

Supporting Autistic People

A learning resource for staff supporting people
with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

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Introduction

In this workbook, you will find information about the nature of Autism and how it affects people. It explores the difficulties autistic people experience with social imagination and with communicating and interacting with others socially. It also considers the range of sensory issues and preferences sometimes experienced by autistic people.

Flexibility of thought and transitioning or changing from one activity or routine to a different one can be difficult for people with autism, the reasons for this and information on how we can help are also included.

Each section provides advice on building strategies of support. At the end of each section there is a quiz to help you check what you have learned. This learning resource aims to enable staff to develop the skills and expertise to support autistic people in a safe, responsive and inclusive way. In short to assist autistic people to enjoy a good quality of life and achieve their aspirations.

What is Autism?

The National Autistic Society describes Autism as:

'A lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them.'

Autism affects the way the brain processes information.

Autism is described as a 'spectrum disorder' that means that there are different levels of severity, people will be affected differently.

Autism is a lifelong condition; children with autism become adults with autism.

How common is Autism

There are almost 700,000 people in the UK who have Autism

That is over 1:100 people. The number of people diagnosed with Autism has greatly increased in recent years and this is probably due to greater awareness of the condition and better practice in healthcare.

It is important that people with Autism get a timely diagnosis. It can be helpful for adults to understand why they have difficulties in certain areas. For children it is especially important to receive a correct diagnosis so that they can access the right kind of support and services as early as possible.

Approximately four times more men than women are affected by Autism. The reasons for this are not yet fully understood. It maybe that girls with Autism often present as more socially able and are less likely to be diagnosed.

Autism and Learning Disabilities

Approximately 50 % of people with Autism also have a leaning disability. Some autistic people may also have learning difficulties such as Dyslexia or Dyspraxia

Autistic Spectrum

Autism is described as a spectrum Disorder, which means that how it affects people can vary a lot. Some people will have severe disability, perhaps with very limited or no verbal communication while others will be described as high functioning. Some people with Autism may lead very independent lives, while others will need ongoing specialist support.

Asperger's Syndrome

This is a form of Autism, people with Asperger's syndrome usually have average or above average intelligence. They have fewer problems with speech but may still have difficulties with processing language, that is understanding what has been said.

How does Autism affect people?

As we have discussed, Autism affects people in different ways and to different degrees. However, everyone with Autism will experience some difficulty with:

Social Communication – understanding verbal communication, understanding facial expressions or tone of voice.

Social Interaction – understanding unwritten social rules, picking appropriate topics of conversation, taking things literally.

Social Imagination – guessing and predicting what might happen, knowing what other people think or know.

This is called the ‘**dyad of Impairment**’ We will look at these areas in more detail in the next section and consider ways to support people with social communication and interactions.

Sensory Issues

People with Autism may also experience sensory issues. This can affect any of the five senses, sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. A person may be over or under sensitive and this can affect any sense. Sensory issues may cause people with Autism to have a strong like or dislike for certain smells, tastes, textures. It is useful to remember that a person may be over-sensitive in one area and under-sensitive in another. Later we will look at some examples and ways to support people with Sensory issues.

Flexibility of Thought.

This is the term used to describe some of the issues people with Autism experience because of the difficulties they have with social imagination. This can involve things like interpreting other people’s thoughts and feelings, predicting what will happen next, imagining alternative outcomes, problem solving and working out consequences or seeing the bigger picture. This is one reason why people with Autism tend to prefer structure and routine in their lives.

It is important to remember that having difficulties with social imagination does not mean that people with Autism cannot use imagination in other ways. Autistic people can be very creative and there are many examples of talented artists. Later, we will look at ways we can support autistic people to develop flexibility of thought and problem-solving strategies.

