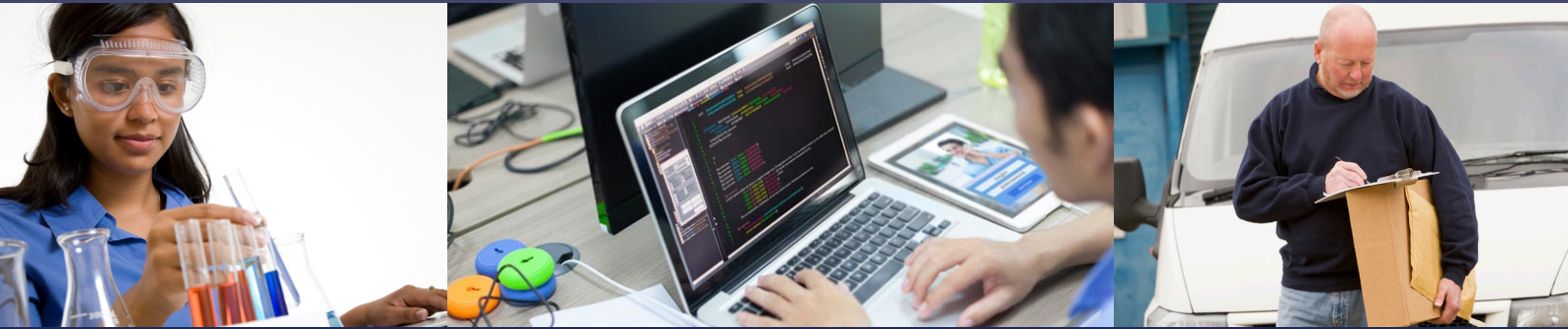




# Understanding Autism

A handout for employers, job coaches and autistic employees



## Around one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum

This figure comes from The National Autistic Society.

### The autism spectrum

There is no such thing as a typical autistic person. Each person has a unique profile of strengths and things they find challenging.

In this handout we describe common strengths and challenges people experience, although not everything will apply to every autistic person.

### People of any gender can be autistic, and autism is a lifelong condition

Autism in girls and women is more likely to be missed, or even misdiagnosed.

### Some autistic people have a learning disability and some do not

Mencap estimate that about 50% of autistic people also have a learning disability, and some people may need a lot of support.

### People of all intellectual abilities can be autistic

Many autistic people have successful careers in occupations including retail, IT, the arts, admin, finance, gardening, health, social care, teaching, engineering, public services, building and logistics.

Some of your colleagues and customers may be autistic.

### You may not realise a person is autistic when you meet them

A person may not mention that they are autistic, and some people are still undiagnosed.



### Autism alert cards



Some autistic people carry an autism alert card.

A person may use this to alert others when they are feeling overwhelmed and finding communication difficult.

Alert cards can be found on The National Autistic Society website. Search for 'alert card' at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

People may use a different alert card, or a sunflower lanyard.



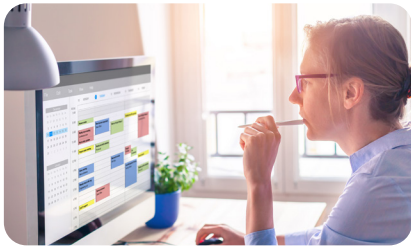
### Adult autism diagnostic assessment

A person's GP can refer them for an NHS adult autism diagnostic assessment. Not all GPs have an up-to-date understanding of autism, and some may need persuading to make the referral. Since the Autism Act 2009 a lot more NHS diagnostic services exist, though waiting lists for an assessment can be long.

Many people are diagnosed in adult life. There is no age limit for diagnosis.

# Common strengths of autistic people

There are some common strengths autistic people may have. In the same way that autistic people experience common challenges differently, not every autistic person will show strengths in all these areas.



## Knowledge and expertise

An autistic person may have very passionate interests, which can be a strength as they develop in-depth knowledge and expertise.

## Ability to focus

Some autistic people find they can concentrate on an activity for long periods of time.

## Intuitive understanding of logical systems and rules

Some autistic people excel in fields such as science, analytics, logistics, engineering and finance.

