

# A POCKET GUIDE to Autism



A lifelong neurodevelopmental disability present from birth which causes difficulty in communicating, forming relationships, understanding abstract concepts and sensory processing.

## WHAT IS AUTISM?

## WHO IS AUTISTIC?

Autism can be found anywhere, regardless of one's class, ethnicity, gender or sexual

orientation. Diagnoses are statistically more common in males, but increased understanding of it in recent years has seen more and more females being diagnosed.

No. An intellectual disability is broadly defined as impacting on adaptability and reasoning skills. An autistic person may however be separately diagnosed with an intellectual disability.

## IS AUTISM AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY?

## WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

No one knows yet. There is thought to be a genetic link within families. Research into autism's causes are ongoing. It has been disproven that vaccines cause autism.

Autism is not a condition that can be thought of as 'curable' or 'incurable.' It has no physical symptoms, is not medicated for and everyone diagnosed feels it differently. It is instead addressed by different therapies and strategies for self-development.

## IS THERE A CURE?

# WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF

## WHY DO AUTISTIC PEOPLE HAVE TROUBLE WITH SENSORY PROCESSING?

We all interpret the world around us through our five senses – sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. How we interact with our physical surroundings and the people we meet every day is based on the information our brain receives from these senses.

Autistic individuals' minds are wired differently from others and many would struggle to process the same sensory data. This difficulty factors into a much wider picture about the condition's traits and informs how an autistic person interacts with their surroundings.

Those living with the condition can be over-active (hyposensitive) or under-reactive (hyposensitive) to sensory stimuli at any given time. How much varies from person to person and many on the spectrum will have their own unique inputs, such as odours, sounds or textures, which comforts or distresses them.

A noise which sounds normal to you may be intolerable for someone who is hypersensitive to volume. Equally, a hyposensitive person may prefer stimuli levels that would be too much for most people, such as strong tastes or heavy clothing.

# AUTISM? WHAT ARE SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES?

**TOUCH** OF A GENTLE PAT ON THE SHOULDER . . .

**HYPERSENSITIVE:**

can feel like a hard punch.



**HYPOSENSITIVE:**

needs deep pressure and may feel irritated by light touch.

**SOUNDS** THAT YOU MAY NOT BE AWARE OF . . .

**HYPERSENSITIVE:**

All build up and might overwhelm someone.



**HYPOSENSITIVE:**

May need to turn the volume up and seek out loud noises.

**SMELLS** THAT YOU MAY NOT NOTICE . . . **LIGHTS** THAT SEEM FINE TO YOU . . .

**HYPERSENSITIVE:**

Overpowering and may cause headaches and nausea.

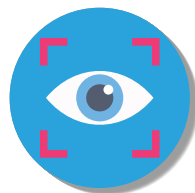


**HYPOSENSITIVE:**

May not even notice or might like to wear strong aftershave

**HYPERSENSITIVE:**

Could be dazzling, blinding and disorientating.



**HYPOSENSITIVE:**

May not be able to see clearly or may need extra light.

**TASTES** THAT ARE QUITE STANDARD TO YOU . . .

**HYPERSENSITIVE:**

Could taste out-of-date or undercooked.



**HYPOSENSITIVE:**

May prefer strong tastes or seek out sweeteners and spices to put in meals.

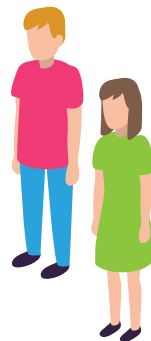
**STANDING STILL (PROPRIOCEPTION)** . . .

**HYPERSENSITIVE:**

Might cause dizziness or the need to stim.

**HYPOSENSITIVE:**

May need to change position to read the space around them.



## WHAT ARE THE COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES?

### SPEECH

- Some People Have Little Or No Speech And May Use Pictures, Signing Or Technology To Communicate.
- Some people are somewhere in between.

Communication is one of the biggest challenges faced by autistic people. Many will experience delays in developing their speech and understanding language. Others may never use verbal ways to interact at all and will instead utilise technology and picture tools to communicate. What is important to understand here is that **just because someone can't speak, doesn't mean that they have nothing to say.**

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### LANGUAGE

Autistic people are often very direct and literal when communicating. For many on the spectrum, things like slang, metaphors, sarcasm and abstract language are difficult to understand. When interacting with them, **say what you mean and say it clearly.**

A collection of colorful handprints in various colors (yellow, blue, green, purple, pink) and sizes, some overlapping. Three speech bubbles are present: a blue one at the top left, a pink one at the top right, and a green one at the bottom center. In the bottom right corner, there is a cartoon illustration of a man in a white shirt and tie looking confused, holding a multi-colored umbrella. Above him, there are raindrops and small icons of a black cat, a dog, and a lion.

CAN YOU GIVE ME  
A HAND WITH THIS?

