

7 Minute Briefing - Autism and Mental Health

Updated November 2023

A note on naming the preferred term is “autistic” and phrases like “living with autism” should be avoided.

Autism is “A lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. “

Autistic traits vary between individuals.
However there are four main areas of difference:



Social Interaction

Autistic people may have difficulty in expressing feelings and understanding the intentions of others. Trying to “read” other people can lead to tiredness, avoidance of social contexts, loneliness, and isolation. Reasonable adjustments can be easily applied and help greatly.

Social Communication

Autistic people may have difficulty interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues. They may take instructions very literally or struggle to understand sarcasm. Over time this can lead to isolation and increase their vulnerability in society.

Sensory Differences

Autistic people may experience “under” or “over” sensitivity in any of their senses. Sounds, lights, touch, and smells can be uncomfortable or even painful. Some autistic people may only eat certain foods or cover their ears when anxious. Sensory differences may be an advantage such as a “photographic” memory or an extraordinary eye for detail.

Flexible Thinking / Social Imagination

Autistic people may have difficulty understanding someone’s point of view. This may cause difficulty in new, unfamiliar, or unexpected situations. Routine and predictability can help. Difference may also be advantageous; developing intense interests may allow some to excel in certain areas such as music, science and sport

Autism and Mental Health

It may prove difficult to access healthcare leading to poorer health outcomes. Autism is **NOT** a mental health illness but 70% of autistic young people experience mental health issues, and between 40-50% meet the diagnostic criteria for two or more psychiatric conditions, with depressive illness and anxiety being most common. **Suicide is the second leading cause of death for autistic people.** Social isolation and loneliness are the most common reasons for suicidal thoughts.

1 in 4 autistic children and young people have experienced suicidal ideation and 1 in 10 have attempted suicide

Empower autistic people to access appropriate health care by:

- Making reasonable adjustments
- Timely assessment and diagnosis
- Support self-advocacy
- Promote meaningful information sharing between professionals



Stimming

This is a repetitive self regulating behaviour such as hands flapping or spinning. It can sometimes be self-injurious such as head banging or skin picking.

It is important to recognise the underlying cause of the stimming and support the autistic person appropriately.

Masking

Some people may try to hide their autistic traits to fit in with societal norms; “camouflaging” or masking is more commonly seen in autistic females. This can make diagnosis and access to support more difficult. It can lead to chronic exhaustion, loss of skills and reduced tolerance to stimuli (**autistic burnout**).

Autistic Meltdown

Meltdowns often result when an autistic person experiences high levels of anxiety or distress in certain situations which they find overwhelming.


Similar to the ‘fight response’ this may be interpreted as a “tantrum” or aggressive panic attack. It is important to recognise that the person is experiencing an extreme state of distress and requires support to regulate.

Autistic Shutdown

Shutdowns often result when the autistic person experiences situations with high demand.

Similar to the ‘freeze response’ it can lead to difficulty forming coherent sentences, mutism or reduced mobility. It is important to recognise the person is experiencing an extreme state of distress and requires support to regulate.

Reasonable Adjustments Flag

An NHS national record that shows a person's accommodation and necessary adjustments needs. Associated autism social communication needs are included in line with the Equality Act 2010. 


To meet the Accessible Information Standard, practitioners need to ask the person how they wish to receive their information. Encourage autistic people to talk about the reasonable adjustments they require and consider placing a flag on the records to communicate this requirement.

Questions to consider

Ask the person, or someone who knows them well, how best to communicate with them and what adaptations are needed, if any.


- What is being communicated by the observed behaviour?
- Are there any co-occurrences present? (e.g. mental health, substance use).
- Does the person have any current support in place?
- What background information can you gather?
- What reasonable adjustments can you put in place?



Autism affects both males and females 



One in 67 people in the UK are autistic, but many autistic people have never been diagnosed

Only one in three autistic people has a diagnosed learning disability 



Seven in ten autistic people struggle with their mental health
What can society do to address this ?

Resources

[Norfolk Safeguarding Adults Board Procedures](#)
[Care Act Statutory Guidance](#)
[National Autistic Society](#)
[Autism - NHS](#)
[Autism | Autistica](#)
[Norfolk Autism Partnership](#)
[Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership](#)
[Leading Lives](#)

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