

# What is autism?

People with autism have said that the world to them is a mass of people, places and events which they struggle to make sense of, which can cause them considerable stress and anxiety. In particular, understanding and relating to other people and taking part in everyday family and social life may be harder for them. Many people appear to know, intuitively, how to communicate and interact with each other, while people with autism might find this particularly difficult. This leaflet explains more about how autism has come to be defined.

## What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. It is part of the ‘autism spectrum’ and is sometimes referred to as an autism spectrum disorder, or an ASD. The word ‘spectrum’ is used because, while all people with autism share three main areas of difficulty, their condition may affect them in very different ways. Some are able to live relatively autonomous lives; others may require a lifetime of specialist support.

The three main areas of difficulty which all people with autism share are sometimes known as the ‘triad of impairments’.

They are:

- > difficulty with social communication
- > difficulty with social interaction
- > difficulty with social imagination.

It can be hard to create awareness of autism as it is an ‘invisible’ disability – you cannot necessarily tell someone has it from their appearance. Parents of children with autism often say that other people simply think their child is naughty, while adults find that they are misunderstood. All people with autism can benefit from a timely diagnosis and access to appropriate services and support.

## What are the characteristics of autism?

The characteristics of autism vary from one person to another but are generally divided into three main groups.

### Difficulty with social communication

“For people with autistic spectrum disorders, ‘body language’ can appear just as foreign as if people were speaking ancient Greek.”

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

- > gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
- > jokes and sarcasm
- > common phrases and sayings, such as ‘Watch yourself!’, which might be used to warn someone against a nearby hazard, but taken literally is an instruction telling the person to look at themselves.

Some people with autism may not speak, or have limited language. They may understand what other people say to them, but prefer to use alternative means of communication themselves, such as sign language or visual symbols. Some people may have good language skills, but they may still find it hard to understand the give-and-take nature of conversations, perhaps repeating what the other person has just said (this is known as echolalia) or not recognising when the other person is bored. Some people might use complex words and phrases, but may not be using them in a recognisable context. Other people might

have difficulty knowing when to start or end a conversation and choosing topics to talk about.

In order to help a person with autism understand you, keep your sentences short – be clear and concise.

### Difficulty with social interaction

“I’d always found it difficult to make small talk until I read that the aim of such conversations is merely to pass the time, and that it’s okay to drift from topic to topic without reaching any specific conclusions.”

People with autism often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people’s emotions and feelings, and expressing their own. This can make it more difficult for them to fit in socially, which may or may not be important to them. Many people want to be sociable but have difficulty with initiating and sustaining social relationships, which can make them very anxious. They may:

- > not understand the norms of different social contexts, which most of us pick up without thinking: they may stand too close to another person for example, or start what may be considered by others to be an inappropriate subject of conversation

- > appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling
- > prefer to spend more time alone than other people
- > not seek comfort from other people in assumed or expected ways, or become withdrawn, disinterested or aloof
- > appear to behave ‘strangely’ or not according to social expectations
- > find other people unpredictable and confusing.

### Difficulty with social imagination

“We have trouble working out what other people know. We have more difficulty guessing what other people are thinking.”

Social imagination allows us to understand and predict other people’s behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine. Difficulty with social imagination means that people with autism find it hard to:

- > understand and interpret other people’s thoughts, feelings and actions
- > predict what will happen next, or what could happen next

- > understand the concept of danger, for example that running on to a busy road poses a threat to them
- > engage in imaginative play and activities; children with autism may enjoy some imaginative play but prefer to act out the same scenes each time
- > 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, actors or writers.

## Other related characteristics

“If I get anxious I get in a tizz. I have a timetable; it helps me to see what I have to do next, otherwise I get confused.”

### Love of routines

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to people with autism, who often prefer to have their own fixed, daily routine so that they know what is going to happen every day. It may be more helpful for someone with autism to use a routine

they’ve created themselves or which has been mutually agreed, rather than one which has been imposed on them.

Rules and rituals can also be important: it may be difficult for a person with autism to take a different approach to 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 better if they are prepared for it in advance.

### Sensory sensitivity

“Rowan loves art but he hates wearing a shirt to protect his clothing – the feeling of the fabric against his skin causes him distress. We have agreed with his school that he can wear a loose-fitting apron instead.”

People with autism may experience some form of sensory sensitivity. This can occur in one or more of the seven senses – sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, balance and body awareness. A person’s senses can be intensified (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hyposensitive). The degree of difficulty varies from one individual to another and according to other factors such as mood and levels of stress and stimuli.

For example, a person with autism may find certain background sounds, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause stress and anxiety or even physical pain. People who are hyposensitive may not feel pain or extremes of temperature. Some may rock, spin or flap their hands to stimulate sensation, to help with balance and posture or to deal with stress. Some people may have a hyposensitive body awareness system, making it harder for them to navigate rooms and avoid obstructions, stand at an appropriate distance from other people and carry out ‘fine motor’ tasks such as tying shoelaces.

### Highly-focused interests

“I remember Samuel reciting the distances of all the planets from the sun to a baffled classmate in the playground when he was five.”

Many people with autism have intense 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. Some people with autism may eventually be able to work

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Accept difference.  
Not indifference.

## What is autism?

or study in related areas. For others, it may remain a hobby. A special interest may sometimes be unusual. One person with autism loved collecting rubbish, for example. With encouragement, this was channelled into an interest in recycling and the environment.

