

# Disability Insight

Take a look around you

**Autism Awareness Day**

**7<sup>th</sup> February 2019**

## Key points

- There are around 700,000 autistic people in the UK - that's more than 1 in 100.
- Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways.
- Autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.
- People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can be autistic, although it appears to affect more men than women.

## 1 About Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental disability which affects the social and communication centre of the brain. Autism affects the way an individual relates to people, situations and the immediate environment. Signs typically appear during early childhood and affect a person's ability to communicate, and interact with others. ASD is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a "spectrum condition" that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees. There is no known single cause of autism, but increased awareness and early diagnosis/intervention and access to appropriate services/supports lead to significantly improved outcomes.

Some of the behaviors associated with autism include delayed learning of language; difficulty making eye contact or holding a conversation; problems with planning and organisation; narrow, intense interests; poor motor skills' and sensory sensitivities. A person on the spectrum might have many of these behaviors or just a few.

Well-known people with autism include actors Anthony Hopkins and Daryl Hannah, TV presenter Chris Packham, and singer/ songwriter Susan Boyle.

Supported by BSO Equality Unit

## What is Asperger's syndrome?

Asperger's syndrome is a form of autism which may also affect the way a person communicates and relates to other people.

People with Asperger's syndrome may experience challenges such as specific learning difficulties, anxiety or other conditions.

## What is Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)?

Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) is a form of autism which may also affect the way a person communicates and relates to other people.

People with PDA may experience challenges such as specific learning difficulties, but their central difficulty is that they are driven to avoid everyday demands and expectations to an extreme extent. This avoidance is rooted in an anxiety-based need to be in control.

## 2 How does Autism affect someone's life?

Autism affects the way an individual relates to people, situations and the immediate environment. Many individuals with Autism have difficulty processing everyday sensory information like sight, smells, touch, tastes and sounds. The two main areas of difficulty which all people with autism share are:

- **Social communication and reciprocal social interactions.** Some of the common communication and interaction difficulties include sustaining social communication (e.g. small talk, maintaining a spontaneous conversation); understanding non-verbal cues (e.g. body language, tone of voice, facial expression); understanding the social context of a situation; difficulties with social Skills (e.g. personal space, eye contact); and understanding or imagining other people's thoughts and reactions within a social context.
- **Restricted, repetitive and inflexible patterns of behaviour (including sensory processing differences).** Some of the common patterns of behaviour include: high anxiety because of unexpected changes; a need to follow particular routines or rules; repetitive behaviour (e.g. hand flapping) or interests (e.g. highly focused on particular topics or activities); hypersensitivity (over sensitive) or hyposensitivity (under sensitive) to sensory information including noise, lights, smell, taste, touch and body awareness.

Many of these differences are due to how a person's brain is processing information about the world around them. There are lots of adaptations that can

be beneficial to an individual with Autism, including adapting the sensory environment and giving relevant information in a clear and concise way.

### 3 Supporting someone with Autism in work

Working with someone on the autism spectrum (including those with Asperger syndrome), can be an enriching experience for managers and colleagues alike, but it may also present some challenges. Many autistic people have a variety of sometimes exceptional skills that enable them to thrive in roles ranging from sales assistant to computer programmer and journalist to statistician, to name a few. However, they are often disadvantaged when it comes to getting and keeping a job because of difficulties with social communication and interaction, other people's lack of understanding, and sensory issues.

There are reasonable adjustments that can be made for employees who have autism. For example:

- writing down instructions and tasks;
- giving short, clear instructions;
- breaking down large tasks into smaller components;
- having a regular timetable of tasks to add structure to the working day;
- ensure the work environment is well-structured;
- provide sensitive but direct feedback;
- support your staff member to prepare for any workplace changes.

For an inspiring article on Autism in the workplace please follow the below link:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-46538125>

### 4 Support for you if you care for somebody with Autism

If you support someone with autism, you may be concerned about how you support them and their needs. You may benefit from accessing more information about the condition yourself. It is important when supporting someone with autism you understand the person and the condition. If you feel you need support don't be afraid to ask, see below for more information on accessing support.

Autism NI's Family Support team offers support to parents/carers of newly diagnosed children as well as support to families who have been living with Autism for longer periods. Autism NI's Family Support team offers a regional Helpline by calling **02890401729** from Monday – Friday, 9.00am - 5pm. There are over 20 family support groups in Northern Ireland offering support to thousands of parents and carers.

## 5 Support for you if you have Autism

Initial diagnosis can be a very emotional period. Prior to diagnosis there can be a lot of frustration due to unexplainable symptoms. Once a diagnosis is confirmed, it can cause many emotions and feelings such as anger, shock, relief, and loss. With a proper diagnosis, adults with ASD may be able to access local autism support services, if available in their area. You can search for services for adults using the [Autism Services Directory](#).

Examples of programmes that may be available in your local area include:

- **Social learning programmes** – to help you cope in social situations.
- **Leisure activity programmes** – these involve taking part in leisure activities, such as games, exercise, or going to the cinema or theatre with a group of people.
- **Skills for daily living programmes** – to help you if you have problems carrying out daily activities, such as eating and washing.

Adults with ASD may also benefit from some of the interventions offered to children with ASD, such as psychological therapy and medication. Read more about the help and support available for people with ASD:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/treatment/>

**Sources and further reading:**

<http://www.autismni.org/>

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

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/>

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions/autism-and-aspergers-syndrome>