Transitioning

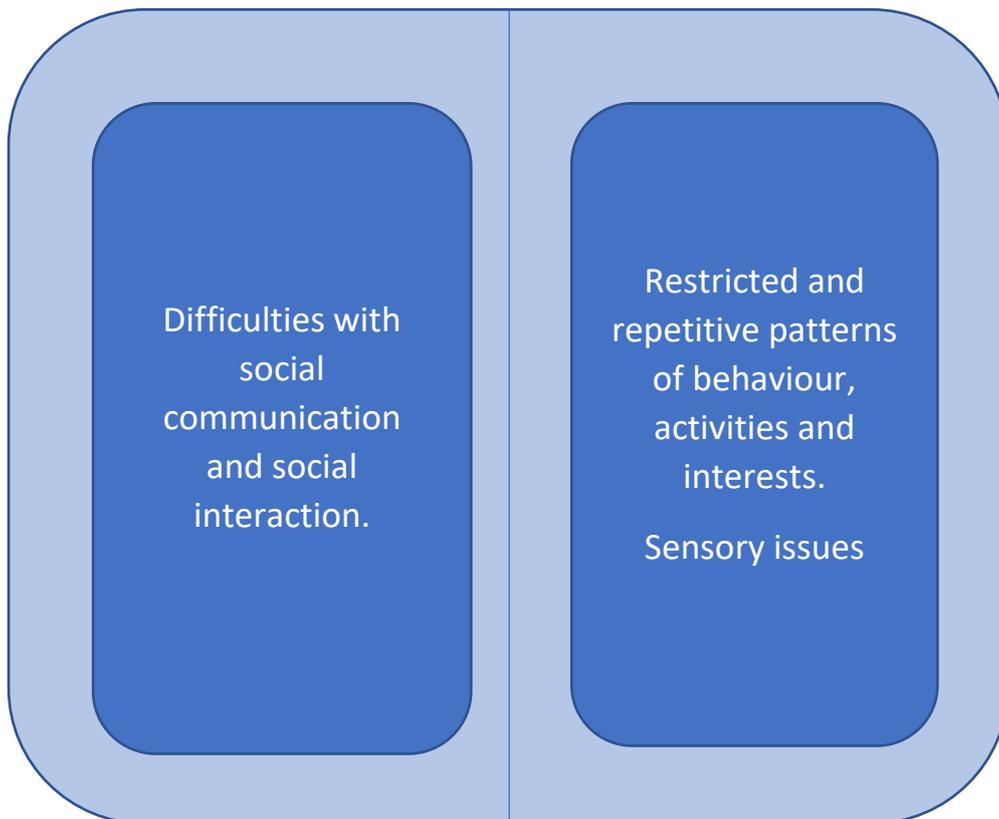
Many people with Autism experience difficulty with change. This can be small changes such as moving from one activity to the next during the day, or coping with bigger life events such as leaving school or moving house. Careful preparation and planning are very important aspects of supporting of supporting autistic people to make successful transitions and reducing the distress and anxiety that people may experience. Later, we will look at strategies to support people with transitions.

Let's review our knowledge of Autism and how it affects people

1. Autism is a developmental disorder which affects which of the following?
 - A) How a person communicates and relates to others
 - B) The brain processes information
 - C) How the person makes sense of the world around them
2. Everyone with Autism has a high IQ True or false
3. How common is Autism?
 - A) 1 in 10 people have Autism
 - B) 1 in 100 people have Autism
 - C) 1 in 1,000 people have Autism
4. People with Autism may have difficulty understanding what is being communicated by facial expression or tone of voice? True or false
5. People with Autism may have difficulty in social situations because of which of the following?
 - A) They don't want to make friends or need social contact
 - B) They may have difficulty with verbal communication
 - C) They may not understand 'unwritten' social rules
 - D) They may have difficulty guessing what other people think or know.
6. Issues with social imagination can cause people with Autism to have difficulties with which of the following:
 - A) problem solving
 - B) predicting what will happen next
 - C) seeing the 'big picture'
 - D) learning to paint or play a musical instrument
7. People with Autism only have difficult with major changes and life events. True or false

How did you score? /7

What is the Dyad of impairment?



Let's look at those in more detail

Social Communication

What sort of difficulties are these? A lot of what we communicate is done non-verbally that is, using facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice. People with autism may have difficulty understanding these.

