

An introduction for adults with autism

The workplace, like all of society, has many social rules which are not explicitly taught. This information sheet looks at some of the key things that you may need to know about the workplace.

Disclosure

It is up to you to decide whether you want to tell other people about your autism. It will depend on your own feelings and situation. You may decide to tell your boss but not other members of staff or you may choose to only tell one colleague, but not your boss. Remember that other people may pass on information without you knowing. This may be through gossip or simply because there is a policy that they have to tell certain people, such as the HR department. If it is the second reason then they will usually tell you before passing on the information. If people do gossip or tell others about your autism and it gets to your manager, it may look like you were trying to hide something. So think carefully about who you tell about your autism.

It may be useful for your manager to find out about your autism from you. This gives you the chance to tell them about what autism means for you and the strengths that it gives you. It can also help to talk about your specific needs and the things that might help you at work. If you do not disclose your autism then your employer cannot be expected to make any adjustments for you.

Reasonable adjustments

There are laws in the UK that mean that employers cannot treat people with disabilities differently to other employees. However, people with disabilities may have needs that mean they cannot just be treated the same as people with no disability. They may need some support to have equal access to their workplace. For example, if someone is in a wheelchair then they need a lift if their office has stairs. Equally, if someone has autism they may need some adjustments, such as having their instructions for the day written down.

Employers have to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace or the way that an employee's work is done, if that person has a disability. Reasonable adjustments are things that the employer can realistically be expected to do and must only give the person with a disability equal access to the role, not an advantage. For example, it is not reasonable if the adjustments will cost a lot of money or if it involves taking on someone who is not able to do the job.

What to wear

Knowing what to wear to work can be difficult because it will depend on where you work, who you work with and who you are managed by. If you work somewhere that has a uniform then there should be clear rules about what you can and can't wear, including what jewellery is acceptable and sometimes even what hairstyle you can have. If there is no uniform then it is best to follow what your colleagues wear.

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This will vary depending on where you work and sometimes there will be different teams that each dress differently. In this case, make sure you are dressing like the people you work with most often. If you are just starting at a job and aren't sure of what to wear, it is always better to be too smart than not smart enough. Men should wear a suit or formal/suit trousers with a shirt and tie. Women should wear a suit; formal/suit trousers or skirt and a blouse/shirt; or a smart dress. You should also wear clean, plain leather or leather-style shoes. If this seems too dressed up compared to your colleagues, you can dress down the next day. If you are not sure of what to wear, just ask! Speak to your manager and ask if there is a specific dress code.

Sometimes places of work may have casual days where they dress in more comfortable clothes; however you will still be expected to look presentable. A good outfit for these days is a clean and neat pair of jeans with a casual shirt, blouse or smart top. This shows that you are casual but still take your work seriously.

Lunchtime

Lunchtime can be difficult for some people with autism. Some workplaces do not have a fixed lunchtime, so it can be hard to know when to go for lunch. It is also often a social time. The best way to handle lunchtime is to find a group of people who go to lunch at roughly the same time each day. This will mean that you will know a good time to go for lunch when there will be other people around. Or, if you would rather be alone, a good way to avoid others is to have a fairly early or late lunch. Most people eat between 12pm and 2pm - although this will be different in different places - so you could try to eat outside of those times.

If you do want to socialise with colleagues, lunchtime can be a good opportunity for this. You may still be quite difficult to engage in conversation, you may not know what to say or have difficulty knowing when it is your turn to speak or when the conversation is over. You can read our information sheet on socialising to find out more about this (see details below). Generally, though, conversation at work is light and simple. People generally talk about things they have done outside of work time, the weather, TV shows and other 'small talk' topics. Remember, people are on a 'break' from work so they don't usually want to talk about work or other things that may be stressful or negative.

Useful resources

www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/helpadvice/downloads - Free information sheet available on socialising for adults with autism.