## An eye for detail and accuracy

Many autistic people have a very good eye for detail, and can be very precise and accurate when doing activities like proofreading, art and computer programming.

## Highly developed skills

Some autistic people have an exceptional memory for facts and may have intuitive abilities with things like music or languages.

## Honesty, integrity and reliability

Many autistic people tend not to bend or break the rules, or favour certain people. An autistic person is often very a reliable employee.

Some autistic people may excel at practical aspects of a job, but perhaps find aspects involving a lot of interaction challenging. An employer can consider 'carving' job roles to suit people's skills.

## Uneven abilities

An autistic person may have 'uneven abilities' and excel at certain tasks whilst finding other, seemingly less complex, tasks very challenging.

For example a person may be studying a subject at Masters level, but perhaps find it hard to plan an unfamiliar journey, organise their paperwork at home, or make a phonecall to book a health appointment.



## Common challenges autistic people may experience

An autistic person may experience sensory and communication differences, and find managing change, uncertainty and interpreting social rules difficult at times. These challenges can cause high levels of anxiety, though there are strategies and reasonable adjustments which can be helpful. Not everyone will have challenges in all these areas.

### Managing uncertainty

Many autistic people rely on their routines, and the security, certainty and predictability they provide.

Some autistic people may ideally like to stick to a range of familiar activities and choices.

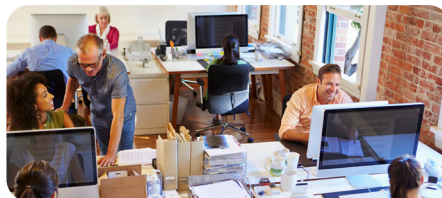
Unexpected changes can be challenging. People may need extra time to process the idea of the change and need a lot of clarification.

Autistic people often prefer to focus on one task at a time, which can be a real strength. They may struggle with managing interruptions, or being asked suddenly to switch to another task.

## Sensory sensitivities

An autistic person may experience noise, visual, taste, touch or smell sensitivities. When tired, unwell or stressed a person's sensitivities can feel amplified.

### Noisy and busy environments



Many autistic people experience noise sensitivity. They may struggle to filter out background distractions, making it very difficult for them to focus and communicate effectively. Open plan offices can be particularly challenging.

### Taste, texture and smell

Some people find certain tastes and textures unpleasant. For some people, certain smells can be overpowering.

### Visual input

As well as finding busy places visually overwhelming, some people are very sensitive to light, and can find bright environments overwhelming.

### Touch

Some autistic people can find touch, particularly light touch, alerting and stressful. Close proximity to others, particularly when they're behind them, can also feel very uncomfortable.

People don't 'get used to' their sensory sensitivities, and may use things like tinted glasses or headphones to manage them. Being able to move around, and taking regular breaks in a quiet space can also be helpful.

# Communication

An autistic person may need extra time to understand what others are saying, particularly if people talk quickly, are a bit vague or are giving lots of information.

## Telephone and group conversations

Many autistic people find telephone calls difficult, particularly when the call is unexpected or with a stranger.

Some people find group conversations overwhelming, particularly in busy places, and often find one to one conversations much easier.

## Eye contact

Some autistic people find it easier to listen when not giving eye contact.

## Open questions

Questions like "How are you getting on with looking for work?" can be hard for people to answer. It helps to ask more specific questions such as:

- Tell me about the jobs you've applied for this month.
- Have you had any interviews?

## Clear and direct communication

Autistic people prefer others to be direct and clear. They may not pick up on hints, or 'read between the lines' when a message is unclear. People

may miss non-verbal clues such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. For example, rather than saying "Would you like to help me with this?" say "I would like you to help me with this?".

An autistic person may sometimes come across as a bit blunt without meaning to seem rude.

These factors can lead to confusion and misunderstandings.

## Put it in writing

Autistic people will often find written information easier to process and interpret than verbal communication.

## It's important to clarify

An autistic person may ask for a lot of clarification. This can sometimes be misinterpreted as people being awkward, or trying to avoid doing the task. It is more likely to be a genuine desire to get it right, and avoid anxiety and confusion. For example, if asked to "Copy this for everyone" a person may not easily interpret who you mean by 'everyone'.

