

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

An information leaflet for carers.

Introduction

This leaflet has been written for carers and staff who are supporting an individual with an autistic spectrum disorder.



The leaflet provides information on:

- The definition of autism – what the word autism means
- The underlying difficulties linked with autism
- Some practical advice and ideas for supporting an individual who has autism

What is autism?

Autism is:

- A developmental condition that is there from birth and throughout life



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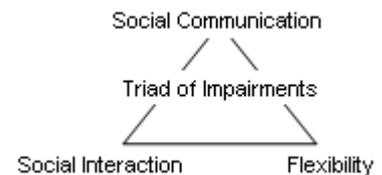
- Caused by a dysfunction of the brain



- A condition that can run in families but can happen spontaneously



- Diagnosed by using the triad of behavioural impairments



What are the underlying difficulties linked with autism?

The term 'Triad of Impairment' describes the three key areas and wide range of behaviours which are affected in individuals with autism. These include;

1. Impairments in **Social Interaction.**



- Deficits in understanding how to behave and interact with other people
 - May have difficulty understanding unwritten social rules relating to touch, proximity, turn taking, appropriate use of language etc
- May be unaware of different ways to interact with different people e.g. friends, staff, strangers
- May want to have friends and relationships but struggles to initiate and maintain these

E.g. Touching a stranger because they are attracted by the feel of the person's clothes.

2. Impairments in **Social Communication.**

Deficits in ability to communicate effectively with other people

- May communicate for own needs rather than for social engagement
- May talk about own interests regardless of the listener's response
- Possible absence of desire to communicate
- May have difficulty "reading between the lines"



*E.g. Becoming distressed due to literal interpretation of speech;
"That will cost an arm and a leg"
"My eyes popped out of my head"*

3. Impairments in **Imagination.**

Deficits in flexible thinking regarding interests, routines, perspectives and rules



- interests and obsessions, often to the detriment of their own wellbeing
- May not understand other people's point of view or feelings
- May be agitated by change
- May not generalise information

E.g. Refusing to get on the bus because there is a different driver

Other areas of difficulty that you may notice associated with autism are also a result of the triad of impairments. These include:

Cognition / Thinking

When people with autism are under stress, they often react emotionally rather than logically and have problems thinking through appropriate responses.



They may have a rage/tantrum, or say inappropriate phrases because of difficulties with self-control.

Generalisation

People with autism often have difficulties in using their knowledge and skills in different settings and with different individuals and may have problems in learning from past experiences.

Someone with autism may know how to act appropriately in one situation but may not be able to act appropriately in the same situation involving different people, or in different situations involving the same people.

Each situation may feel like a new experience for which they may need prompts to remember what to do.

Maturity

Individuals with autism can seem immature, looking and acting much younger than they actually are (even older adults).



Rote Memory (Learning by Heart)



Rote memory can be thought of as an asset, it can however create difficulties for someone with autism. Because of well-developed rote memory skills, they may give the impression that they understand when in fact they do not. They may be able to recall large chunks of information but cannot use it flexibly or apply it within situations.

Chunks of information may be stored in memory, but it can be difficult for someone with autism to retrieve them. For example open ended questions such as, "Tell me what the main character in the story did after his horse disappeared", may not get an answer because the person has stored the information under the main character's name and is unable to make the link from the term 'main character' to her actual name.

Problem-Solving



A person with autism may choose one problem-solving strategy and use it constantly regardless of the situation or outcome. They may not know any others and so do not know how to adapt to changing situations, this can lead to frustrations and may show in their behaviour.

Language

Someone with autism can have good structural language skills, such as clear pronunciation and correct syntax, (sentence structure), but have great problems in using it in the correct context. Problems can include:



- Repeating the same phrase over and over.
- Talking with exaggerated accent, or in a droning style.
- Discussing at length a single topic that is of little interest to others
- Experiencing difficulty in maintaining a conversation unless it focuses on a particular, narrowly defined topic.

Non-verbal communication difficulties include;

- Proximity – standing closer, or further away from people during a conversation.
- Intensely staring at another person for long periods during conversation.
- Failing to make eye contact.
- Having an inexpressive face, which doesn't show interest, approval, or disapproval in another person's conversation.
- Failing to use, or understand gestures and facial expressions.



Visual Processing



Generally we know that people with autism understand information more easily if it is shown to them in a visual way, rather than given verbally. This is extremely important and can help someone make sense of a very confusing world.