### Learning disabilities

“I have a helper who sits with me and if I’m stuck on a word she helps me.”

People with autism may have learning disabilities, which can affect all aspects of someone’s life, from studying in school, to learning how to wash themselves or make a meal. As with autism, people can have different ‘degrees’ of learning disability, so some may be able to live fairly independently – although they may need some support to achieve this – while others may require lifelong, specialist support. However, all people with autism can, and do, learn and develop with the right sort of support. Other conditions are sometimes associated with autism. These may include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia.

### Asperger syndrome and PDA

Asperger syndrome and pathological demand avoidance (PDA) are considered to be part of the autism spectrum.

### Asperger syndrome

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism. People with Asperger syndrome have fewer problems with language 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. With the right support and encouragement, many people with Asperger syndrome can lead full and autonomous lives.

### Pathological demand avoidance (PDA)

Individuals with PDA share difficulties with others on the autism spectrum in social aspects of interaction, communication and imagination. However, the central difficulty for people with PDA is the way they are driven to avoid demands and expectations. This is because they have an anxiety-based need to be in control. People with PDA seem to have better social understanding and communication skills than others on the spectrum and are able to use this to their advantage.

### Who is affected by autism?

There are around 700,000 people in the UK on the autism spectrum. People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can have autism. More men are diagnosed than women; the reason for this is unknown. It is a lifelong condition: children with autism grow up to become adults with autism.

### What causes autism?

The exact cause of autism is still being investigated. However, research suggests that it is ultimately genetic with interaction from environmental factors.

Autism is not caused by a person’s upbringing or their social circumstances and is not the fault of the individual with the condition.

### Is there a cure?

There is currently no cure and no specific treatment for autism.

As our understanding of the condition improves and services continue to develop, people with autism have more opportunity than ever of reaching their full potential. There are many approaches,

therapies and interventions, which can improve an individual’s quality of life when used appropriately. These may include communication-based interventions, behavioural therapy and dietary changes. Information about many of these can be found on The National Autistic Society’s website: [www.autism.org.uk/approaches](http://www.autism.org.uk/approaches).

### What is a diagnosis?

A diagnosis is the formal identification of autism, usually by a team of health professionals which might include paediatricians and psychiatrists. Everyone is affected differently by their autism, and some people see a formal diagnosis as an unhelpful label. However, a diagnosis can:

- help people with autism and their families, friends, partners, carers, professionals and colleagues, to better understand why they may experience certain difficulties and manage their needs
- allow people to access services and support.

Many people are diagnosed as children but some forms of autism can be harder to diagnose, meaning they may not be recognised until adulthood. Parents, carers and

professionals who work with children – such as teachers – can all ask GPs for a referral. Adults can ask their GP to refer them to a team of specialists. Some professionals may refer to autism by a different name, such as autistic or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), classic autism or Kanner autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), high-functioning autism (HFA), pathological demand avoidance (PDA) or Asperger syndrome.

### Where do I go next?

The National Autistic Society provides regular autism information and news, including *Your Autism Magazine*, to its members. Join today at [www.autism.org.uk/membership](http://www.autism.org.uk/membership) or call **0808 800 1050**.

Our website contains information about autism and the services we offer: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk). Adults on the autism spectrum can find information specific to them at [www.autism.org.uk/adults](http://www.autism.org.uk/adults).



We also have an online community that is open to people with autism, their relatives and carers over the age of 16: [www.autism.org.uk/community](http://www.autism.org.uk/community).

An easy read version of this leaflet is available to download from our website: [www.autism.org.uk/ineasyread](http://www.autism.org.uk/ineasyread).

Our Autism Helpline offers confidential information and advice on autism and related issues.

**Tel: 0808 800 4104**  
**Free from landlines and most mobiles**  
**(open 10am-4pm, Monday-Friday)**  
**Email: [autismhelpline@nas.org.uk](mailto:autismhelpline@nas.org.uk)**

The Helpline offers a telephone interpretation service for callers whose first language is not English. Find out more at [www.autism.org.uk/interpretation](http://www.autism.org.uk/interpretation).

 Find us on Facebook  
[www.facebook.com/NationalAutisticSociety](https://www.facebook.com/NationalAutisticSociety)  
 Follow us on Twitter  
[twitter.com/autism](https://twitter.com/autism)

We are the leading UK charity for people with autism (including Asperger syndrome) and their families. With the help of our members, supporters and volunteers we provide information, support and pioneering services, and campaign for a better world for people with autism.

Around 700,000 people in the UK have autism. Together with their families they make up over 2.8 million people whose lives are touched by autism every single day. From good times to challenging times, The National Autistic Society is there at every stage, to help transform the lives of everyone living with autism.

*We are proud of the difference we make.*

#### National offices

##### Head Office

Tel: 020 7833 2299  
Email: [nas@nas.org.uk](mailto:nas@nas.org.uk)

##### NAS Cymru

Tel: 029 2062 9312  
Email: [cymru@nas.org.uk](mailto:cymru@nas.org.uk)

##### NAS Scotland

Tel: 0141 221 8090  
Email: [scotland@nas.org.uk](mailto:scotland@nas.org.uk)

##### NAS Northern Ireland

Tel: 028 9068 7066  
Email: [northern.ireland@nas.org.uk](mailto:northern.ireland@nas.org.uk)