*No, I need both my hands.*

IT'S RAINING  
CATS & DOGS

*Really? I just see usual rain.*

FIX IT FOR ME,  
IF YOU DON'T MIND?

*You asked me if I minded and I did, so don't be surprised when I chose not to do it.*

## SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

A conversation between two people involves more aspects than one person speaking and another listening and answering. Tone of voice, facial expressions and body language tell us a lot about what the other person really means. Understanding these can be tough for an autistic person.

**What may be a misunderstanding on their autistic person's part may be seen as ignorant or rude.**

### FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

*Is that person crying with sadness or joy?*

*Are they laughing at a joke or me because I've said or done something stupid?*

## SOCIAL IMAGINATION

Accurately interpreting social situations is challenging for many autistic people. Context blindness is thought to be the source of this problem in a lot of instances. This means that understanding a new environment's bearing on a conversation can take time for an autistic person's brain to fully process.

### WHAT DOES CONTEXT BLINDNESS INVOLVE?

- Unaware and uncertainty of social norms and customs within particular settings.
- Difficulty reading non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expressions.
- Misunderstanding voice pitch and tone, sarcasm and slang.

**What's the craic?**

**That's gas!**

**What's the story!**

### HOW CAN I HELP?

- Ensure that we explain our actions and choose words carefully to avoid misunderstanding.
- Teach emotions in context. We never see facial expressions without the context that helps us to understand them.
- Begin with what a person is familiar with and what they will recognize with and teach at a slow enough pace to ensure understanding.

# STIMMING

Stimming (Self-Stimulatory Behaviour) is a series of repetitive actions which help regulate the body's sensory system in autistic people.

Almost everyone engages in stimming to some degree in their own way. They might crack their knuckles, tap their feet, or even just hum and whistle. Autistic people are usually more overt when stimming. Flapping their hands, rocking back and forth and repeating certain words are just some of the ways they regulate their sensory processing.



It's important to be aware and understanding when an autistic person is stimming. Some methods may appear odd or even inappropriate to onlookers, especially if it's an adult, but drawing attention to their stimming will only cause more distress.

If an autistic individual doesn't get an opportunity to stim and meet their sensory needs, then they may withdraw and 'shut down' or experience a meltdown.

## WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE OVERLOADED?

- YOU HAVE 20 WINDOWS OPEN ON YOUR COMPUTER.
- YOU MUST KEEP TRACK OF ALL OF THEM. THE COMPUTER IS GETTING HOT.
- IT FREEZES - NO ACTION - NO AMOUNT OF BANGING THE KEYBOARD WILL MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE.
- IT IS IN SHUTDOWN MODE. THE FAN IS RUNNING TRYING TO COOL IT. YOU CAN DO NOTHING BUT WAIT.
- THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE IN TRYING TO COOL IT. YOU CAN DO NOTHING BUT WAIT.
- LOUD NOISES (EARS AND HEAD HURTS).
- I FEEL DIZZY AND SICK.
- I HAVE TO MAKE SENSE OF WHAT IS HAPPENING.
- I AM ASKED QUESTIONS BUT NO WORDS ARE COMING OUT
- TOO MANY PEOPLE ARE TOUCHING ME - IT HURTS.

**STOP WORLD, I WANT TO GET OFF!**

## MELTDOWNS

Major anxiety and overstimulation can overwhelm autistic people. A meltdown is a response to overwhelming situations where too much stimuli will overload a person's brain. They will temporarily lose control of their behaviour and often become emotional. This loss of control can be expressed verbally (eg shouting, screaming, crying), physically (eg kicking, lashing out, biting) or in both ways.



### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Don't stare at or judge them.
- Give them enough time and space to vent.
- Calmly ask them (or their parent, carer or friend) if they're okay.
- Set up or find a quiet, safe place where they can recover.

## HOW CAN YOU HELP SOMEONE WITH AUTISM?

### COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

- Be clear, easy to understand and patient.
- Use visual instructions and directions.
- Give the person time to process a question (count to 10).

### REACH OUT

- An autistic person may prefer to step away from crowded social situations, and that's okay.
- A person with autism may need to be alone sometimes and that is fine.
- Always invite them to events or social outings-even they refuse, keep offering.
- Ask the person to social outings that you know they might like.

### BE SENSORY AWARE

- Conduct a sensory audit in your school, college or workplace. Be aware of the sensory environment.
- Provide reassurance.
- Give the autistic person notice of any changes that might or are going to happen and explain why there's been a change in routine.
- Provide instructions in as clear a way as possible when issuing tasks. Explain the goal, what to expect, how to do it, what's expected of the person and how things will work.

### HOW CAN YOU BE ADAPTABLE?

- Understand that autistic individuals find changes in routine and environment difficult.
- Ask them about their sensory needs and what their preferences are to develop strategies for adapting and coping.
- Tackle biases by challenging autism myths when you hear or see them in daily life.
- See the person first, not the disability.



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