Sensory Issues

Odd responses to sensory stimuli such as, touch, smell, taste, noise, visual information, pain and textures. This can either be an over or under sensitive reaction.



Behaviour

Behavioural difficulties are often the result of the Triad of impairments such as;

- A lack of understanding of a social situation
- High stress levels
- Lack of control over the environment and problems coping with change
- An obsessive and single-minded pursuit of a certain interest

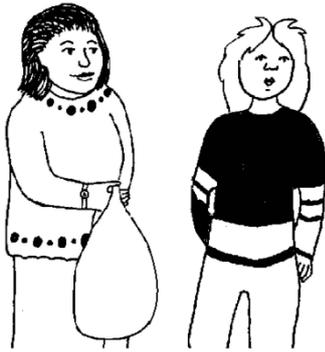


Stress and Excitement

A person with autism may not show stress in the usual way through for example tone of voice or posture. As a result, their agitation may increase to a point of crisis because others are not aware of their discomfort. Excitement often causes the same reaction as stress.



Distractibility and Inattention



- Attention can often seem fleeting.
- Social interactions are often distracting for the person with autism.
- Distractions may occur because they do not know how to filter out relevant from irrelevant information and so attend to everything.

Tunnel Vision

Having the ability to focus attention on one particular thing while ignoring all others is very difficult for the person with autism

Structure, Organisation and Flexibility

People with often either have an ability to provide structure for themselves or they totally rely on others to help them organise themselves.



It is generally easier for people with autism to function in an organised environment. Predictable schedules and environments help them to cope. Unscheduled events cause the person great discomfort which may be shown by disorientation or difficult behaviour.

Supporting a Person with Autism

Communication



Problem behaviours in people with autism often result from communication problems – not understanding what is asked of them or misinterpretation or anxiety about future.

There is a need to support their difficulties with understanding words and making sense of social situations. Look at how to adjust your communication to enable the individual to make sense of language.

You need to Change the Way you communicate in order for the person with autism to understand.

Here are some simple suggestions.

DO:

- Use the person's name to gain his attention first.
- Use key words and make speech very specific – reduce the fillers!
- Say things in the order they will happen.
- Give choices.
- Tell him **what to do** not **what not to do**, e.g.; “sit down” and point to the chair.
- Use pictures, symbols or actions to back up what you say.
- Use the word “finished” to indicate that something has ended
- Use the word “then” to help him understand the sequence of events.
- Expect a literal understanding.
- Think about the individual, do they: -
- Focus on key words or one word in a sentence?
- Rely on visual cues?
- React to the situation rather than the words?

You could try writing your own examples of how you put this in to practice and what the outcome was as a way of tuning in to how the individual understands the world around them.



Visual Communication

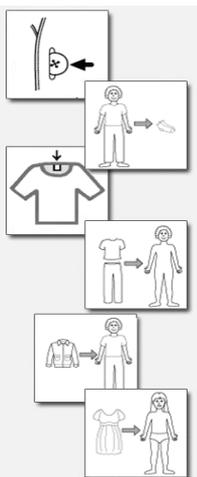
Some people do not feel that using more visual prompts will be helpful but have a look at the questions below before making your mind up

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- Do you leave notes to remind yourself?
- Do you write checklists?
- Do you follow recipes in cookery books?
- Do you read a sign to tell you where to go/which line to stand in?
- Do you point to a picture on a menu?



If so, you have used VISUAL AIDS to help you organise, communicate and make choices.



VISUAL STRUCTURE is essential for people with autism so have a think about how you can build this into the person's daily life.

For example, have written/picture sequences/check lists of daily routines such as getting ready in the morning that they can follow. Prepare them before a new event by showing them pictures/leaflets of where they are going, show photographs of people and let them keep hold of them.

Behaviour

Problem behaviours can be thought of as having a purpose and are aimed at achieving specific results. Behaviour serves a **FUNCTION** for the person. For example it may be a way of;

- Gaining attention
- Refusing to do something
- Expressing a need e.g. for food or
- Expressing feelings e.g. pain or boredom.



The challenge is to first work out what they are trying to tell you and then-

- Teach and encourage appropriate ways of asking for what they want in place of the inappropriate behaviour e.g. using a gesture or word to show you they are thirsty instead of throwing the cup.
- Teach skills that are Physically Incompatible with inappropriate behaviour e.g. looking for items in the shop rather than hand flapping.
- Teach skills that are Functionally incompatible e.g. teach turn taking to reduce anxiety so they will be more likely to stay and finish the game.



