

This information sheet is designed to outline some possible causes of behaviours of concern (sometimes referred to as 'challenging behaviours') and give some strategies that might help in difficult situations.

What are behaviours of concern?

Many people with autism will show behaviours of concern (sometimes referred to as 'challenging behaviour') at some point in their lives. Behaviours of concern are often defined as "Culturally abnormal behaviour(s) of such intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of the person or others is placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit or deny access to the use of ordinary community facilities" (Emerson, 1995).

Examples of behaviours of concern include:

- Self-harm
- Hitting, biting, kicking
- Inappropriate sexualised behaviour (for example groping or public masturbation)
- Damage to property
- Stealing.

What causes behaviours of concern?

Stress

Behaviours of concern do not happen without an underlying reason. When thinking about the possible causes, it is important to bear in mind the impact that stress may be having on the person. We all experience stress, but we are usually able to identify the cause and put in place strategies to reduce our stress levels. In a person with autism, stress can exacerbate some of the difficulties associated with the core features of autism.

Communication

Difficulties in communication can range from not being able to speak at all to being very articulate but not understanding the social variations in a conversation. If a person with autism is finding it difficult to communicate something, they may try and find other ways to let you know what they need.

Case study

Jim, a non-verbal man with autism receiving 24 hour care, began to hit himself in the jaw. His behaviour was clearly distressing to him and the staff supporting him. As this was a new behaviour, staff wondered whether it might be medical. They consulted Jim's GP and wondered whether he might have toothache. A trip to the dentist confirmed this. This behaviour stopped when the toothache was treated.

Sensory issues

Many people with autism experience sensory issues. They can be over- or under-sensitive to any of their senses.

Case study

After spending time identifying why he would not do his homework, staff figured out that the sound of the school bell was extremely distressing to Tom. He would spend the last 10 minutes of class dreading the school bell ringing and was not able to focus on what his teacher was saying. This meant that he did not hear his teacher giving homework. This is an example of a behaviour of concern occurring due to sensory issues.

Social understanding

Some people with autism struggle to understand the social rules. For example, refusal to care for personal hygiene can be considered a behaviour of concern. When a person with autism does not wash, it might be caused by a lack of social understanding – they may not notice their smell so they may not feel they need to wash. Some people may not understand that they need to wash because they do not see other people washing. Some people may find the sensory aspects of washing difficult. Refusal to care for personal hygiene is a good example of the importance of exploring why a person is showing these behaviours.

Case study

Sally is a woman in her early 20s who has just started a new job. Some of her colleagues have expressed concern about her personal hygiene. Her manager and autism employment supporter spoke to her about her hygiene routine, explained the importance of showering every day, and explained the importance of deodorant. They also encouraged her to keep a can of body spray in the office for particularly hot or stressful days. This helped Sally understand why she needed to keep up with personal hygiene.

Inflexible thinking

Some people with autism struggle with changes in routine. Others may think very literally, which can lead to misunderstandings.

Case study

A change in routine

Amy loves going to school and gets on well with her teacher and her peers. One day, her teacher was away due to a family emergency and a supply teacher was brought in. Amy refused to enter the classroom and became very distressed. School staff helped her to calm down in a quiet room, and put together a social story to help her cope with any future unexpected staff changes.

Case study

Literal understanding

A young man in school was asked whether he had done his homework. He answered "Yes". When the teacher asked "Can I see it?", the young man replied "No, you can't". This made the teacher angry, and he sent the young man out of the classroom. What the young man meant to say was that the teacher could not see the homework because it was in his bag under his desk. This was a distressing and confusing incident for this young man.

Anxiety

Many people with autism experience higher levels of anxiety on a day to day basis than the neurotypical population. When a person with autism becomes extremely anxious, they may do or say something to create a predictable situation to lower their anxiety.

Case study

When John becomes extremely anxious, he hits one particular member of his support team. Staff were initially concerned he may be 'targeting' this particular member of staff. However, after observing the situation, they discovered that this member of staff would grab John's arm whenever he went to hit them. John was looking for a predictable response, but may also have found the pressure comforting. Staff gave John other ways to satisfy his craving for pressure, and worked to find ways of reducing his overall anxiety.

How can we support people with autism who are showing behaviours of concern?

When we encounter behaviours of concern, it is important that we identify the cause of the behaviour. This way, we can reduce the likelihood of it happening again, and as a result improve the person's quality of life. Sometimes, there is more than one reason why a person may be showing these behaviours.

Finding out what is going on is often a matter of trial and error. The first step should always be to ask the person why they are doing something. Particularly in high-functioning individuals, they may tell you straight away. Teamwork is also important, particularly involving people who know them best, like parents and support staff.

Strategies that may help in difficult situations

- Try to **remain calm**. Keeping calm means that you can see the bigger picture and help them to work through anything they are finding difficult.
- **Keep a diary** to record when behaviours are happening. This will allow you to track whether there is a specific trigger to a behaviour. For example, a behaviour occurs every time you go to the supermarket. Does it happen at every supermarket or just that particular one? Keeping a log will make it easier to understand what may be triggering a behaviour.
- **Don't tell them to calm down**. Instead, give them guidance to help them calm down.
- **Be consistent** in what you say and do.
- **Be clear** about your expectations, boundaries, rules and consequences.
- Use appropriate **reward systems** for that individual.
- **Get support from others** to help you understand and manage behaviour, for example from support groups.
- **Make a list** of all behavioural concerns and only focus on one or two at a time.

Further reading

- *From Theoretical Understanding to Practical Intervention* by Theo Peeters
- *People with Autism Behaving Badly* by John Clements
- *Behavioural Concerns and Autistic Spectrum Disorders* by Ewa Zarkowska and John Clements
- *Assessing Behaviours Regarded as Problematic for People with Developmental Disorders* by John Clements and Neil Martin
- *Challenging Behaviour and Autism* by Philip Whittaker
- *No Fighting, No Biting, No Screaming: How to Make Behaving Positively Possible for People with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities* by Bo Hejlskov Elven