Autistic People may take what is said literally, they may have difficulty understanding sarcasm, jokes, puns and metaphors. This can make it difficult to join-in in social situations and also, what people say may be misinterpreted.

Here are some examples

Saying 'good catch' when someone has dropped the ball.

Saying 'That's cool' when we mean something is good.

Saying 'it's raining cats and dogs'

'I could eat a horse' when we are hungry.

People with Autism may have difficulties with language. This can range widely from needing a little longer to process what has been said to not using spoken language at all.

There is often a difference between expressive ability and receptive ability.

That is, someone may be articulate and have a large vocabulary, but they may still need extra time to understand what someone has said to them. This can lead the person to appear to have understood more than they have.

Sometimes it is useful check understanding by asking questions or asking the person to explain what has been said.

Social interaction

Social situations can be challenging for people with Autism. They may have difficulty in making and maintaining friendships or understanding unwritten social rules, such as personal space or suitable topics of conversation. They may find it very hard to 'read' people and so they find others to be confusing and unpredictable. One person with Autism described how they had difficulty 'working out what other people know' and 'guessing what other people are thinking', *Source National Autistic Society.*

People with Autism also describe difficulty knowing what to do if they 'get it wrong' in a social situation. Unfamiliar situations and meeting new people can be particularly hard. Often people with Autism can appear aloof or disinterested when in fact, they are anxious and unsure how to act.

It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that all people with Autism are 'loners' who don't want to make friends or have a social life. This is often not the case, a survey in 2012 found that 65% of people with Autism would like to have more friends. Source National Autistic Society

Support strategies can help people to develop their social abilities and reduce the anxiety that social situation provoke. Later we look at some suggestions to help support people in social situations.

Social Imagination

Issues with social imagination can make it difficult for people with Autism to imagine alternative outcomes to situations and to predict what might happen next. It can be hard to understand or interpret other people's thoughts, feelings or actions. It can be difficult to put themselves 'in someone else's shoes'. We often use our imaginations to help us problem solve in social situations and this can be difficult for people with Autism.

Children with Autism often prefer more structured concrete hobbies to 'let's pretend' games and can be very focused on their hobby or special interest. These interests are often maintained into adulthood and can be a helpful as a common interest, for developing social skills and making friends.

It is important to remember that people with autism can be imaginative in the conventional sense of the word and many are talented in music or the arts.

Supporting people with their Social Communication.

'If you have Asperger syndrome understanding Conversation is like trying to understand a foreign language'. *Source National Autistic Society.*

Social communication is made up of much more than one person using words to convey information to another person. It also consists of, gestures, facial expressions body language, personal space and tone of voice. Neither is the way we use language straight forward; ordinary conversation is full of double meanings, jokes, sarcasm, metaphors and banter. In addition to this, circumstance will dictate how we interact with others, for instance people may use different language and behave more formally at a job interview than they would with a group or friends. These variations of how we interact with others can be very subtle.

As we have discussed people with Autism often have difficulty understanding, facial expressions, gestures tone of voice and body language. They can also have trouble with understanding jokes, sarcasm and innuendo, they may take what is said literally.

Unwritten social rules which people just pick up as they grow up can pose a difficulty for autism people. For instance, how close to stand next to someone, what to talk about when you've just met someone, how to interrupt in a group when you have something to say.

Given all this, it is easy to understand why people with Autism can have great difficulty with social communication and find themselves very anxious in social situations.

Supporting People with Social Communication.

How can we help autistic people to communicate more effectively and reduce the anxiety of social situations?

Firstly, a good understanding of the person is essential. It is important to know which areas a person has difficulty with and how extensive the issues are for them. As you get to know the person make sure all their communication needs are documented in their Person-Centred Plan.

What type of situations does the person find difficult, consider if sensory issues are involved. For example, avoiding parties because of loud music or lighting levels if someone is over sensitive to noise or perhaps under sensitive to light.

