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# A guide to Autism Spectrum Disorder

# What is Autism?

Autism affects the way people are able to:

- Communicate
- Interact
- Think and behave flexibly
- Experience their senses

This means that people with autism have difficulties with everyday life.

- They are often extremely anxious.
- Many find change very difficult and so always want things to stay the same.

Given the right understanding, people with autism can lead more fulfilling lives.

Autism affects people right across the intellectual spectrum and there are a range of labels that people receive when they get a diagnosis such as:

- Classic or Kanner's Autism.
- Autism with associated Learning Disabilities.
- High Functioning Autism.
- Asperger Syndrome.

The term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), also sometimes named Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), is used to cover all these, but it is important to understand that just because someone is very able does not mean their ASD is mild. The impact of ASD on someone who is intellectually able can be very disabling.

People with autism may find it difficult to:

- Make sense of the world
- Learn
- Be adaptable to new situations
- Understand emotions
- Do practical things
- Reason and make decisions
- Maintain good mental health and well being

It can be confusing because one person with autism can find some things so easy and others so difficult. For example:

- Someone who has Asperger Syndrome might be a successful computer scientist and author but may be terrified of crossing the road because he cannot judge speed and distance.

- Someone who has learning difficulties and autism may be unable to get dressed on her own but able to do a thousand piece jigsaw at speed without looking at the picture on the box.
- Someone else with High Functioning Autism may love history and have easily learnt the dates of all the Kings and Queens of England but spends every break time and lunch time at school on his own because the making of friends is a complete mystery.

These examples help show the varied patterns of ability for people within the Autism Spectrum.

## Further information about Autism

- It is life long.
- It affects people from different backgrounds all over the world.
- The brain of a person with autism develops and functions in a different way from the brain of a person without autism.
- People with autism tend to see, hear, taste, touch and smell the world differently. Their knowledge of where they are in space and their balance can also be affected.
- There is a genetic link in autism; therefore it can affect more than one family member.

## What can help?

- Say the person's name to get their attention.
- Keep language simple and allow time for a response.
- Explain social rules as clearly as possible and also how to behave in different social situations.
- Provide structure and routine to give predictability. This will help to reduce anxiety.
- Some people will really benefit from visual support like symbols, pictures and photographs to add meaning to the spoken or written word.
- Consider the environment carefully to avoid sensory overload.
- 'Social stories' can be very helpful in preparing a person with an ASD for a change in their life (Carol Gray, 1995).

Autism can also mean people develop a particular strength or focused interest. This can become obsessional and negative when levels of anxiety are very high. However, if the individual is understood and well supported, their special interest can be channelled appropriately and bring calm, pleasure and even employment, helping them lead fulfilling lives. There are some exceptional individuals whose special interest becomes a rare talent, for example as an artist like Stephen Wiltshire, or scientist like Temple Grandin.