

What is autism? Ways you can help

Classic autism ... Autism ... Asperger syndrome ... Atypical autism ... High-functioning autism ... Pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) ... Pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) ... Semantic pragmatic disorder ... Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)

What do these words and phrases mean?

These words and phrases are all often used to describe forms of autism or conditions related to autism. Autism is a disability that affects the way a person communicates with other people and relates to the world around them.

People with autism have difficulties in three main areas. These are sometimes called the 'triad of impairments':

- Difficulty understanding and using language to communicate
- Difficulty in social interaction and relationships with people
- Limited imagination and inflexible thinking.

Many people with autism have unusual reactions to sensations such as sound, light or touch. They may also have learning disabilities, dyslexia or other difficulties.

People with Asperger syndrome, however, do not have learning disabilities but share the three main difficulties outlined above.

It is thought that there are more than 535,000 people with autism in the UK. Autism is more common in men than in women.

People with autism are not physically disabled. They do not need wheelchairs and most look just like anybody without the disability. Because of this, it can be harder for other people to understand what it is like to have autism.

"Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seem to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything." *A person with autism*

Please note that at the end of this page there is a list of words and phrases you may hear or read about this disability. We also give examples of the kinds of difficulties people with autism may face, and offer some ways to help.

Difficulty with language and communication skills

People with autism may:

- have difficulty understanding and using gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice
- find it difficult to respond to questions and instructions
- repeat what has been said. This is called 'echolalia'
- have difficulty in starting and maintaining a conversation
- take phrases literally, which can make it difficult to understand proverbs, jokes and common sayings. For example, the common phrase "It's cool!" may not mean that it is good or fashionable to a person with autism, who may think it is actually cold!
- use complex words, but not understand their meaning
- talk about a special interest they have, not noticing that others do not share this interest
- some people with autism may not develop speech.

The ways you can help

- Get the attention of the person before starting a conversation (for example, tap on their shoulder or say their name).
- Use language at a level that the person can understand.
- Speak clearly and keep your sentences short.
- Don't use indirect language with hidden meanings. A person with autism may answer "yes" to the question "Have you got a watch?" or "Do you know what the time is?" when you really meant, "What is the time?"
- Use pictures to help understanding.
- Allow time for the person to respond to what you have said.
- Think about other ways of communicating, such as writing, signing or using pictures if necessary.

Difficulty with social interaction and relationships with people

People with autism may:

- find it difficult to understand other people's emotions and feelings
- find it difficult to express their emotions and feelings in a socially acceptable manner
- want to interact with other people, but not know how to do it
- find it difficult to build relationships and friendships with others
- not understand the 'social rules' for different settings
- not want to share activities with others
- not like meeting other people
- find it difficult to recognise other people's emotions, likes and interests
- not seek comfort from others.

The ways you can help

- Accept that the person may need some time alone.
- Try to make your feelings clear. If you feel happy, look and say that you are happy.
- Explain the rules for a social situation and refer to them if needed.
- Encourage the person to interact with others, for example, if they like computers, could they join a computer club?
- Over time, help the person to develop social interaction skills, perhaps by practising situations at home or in school. A social worker, teacher or other professional may be able to help.
- Help the person to understand and explain their feelings. For example, give your child his favourite toy and say, "This makes you happy."

Limited imagination and inflexible thinking

People with autism may:

- enjoy structure and routine
- want to follow the same routine every day
- find change difficult
- find it difficult to understand subjects that require imagination, such as stories or religious education
- find it difficult to guess what other people are thinking
- have limited interests
- try to impose routines on others
- have difficulty in imaginative play and activities. For example, if you ask a child with autism to draw a house, he may answer "Which house?"

The ways you can help

- Structure the person's day, perhaps by using real objects, photographs, pictures or a written timetable.
- Provide time when they can do their favourite activities.
- Prepare the person for change by telling them about it in advance.
- Use visual means, such as a timetable, to introduce changes.
- Make gradual changes.
- Encourage the person to broaden their interests. For example, if your child collects chocolate wrappers, see if you can interest him in locating the countries where they are produced. This may lead to him learning more about the people and customs of different countries.
- Help in developing these interests into hobbies, if possible. For example, if your child likes tearing paper, you could try teaching him paper folding or origami.
- Provide opportunities to develop new or different interests. For example, if your teenage child likes water play, encourage him to learn swimming.
- Help in developing imaginative thinking. For example, hold up a piece of paper on which you have been writing and ask "What else can you do with this piece of paper?" Possible responses may be fold it, cut it into shapes or wrap something with it.