When speaking to the person try to use plain language. Give clear instructions and explanations. For instance, 'we will go to the supermarket at 10 o'clock' rather than 'we might go shopping later this morning'.

Planning and rehearsing can help someone feel prepared and less anxious. For instance, 'when we go to see the Doctor tomorrow, she will ask are you are? You can tell her that you are fine but your leg is sore and she will examine it and tell us what the problem is'.

Encourage people to speak for themselves and help out if they get stuck rather than 'taking over'. It can increase someone's confidence to know that you will help out if they get stuck explaining or understanding something.

Give extra time for processing language, sometimes people with Autism need a little long to comprehend what has been said and to respond. Don't assume that because a person is high functioning or is articulate that they don't need a little more time to process language.

Check understanding, don't assume that someone has understood everything that has been said to them, especially in a stressful situation or if the information is complex. Always make sure that the person has understood, by asking questions tactfully and asking them to explain it to you.

Teach the rules, explain jokes, metaphors and local expressions, when people use them, give advice about social rules for instance, how we stand at arm's length from people so they don't feel crowded. Practice for social situations, for instance with prompts about suitable topics of conversation and social activities, 'when we see Tom at the party tomorrow you could ask him about his new football team and ask if he would like to come to the match with us on Saturday'

Language isn't everything, many people with Autism are visual learners, consider using pictures and charts for instance to prompt people with housework or routine. For example, a chart in the person's flat with the days of the week and a picture of the jobs to be done. Remember to make the most of the technology available, sometimes people with Autism find it easier to use texting or email. Support may be needed with using social media, such as twitter or Facebook.

Social Interaction.

'I have difficulty picking up social clues and difficulty in knowing what to do when I get things wrong'. *Source National Autistic Society*

Social communication and social interaction are of course closely linked. Some of the strategies mentioned in the previous section will be helpful in supporting people with Autism to achieve as full and active social life as they want, as well as helping to relieve anxiety in other situations such as attending college, work or voluntary jobs, attending the Doctor or other appointments, even going on holiday.

Planning is vital, many people with Autism like to have routines and changes to routine can be a source of anxiety. When we sit down with someone to discuss their goals and aspirations, we make a note of the outcomes people want to achieve. It is helpful to build these tasks into a daily or weekly routine.

Remember that charts and pictures displayed in a person's flat can be a good way of representing the routine. As we have mentioned practicing and rehearsing can be an effective way to help reduce anxiety and build confidence in social situations. The aim is always to make social events and interactions less confusing and more predictable. So, it can be useful to break things down and give the person information about the time you are leaving, how you will get there, who will be there what will happen, when you will be leaving and how you will get home.

It is useful to have an exit strategy for social events if they become stressful, for example transport available to come home or a less stressful alternative.

Ensure the person is aware of any 'plan B' and monitor for signs of things becoming stressful.

Special interests. These can be a refuge from stress and anxiety. People with Autism will often devote a lot of time and concentration to their hobby and become very knowledgeable on a topic. If someone has a particular hobby or interest this can be an opportunity to engage socially, to boost self-esteem and develop skills.

Information and choice. When introducing a new activity or a necessary change of plans into a person's routine it is helpful to give as much notice as possible. Always make it clear that it is the person's choice. Always give a clear and honest explanation of why the change is needed. Try to offer an acceptable alternative, for instance 'We won't be able to go swimming next Tuesday

morning as that was the only time, we could get a GP appointment, but we can go swimming after the appointment or on Wednesday instead, whichever you prefer'. The change of plans may cause some anxiety but probably less anxiety than being told at the last minute and not being offered an alternative.

Remember it is central to our vision and values to ensure that our tenants have as much choice as possible and retain control of all areas of their lives.

Social imagination

What is social imagination and what sort of difficulties do people with Autism experience in this area?

'We have trouble working out what other people know. We have more difficulty guessing what other people are thinking'. Source National Autistic Society.

Social imagination allows us to predict what might happen in a new situation. It allows us to problem solve, to imagine different outcomes and to work out the consequences of our actions. It helps us to know what other people might be thinking or feeling, to guess how they might react.

