

Supporting People with ASD



in the Workplace and Education

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition linked to differences in brain function that affect how a person makes sense of the world, processes information and relates to other people. It is not a mental illness, but those with ASD can become mentally unwell, as can anyone.

The condition affects people in many different ways and to varying degrees. Some people with ASD also have a Learning Disability. Others have average, or above average and superior intelligence. Asperger's Syndrome is another name for ASD used for people with average and above average intelligence, or 'high functioning ASD'.

People with ASD have **difficulties** with **social communication and social interaction** and often have **sensory sensitivities**. Problems in these areas are *not* an indication of low general intelligence. Some people with ASD achieve high levels of education and have highly skilled and intellectually demanding jobs.

Having ASD can make normal daily activities very challenging. It is important to recognise the **strengths and positive qualities** that a person with ASD has, as they often try hard to use these to cope with their difficulties. You might find that the individual has **skills or talents that you are unaware of, such as excellent memory skills, an ability to do the same thing without losing interest and with great precision, a unique or unusual way of seeing a situation, honesty and loyalty**.

It is worthwhile getting to know your employee and their strengths as well as their difficulties in the workplace, so that they can achieve their full potential within their job, which is likely to be a common goal you both share.

People with ASD are often extremely meticulous in carrying out tasks, when in a manageable environment and when they understand what is required of them and what the outcome should be.

Anyone with ASD has a legal right to reasonable adaptations in the workplace help from trade unions.

The Research

Research indicates that many difficulties can be experienced by people with ASD/AS in the workplace and in education such as:

Existential issues:

- Concern regarding loss of identity and lack of individuality/autonomy
- Difficulty understanding work/job/qualifications in context of life and future

Practical Issues:

- Organisational skills
- Others' expectations of the person's social behavior
(Dubin, 2009)

Also:

- Difficulties understanding instructions
- Communication problems
- Lack of assertiveness or aggression –walking out (melt down)
- Failure to grasp or use and adapt social rules
- Difficulties working independently
- Difficulties working in teams and attending meetings
- Inappropriate working patterns and practices (due to obsessions and rituals)
- Obsessional behaviors and rigid adherence to rules and routines
- Being bullied or taken advantage of by others
(Howlin, 2003)

In addition to:

- Sensory sensitivity
- Difficulties with time keeping
- Problems with personal hygiene and adherence to dress codes (they may not see the importance or necessity of these)
- Not knowing how or feeling too anxious to ask for help
- Problems coping with change and the unexpected
- Organizing and planning difficulties
- Issues resolving workplace conflicts (may tend to blame others but are also often easy to blame by others)
- Advice can be perceived as criticism
- They may have unrealistic job expectations - overly optimistic or do not view themselves as skilled and important.
(Attwood, 2007)

People with autistic spectrum disorders often experience great challenges in the workplace despite wanting to work and wanting to be with people. They can often be misunderstood and seen as egocentric and rigid/stubborn. The issues that arise are often resolvable by knowledge, understanding and patience.

However, the nature of this condition means that it is extremely difficult to request help and, also, to communicate what kind of help maybe needed. As with all employees who have autistic spectrum disorder, it is important that employers are able to find effective ways of recognizing when their employee is experiencing difficulty and then seek ways of effectively communicating with the individual. This may involve a process of trial and error in finding a way of developing a shared understanding of what the problems are and how they might be overcome.

Recommendations for Specific Adjustments to Support Employees with ASD at Work

- The individual's managers would benefit from reading/training regarding the nature of Asperger's syndrome and autism (local organizations and the National Autistic Society are very helpful in this regard).
- The individual with ASD may benefit from having a mentor (*someone who the person is comfortable with!*) in his/her workplace with whom to discuss difficulties and plan problem solving strategies. A mentor might:
 - Support the individual with autism in self-monitoring by encouraging him/her to ask himself, "Did I get everything this person said?" and by double-checking with the speaker. He/she should be encouraged to ask frequent questions to check for understanding.
 - Help him/her to learn to use positive coping statements when he/she encounters difficult situations or experiences failure (e.g. "It's Ok to make mistakes and that doesn't mean I'm no good at everything; I'll do things a bit differently next time.")
 - Help an individual take responsibility for his/her actions and to develop positive ways of dealing with stressful situations without having meltdowns e.g. making apologies.
 - Advise on socially appropriate behaviour, such as tone of voice, language used and maintaining appropriate eye contact during conversations (e.g. look at the person's chin rather than eyes).
 - Support the individual to learn ways of handling situations appropriately and successfully with managers/customers without conflict.
 - Provide support and encouragement in social events at work – e.g. helping the person to be included in conversations.
 - Support to communicate his/her unhappiness, anger, frustration, and other similar feelings in a socially acceptable manner and enjoy the job they do.
- Do not insist on the person making eye contact with others. This is extremely difficult for many people with ASD.
- Reward is a good strategy for achieving a desired outcome, rather than being punitive or complaining and only pointing out mistakes or areas needed to improve.
- The individual with autism might benefit from more frequent breaks or moving around than is usually allowed, and from working in places that are free from external distractions and unnecessary stimulation.
- If the individual appears to have difficulty in adjusting to changes in routine or environment, when a change is to occur, he/she should be informed about the nature of the change so that he/she is allowed adequate time to make adjustments in a gradual way.
- Consider the impact of the work environment and how this impacts upon your employee with ASD, for example:
 - Fluorescent lighting and noise can be experienced as unbearable and painful.
 - Clutter and activity are highly distracting and anxiety provoking, therefore large open offices without natural light are unsuitable.