Functions of behaviour

Examples of functions of or reasons for behaviour and appropriate ways of responding.

REASON FOR BEHAVIOUR	MANAGEMENT
Seeking attention Only happens when child is NOT doing anything	Ignore it Give more stimulation.
Fear of situation/object. When tired/hungry.	Treat the fear and help reduce the anxiety. Give rest/food.
Reacts to parent's tiredness or irritability.	Reduce parents stress
When overloaded with long sentences.	Reduce complexity of language.

Here are some ways of encouraging appropriate behaviour once you have worked out the reason for a person's problem behaviour. There is some jargon used but we need to use it to properly explain what we mean.

Useful approaches

1. Positive Reinforcement: - Decide on what the goal is for the person and then use tokens/star charts to chart success and motivate them to reach the goal. Use things that you know they like and make it "real" for the individual (remember-focus on visual approaches).



2. Reward 'appropriate' behaviour rather than punish 'inappropriate'. Praise the times when they do what you want e.g. getting dressed on their own, this makes it more likely to happen again!

3. Change the environment: For example taking the bulb out of a light removes the 'fun' of switching it on and off.



4. Differential reinforcement: Give lots of attention to behaviour you want to encourage which is not compatible with the problem behaviour e.g. slapping the television when it is on a favourite programme. Turn off the TV wait until they sit away from television then switch it on.



Rewarding sitting away (incompatible with slapping the TV) with access to the television programme.

5. Alter the environment: Remove dangerous items from reach/restrict access e.g. locks on door, fences around gardens, ornaments out of reach.



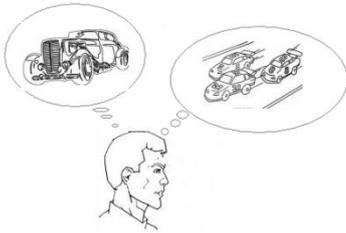
6. Extinction: remove attention from behaviour e.g. head banging and encourage appropriate alternative behaviour by giving attention when head banging stops.



By using the above approaches, we can encourage people with autism to learn more appropriate behaviour and reduce our own levels of stress.

Managing Repetitive behaviours and movements

These often result from a need for sameness and for things not to change. It makes the world less confusing and more predictable and so is a way of reducing stress and anxiety.

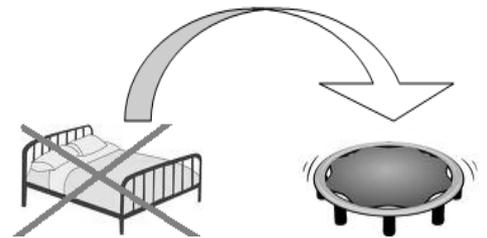


For example: - Flapping, spinning objects, licking, smelling, odd sounds, lining up objects, flicking lights, attachment to one bit of a key, interest in cars, numbers, adverts, and other special topics of interest.

They act as comforts, a way to manage stress but they can interfere with other things. You can intervene but do not try to stop them all at once.

Strategies to try:

- Controlling access – use them to motivate the person to become involved in other activities and reward them with their special interest.
- Restructure the environment e.g. encourage them to bounce on a trampoline not a bed.
- Use the behaviour constructively e.g. if they like pushing buttons on machines find ways to incorporate this in everyday activities.



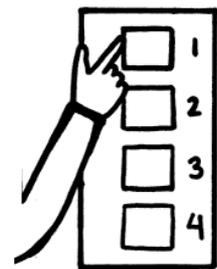
Insistence on sameness:



- Use a visual timetable, including pictures, symbols or words to show a more flexible approach.
- Prepare them verbally before an outing/activity. Go over what will happen and in what sequence then give them a visual record to take with them.

Repetitive questions:

- Use a visual timetable to show what will happen next.
- Prompt to 'go and see' by showing the timetable when asked. If used consistently the hope is that they learn to look at this to gain reassurance. This also reduces your own stress levels.
- Limit the number of times you will respond and stick to it consistently.



Obsessive routines and rituals:

We're using a different cup today



- Provide appropriate opportunities where these routines can be made constructive.
- Use distraction. Join the person in his routine and gradually begin to vary it. E.g. walking around in circles.
- Introduce 'change' slowly.
- Begin to use the word 'different'.
- Try to stop obsessions before they start by being alert to the person's tendency to do this. Intervene and distract early.

For more information contact: Eleanor Porter

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Sources

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- **Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments** by Brenda Smith-Myles & Jack Southwick, Autism, Asperger Publishing Company, 1999.