For autistic people it is often difficult to imagine alternative outcomes to situations and to predict what will happen next. Remember for all of us, using our imagination to problem solve and predict is one of the ways we contain our anxiety in everyday life. For people with Autism who have difficulty doing this anxiety can very quickly become overwhelming. This sudden rush of anxiety or panic can lead to what is sometimes called a 'meltdown' or 'tantrum'. This can appear as if someone is 'over reacting' to a minor setback, mishap or change. In children it often appears as if they are being naughty. This is not the case, in fact they may be frustrated and distressed and struggling to imagine how the problem can be resolved.

Make things predictable. A visit to a venue or trial run before an event can be helpful. Remember technology can be useful Google earth, maps, websites can all help a person visualise a journey or visit.

Detailed planning and being organised can help to make things predictable and reduce anxiety. It is important to know the person and be aware of any particular difficulties they have with social imagination. This will help to identify any situations a person is likely to struggle with. Make sure any issues are recorded in the Person-Centred Plan with a strategy to support the person. So, for example if someone becomes distressed if they don't remember to bring everything they need to college or football, a support strategy could

include staff helping the person to check that their school bag or kit bag is packed with everything they will need. It may be useful to add this into the weekly routine chart or planner.

Keep new experiences manageable. It is important not to overwhelm someone who has Autism with too much change or too many new experiences at one time. Break it down into manageable tasks. For instance, if someone is starting a college course a useful place to start might be with planning a trip to the building. Perhaps start by looking at the location on a map or Google Earth. Then visit the website for the college. A trial run of the journey to and from the college before term starts will be helpful, visit the facilities, canteen, library or classroom and if possible, meet the college staff. This should make it easier for the person to visualise what it will be like to attend that college and make the first day of term a less anxious experience.

Having a social life. Staff, generally go out of their way to make a new person feel welcome and encourage them to join in with social activities. This is a very positive aspects of the service. It can be of great benefit to a person with Autism, particularly if they have struggled to make friends or have experienced social isolation in their lives.

However, it is important not to overwhelm the person and to recognise that coming to live at the service is a big transition. It is important to ensure that the person is fully supported to make the most of new opportunities without feeling overloaded with changes and new experiences. Again, careful planning and being organized, breaking things down into manageable amounts is helpful. Remember keep things predicible and ensure information, explanations are given and use a visual reminder if this would be useful.

Let's review our knowledge of social communication, social interaction and social imagination.

1. Which of the following are examples of difficulties with Social Communication?
 - A) Not understanding tone of voice
 - B) Not understanding Facial expressions
 - C) Taking what is said literally
 - D) Not liking bright lights

2. People with Autism sometimes need longer to process what has been said?
True or false

3. Social situations can be difficult for people with Autism because?
 - A) They have difficulty knowing what to talk about
 - B) They have difficulty with 'unwritten' social rules
 - C) They have difficulty 'reading' other people

4. Difficulties with social imagination make it hard to predict what will happen next or imagining alternative outcomes?
True or false

5. Which of the following may be helpful when supporting someone in social Situations?
 - A) making sure the person knows what to expect at an event
 - B) explaining jokes, sarcasm and banter
 - C) explaining social rules such as personal space
 - D) packing as many activities as possible into the day

6. Many people with Autism are visual learners and find pictures and charts helpful?
True or false

How did you do? /6

Sensory Issues

Many people with Autism experience *over or under sensitivity to stimuli*. This can affect any of the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Some people experience over sensitivity in one area and under sensitivity in another.

Someone may be dislike bright lights but enjoy loud music, so they are Hypersensitive to light and Hyposensitive to sound. We all have preferences for: how loud we like to listen to music, or smells or flavours we like or dislike and this influences the choices we make, what we eat what we wear.

Sensory issues can cause people with Autism to have very strong likes and dislikes, it can affect every aspect of life and can lead to people avoiding some environments or finding certain situations very distressing. Someone who is hypersensitive to taste may find flavours in food to strong and overpowering, this can cause them to restrict the types of foods they eat and can make it difficult to have a balanced diet. It can also cause anxiety in social situations.

