imagination

**P**eople with autism can find it difficult to understand other people's intentions and behaviour.

They may find it difficult to imagine situations that are outside their own routine. They might find it hard to predict what will, or might happen if they are faced with change, so often limit themselves to only a small, repetitive range of activities.

Some people with autism may also have difficulty in understanding the concept of danger.

A lack of social imagination should not be confused with a lack of imagination. Many people with autism are very creative.

## Sensory differences

**M**any people with autism have sensory differences including heightened sensitivity (hypersensitivity) or under-sensitivity (hyposensitivity) to one or more sensory stimuli - for example, sound, light, textures, smells and taste. These sensitivities can also make being touched difficult and can sometimes result in sensory overload.

People with autism may also engage in stimming (self-stimulatory behaviours), as a means of helping them to feel less anxious. Examples of stimming are flapping hands and tapping fingers.

**A**utism is a spectrum condition, which means that people with autism have a wide range of ways in which they may communicate and interact with people. They also have differing abilities, interests and difficulties, which can vary dependent upon the environment and stressors they are currently dealing with. Autism is sometimes called a “hidden” disability because not every person with autism presents with the same or with obvious characteristics. For example, people with autism can have good eye contact, be sociable and share normal interests. This can be particularly true in women or girls who may attempt to engage in social activity more frequently than males and may try to mask their difficulties by copying the behaviour of others. Problems may only become apparent when individuals are expected to be highly flexible and tolerate a lot of environmental demands.

It is important not to generalise or stereotype the behaviours of people with autism, otherwise we may expect and/or try to predict certain behaviours, which could have a detrimental effect on people living with autism in a number of different ways.

Remember that:

**“If you have met one person with autism you have met one person with autism”**

## Small changes can make a big difference

**A**utism is much misunderstood. But, by following these easy tips, you can help make any workplace, retail or home environment calmer and therefore more autism-friendly.

- Avoid bright and flashing lights (especially neon lighting)
- Minimise background noises
- Reduce strong smells
- Avoid distracting movements
- Provide a quiet place to retreat to
- Clearly identify exit routes
- Ask the individual if there is something in the environment which is distressing or distracting, and act on it!



# Top tips to help you communicate with someone living with autism

- 1) Be clear and precise with your language; using plain English
  - do not rely on the person to pick up on the meaning of your questions and body language
  - avoid using open questions, words with double meaning and humour that could be misunderstood
- 2) Give the person enough time to process and understand the information you are sharing
- 3) Ask them what help they need
- 4) Explain at every stage what you are about to do, what will happen next and when
- 5) Be consistent in your actions and do what you say you will do
- 6) Don't be surprised if there is lack of eye contact, unusual body language or if inappropriate language is used
- 7) Respect repetitive behaviours; they might be someone's coping mechanism
- 8) Think about the environment and be aware that some things cause sensory overload (for example, light, movement, sounds, smell and touch)
- 9) Back things up in writing
- 10) Always consider the person's behaviour in terms of his or her autism, even if it becomes challenging

## Further information

- Derbyshire County Council: [www.derbyshire.gov.uk/adultswithautism](http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/adultswithautism)
- National Autistic Society: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)
- Derbyshire Autism Services: [www.derbyshireautismservices.org](http://www.derbyshireautismservices.org)
- NHS Choices: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/Autistic-spectrum-disorder](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Autistic-spectrum-disorder)

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