

AUTISM

PART 1



‘We’re usually very visual learners with poor short-term memory, so we’ll forget much of what you tell us almost immediately unless we read it or write it down, are shown something in the format of picture/graphics/video, or can relate it quickly to some other long term memory we have.’

Pixie. An autistic teenager

What it is

Autism is a life-long developmental disability affecting social and communication skills and the way in which people experience the world around them. It is not classified as a specific learning difficulty.

What it means

Autism can be disabling and debilitating if it is not accepted and supported appropriately. It is a spectrum disorder; this means that an individual may exhibit a wide range of issues. Furthermore, these issues can vary widely from one individual to another. Challenges may also vary for an individual person on a daily basis, meaning they may be more or less sensitive to particular things on different days.



Individuals have challenges with:

- **Social Communication:** People with autism have challenges with verbal and non-verbal communication; for example, they may have difficulty interpreting the meaning of gestures, facial expressions, or intonation and tone of voice. People with autism often understand the meaning behind these areas of communication but can struggle with how they vary according to context. For example, a raised voice can indicate anger or excitement and people with autism may find it difficult to interpret which of these emotions is being conveyed. They can have a wide and extensive vocabulary but may use language that is overly formal or literal in meaning.
- **Social Interaction:** Children and adults with autism have challenges with social relationships. They may, for example, appear aloof and indifferent to other people. Due to challenges in reading facial expressions and body language, people with autism may engage in long monologues or interrupt conversations in a way that can seem inappropriate.
- **Imagination:** There is a weakness in the development of play and imagination; for example, autistic children do not develop creative “let’s pretend” play in the way that other children do. They have a limited range of imaginative activities, possibly copied and pursued rigidly and repetitively. Issues with social imagination mean that people with autism often find it challenging to visualise what is coming next. This can lead to a reliance on structure and routine or raised levels of anxiety when plans change unexpectedly.
- **Sensory needs:** People with autism can be over or under sensitive to all 7 senses (touch, taste, sight, sound, smell, vestibular and proprioception.) Also, their ability to process these senses is not static and can change depending on levels of stress. This can mean that people on the autism spectrum require occupational therapy adjustments.