For a person who is hypersensitive to touch they may find physical contact with other people uncomfortable, even painful. They may dislike washing or brushing their hair. They may dislike the feel of certain fabrics or tight clothing. They may dislike wearing shoes. While someone who is hyposensitive to touch may need to hold others tightly to have sensation of pressure, they may have a high pain threshold and not be aware when they are injured.

For someone with hyposensitivity to sound noisy crowed places can be enjoyable, while for a person with hypersensitivity this would be unbearable. People who are hypersensitive to sound may have difficulty screening out background noise this can lead to trouble concentrating. Sound can also become magnified and distorted.

It is important to be aware of any sensory issues a person experiences and how these affect their daily life. Again, awareness and planning can be helpful. For instance, if someone is hypersensitive to sound, it may be better to go shopping in the early morning or evening when the shops are less busy and noisy. If someone is hypersensitive to light it might be useful to consider dimmer switches or lower wattage bulbs and task lighting.

Key Strategies are:

To be aware of what sensory issues the person experiences and how these they affect them and plan support and activities taking these into account.

Provide opportunities for the person to have sensory experiences which they enjoy.

Flexibility of thought

At S2i, we aim to help autistic people to learn and grow, to achieve and enjoy by trying new activities and having different experiences, so that they can develop their skills and confidence and self-esteem.

For people with Autism change can be a challenge and cause anxiety.

However, with good planning, preparation and creative problem solving these challenges can be overcome.

Transitions

People with Autism do well in familiar environments with structure and routine.

They can find change, even minor changes to their routine difficult and distressing.

You may be supporting someone with small changes such as between one activity and another at home, college or work, or big changes such as moving house, going on holiday, leaving college or starting a job.

Whether the change is big or small the principles to supporting someone to make a successful change are the same:

Give as much notice as you can.

Give as much choice as you can.

Make a transition plan, break changes down into manageable chunks.

Provide information to help the person visualise 'what will happen'.

Use visual supports, pictures, websites, brochures.

Use a trial run or visits, meet any new people involved or the staff if possible.

Explain the benefits of the change.

Give the person opportunities to express any anxieties or concerns and address these.

Have a strategy agreed to help with anxiety.

With the person's consent, give information about Autism and the individual's needs to others involved in the transition, new teachers or line manager at work.

Person Centred Care

What is Person Centred Care?

It is Support that is tailored to meet the individual needs of each person.

The autistic person is at the centre of the planning their support, remember we aim to ensure that people have choice and control over how they live their lives and how they are supported.

Each person will have a support plan which details, what that person wants to achieve and how we will help them, what is important to them and how we will support them.

Support plans are 'living documents' and are adjusted and updated all the time to make sure they reflect the needs and wishes of the person.

Provide information in a helpful format for the person, easy read, colour coded, use pictures and diagrams in support plans

Let's review our knowledge of Sensory issues, Transition and Person-Centred Care

1. Which of the following statements is correct?

Over and under sensitivity can?

- A) Only affect vision and hearing
- B) Can affect any of the five senses
- C) A person can be under sensitive in one area and over sensitive in another

2. True or false If a person is over sensitive to sound which of the following may help?

- A) Avoiding going out
- B) Having ear plugs on hand in case anywhere is too noisy
- C) avoiding noisy or busy times of day to go shopping

3. People with Autism only find big changes challenging

True or False

4. Which of the following are helpful when transitioning or making changes?

- A) Not mentioning anything till the last minute in case the person worries
- B) Having a plan and making changes gradually in small stages
- C) Using visits and trail runs to help the person visualise the new situation

5. Which of the following should be included in a Person-Centred Plan?

- A) Information about how that person likes to communicate
- B) Details of any sensory issues they have and strategies to help
- C) Details of what goals the person would like to achieve

How did you do? /5

Further Resources

National Autistic Society www.autism.org.uk