Behaviour

Because of the difficulties they experience, some people with autism may appear to behave inappropriately. This may happen because:

- they are trying to communicate
- they do not understand the social rules
- they are feeling anxious, scared or frustrated
- they enjoy a particular activity but do not understand its consequences. For example, one person with autism loved the sound of breaking glass but did not realise it was not safe or acceptable to break glass in public.

Sometimes you may not know why the person with autism is behaving in a particular way. A psychologist, doctor or a specialist teacher may be able to help you.

"Because a child with autism looks 'normal' others assume they are naughty or the parents are not controlling the child. Strangers frequently comment on this 'failing'." *A carer*

The ways you can help

- Work with the person to encourage better means of communication.
- Channel the behaviour into socially acceptable forms. For example, if the person likes clapping their hands loudly, encourage them to play an instrument like drums.
- If the person is anxious or upset, find a quiet place where they can calm down.
- If you know there is an object that will help the child to calm down, such as a favourite toy, keep this to hand.
- Provide alternatives where possible. For example, if the person does not like loud noises, give them earphones to wear when they are out and about.
- Seek a doctor's advice if you think that there may be a medical problem
- Slowly expose them to some of the situations that they are finding difficult.
- Provide time for them to do their favourite activity in a safe environment.

Strengths

- Most people with autism are good at learning visually. Using real objects, pictures, demonstrations and written material can all help.
- Some people with autism have a good eye for detail and accuracy.
- Once learned, information, routine or processes are likely to be retained. For example, some may be good at music, numbers, facts or computers.
- Some can focus on their special interest for a long time and may choose to study or work in related areas

- The love of routine can make individuals with autism reliable employees in an organised, structured environment.

What causes autism?

No one is sure of the cause but research shows possible genetic links. It may also be associated with the way the brain has developed before, during or soon after birth.

Autism is not caused by poor parenting or a child's upbringing.

Is there a 'cure'?

There is no known 'cure' for autism. Children with autism grow up to become adults with autism. However, early diagnosis and good education and support can help most people learn skills and progress. Some may go into further education and employment.

Terms you may hear

Autistic spectrum condition (ASC) or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) – a general name or umbrella term for all the variations of the disability.

Asperger syndrome – a form of autism where people share the three main areas of difficulty but do not have learning difficulties or delayed speech development.

Atypical autism – people with atypical autism do not share all three main areas of difficulty. Atypical autism may not be noticed before three years of age.

Classic autism/Kanner syndrome – another name for autism.

Diagnosis – the identification of autism, usually by a health professional.

Dyslexia – this condition causes difficulty with learning to read, write and spell.

Echolalia – repeating words which have just been spoken by other people.

Inflexible thinking – having rigid patterns of thought, difficulty understanding different viewpoints, new ideas and broad concepts.

High-functioning autism – the same as Asperger syndrome, but with delayed speech development.

Pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) – an umbrella term referring to ASD and some other conditions, for example, Fragile X syndrome. PDD is an American term.

Pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) – another name for atypical autism. PDD-NOS is an American term.

Semantic pragmatic disorder – difficulties with social interaction and language but not with imaginative thinking. This is not a common term in the UK.

Social interaction – communicating with and responding to other people in a wide range of social settings.

Social rules – accepted ways of behaving in different settings, such as school, home and office.

Spectrum – people with autism are affected by their disability to different degrees, so autism is known as a 'spectrum condition' which ranges from 'low-functioning' to 'high-functioning'.

Triad of impairments – the three main difficulties that people with autism have.

Visual supports – pictures, photographs or written materials that help understanding.

Where can I get more information?

If you would like more information about autism, contact the Autism Helpline or visit our website: www.autism.org.uk

Autism Helpline
Open Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm
Tel: 0845 070 4004
Minicom: 0845 070 4003
Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

The Autism Helpline has a Language Line service for callers from the UK. This allows us to provide information through an interpreter in 150 languages. Someone has to speak in English at first to let us know which language you speak. We will then call you back.

The National Autistic Society
393 City Road
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