- Visualizing information may enhance the individual's learning of new verbal information if this appears to be his/her preferred learning style (e.g. diagrams or bullet points).
- The individual may benefit from counseling to help him/her learn ways of coping with anxiety. If the person needs to take time out of work to access counseling/therapy this should be accommodated; it is likely to be of benefit to the employee and employer.
- Do not expect skills used in one situation will be easily adapted to others. This can be very hard for a person with ASD and they often require support in doing so initially.

Specific challenges in job roles

Problems an employee may need help with might include: confrontations with staff/customers; adapting to unexpected changes; and coping with stress. He/she may have difficulty changing focus once intent on achieving something, which others may find quite annoying. Frequent sick

leave due to stress and anxiety is an indication that the person needs more support at work. These issues can often be improved with adequate support and patience from colleagues and managers.

Severity of ASD

All Autistic Spectrum Conditions create great challenges for people living with the condition. Each individual has a unique profile of strengths and difficulties; therefore, ***it is not helpful and can be quite deceptive to think of any of the autistic spectrum conditions in terms of severity.***

Like any of us, in one context a person who has ASD may do extremely well, yet in another may be extremely challenged. It is most helpful to provide support and adaptations in times of difficulty, whilst encouraging the affected individual to learn and manage effectively.

Recommendations for feedback on issues

- Any form of behaviour change with anyone takes time and may involve small modifications in steps to produce a noticeable overall change.
- Be very clear with employees about exactly what the behaviour is, that has resulted in a problem and avoid blaming language.
- He/she may not understand the first time they are told. Explaining again in a different way may be met with more success.
- Work on solutions together and be willing to try different strategies until a suitable one is found.
- Consider the physical environment and if this is creating difficulties that could be overcome (e.g. lighting, noise, crowds in offices/shops).

Use of Language

- Use concrete terms rather than abstract or metaphorical language.
- Avoid rambling explanations – get to the point in a nice way!
- Use diagrams/pictures to explain if it becomes complex – allow the individual to keep this as a reminder.

- Take account of added fear and anxiety involved in communicating, which will make it much harder for the person to listen, understand and respond.
- Explain the situation to the person from your/another person's perspective and suggest how to avoid this in the future.
- Provide examples of alternative ways to communicate or do something (in a non-patronizing fashion), allow opportunities to practice and tell the person when they are doing well!

Suggested adjustments for students in educational settings:

- Extra time to get used to the campus or site
- Specialist tuition support, e.g. language skills or structuring work
- Materials in literal language, including exam papers
- Special photocopying arrangements
- Digital recorder for recording lectures, notes, etc
- Extra time immediately after group sessions to check understanding
- Extra time to read, understand, and produce answers in exams
- Alternative ways of completing team-work tasks or help with these
- To have the same information conveyed verbally and in writing
- Preparation for changes of routine, e.g. around deadlines and exam time
- Use of a separate room with an invigilator
- Exam paper written on *plain paper in one colour*
- Use of a prompter to keep you focused during exams
- Word processing facilities if motor control is impaired
- Use of peers, volunteers or a buddy system.
- Provision of quiet room for study if there are sensory issues.
- Allowing students to present to academic staff or make a video presentation instead of written assignments.
- Guidance to help plan your private study and coursework to ensure that you meet deadlines.
- Support to cope with independent living to establish a routine.

Rights and Responsibilities

Remember that people with ASD have their rights protected by

- The Autism Act (2009; 2011; 2015); The Adult Autism Strategy (2010) and Think Autism (2014)
- The Care Act (2014)
- The Equality Act (2010)
- Trade Unions

Information on the above and helpful advice can be found at:

- http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/15/pdfs/ukpga_20090015_en.pdf
- https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422338/autism-guidance.pdf

- <http://network.autism.org.uk/knowledge/policy-guidance/what-does-care-act-mean-people-autism-spectrum>
- <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategy.aspx>
- <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>
- <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents>
- <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Autism.pdf>

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING ABOUT ASD

Books:

- Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals, by Tony Attwood (£11)
- The Autistic Spectrum: A Guide for Parents and Professionals, by Lorna Wing (£7)
- Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Preparing for Adulthood, by Patricia Howlin (£29)
- Living Through the Haze, by Paul Isaacs (£10)
- Living Well on the Autistic Spectrum by Valerie Gauss (16)
- Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Understanding Life Experiences from Early Childhood to Old Age by Sarah Hendrickx (£13)
- Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome by Lianne Holliday Wiley (updated version, 13)
- Autism Equality in the Workplace: Removing Barriers and Challenging Discrimination by Janine Booth and John McDonnell
- The Adolescent and Adult Neuro-diversity Handbook: Asperger Syndrome, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Related Conditions by Hendrickx, Sarah

Websites and Forums:

- <http://www.tonyattwood.com.au>
- <http://www.researchautism.net>
- http://www.autismresearchcentre.com/arc_tests
- <http://www.autism.org.uk/>
- <http://www.autismoxford.org/>
- <http://www.asd-forum.org.uk>
- <http://www.asdfriendly.org>
- <http://www.talkaboutautism.org.uk>

Excellent Ted Talks by:

- Rosie King
- Temple Grandin
- Alix Generous
- Daniel Tammet
- Daniel Wendler

YouTube Videos

- Autism Inclusion and the Law
- Temple Grandin - The Autistic Brain
- Chris Packham: My Autism and Me
- BBC3 - Things Not To Say To An Autistic Person (really hilarious!)
- Autism in Women and Girls by Yo Samdy Sam
- Emotional Intelligence mini-series by Paul Micallef