## Social rules



Trying to work out the unwritten social rules in different situations, and why other people behave as they do at times, can be very confusing and tiring for many autistic people.

Small talk can be difficult for some people, as they may struggle to think what to say. People may be very anxious about making 'social mistakes', and stay quiet rather than 'saying the wrong thing'.

It's possible that some people's social behaviour may be seen as either being inappropriate, or perhaps be misinterpreted as inappropriate.

## Experiences of bullying

Many autistic people experience bullying at school, college and even work. These experiences can be traumatic, and result in high levels of social anxiety that have a huge impact on people's lives.



## Social events



Work related social events can be daunting for some autistic people. Many autistic people enjoy socialising, but can find it difficult, particularly in large groups.

For some people, knowing that it's okay to stay for a while and leave early really helps.

## Feeling anxious and overwhelmed

Misunderstandings, sensory sensitivities, uncertainty and change can cause high levels of anxiety for autistic people.

## Meltdowns and shutdowns

When a person becomes very overwhelmed they may express this outwardly by showing distress or even anger (a meltdown), or inwardly by 'shutting down'.



## How others can help

Knowing that they can take a short break, and having a quiet place to go when overwhelmed, can help people to manage anxieties and avoid meltdowns or shutdowns.

Understanding communication differences, and allowing people to manage their sensory needs with things like noise cancelling headphones is helpful.

If a person does experience a 'meltdown' or 'shutdown' they will need a calm, quiet place to recover, not to be crowded and for people to avoid asking them questions or offering choices.

# Disclosing an autism diagnosis at work

Whether to disclose an autism diagnosis to an employer is a personal choice.

There is no obligation to disclose. Many people find it helpful, though some people worry that they may be seen as less able if others know they are autistic.

## The law around disclosure

An autism diagnosis is viewed as an impairment that a disability can arise from in the Equality Act 2010 Government Guidance. It is what's called a 'protected characteristic'.



## Protection from discrimination

The Equality Act 2010 offers protection from discrimination relating to protected characteristics. In simple terms this means that a person should not be treated less favourably because they are autistic.

This protection only applies if the employer could reasonably have known about a person's 'protected characteristics'. Whereas a physical impairment may be noticeable, an employer may not always recognise that a person is autistic.

After exhausting the internal company processes to address discrimination, an employee or applicant can file a claim with an Employment Tribunal if they believe they have been unlawfully discriminated against. The Equality Act 2010 reversed the burden of proof in discrimination cases, meaning that if an employee provides evidence that discrimination has occurred, the employer must prove there is another reason for the alleged discrimination.

## The duty for employers

When an employee or applicant discloses a disability, the employer has a duty to consider making reasonable adjustments if:

- requested by the employee or applicant
- the employee has difficulty with any aspect of their work
- the employee's sickness record or delayed return to work is related to their disability

**We explain more about reasonable adjustments on the next page.**

## When to disclose



A person can choose to disclose their autism diagnosis at any point during recruitment or their employment. A 2021 UK survey of 232 autistic people found that:

- 23.5% people disclosed on application
- 6.3% people disclosed at interview
- 6.3% people disclosed when offered the job
- 52.1% people disclosed after starting the job (usually after a problem had arisen)

Other people in the study chose not to disclose.

## What to disclose

It's often not enough for an autistic person to tell people they are autistic. Many people have a limited understanding of autism, and each person on the autism spectrum will have a very different profile of strengths and needs. It can help to write a short profile explaining their strengths, challenges, and how other people can help.



## Who to disclose to

You don't have to tell everyone you work with about your autism diagnosis.

Some people may just choose to tell HR and their line manager, whereas others may feel comfortable with many of their colleagues knowing.

People need to feel confident to disclose, and it really helps when a company has a clear policy on supporting autism and neurodiversity.

## An example of a disclosure profile

Based on extracts from an email an autistic person sent to their colleagues.

Autism doesn't affect my abilities to do my job, but rather the way I process information and relate to other people.

### How my autism affects me at work:

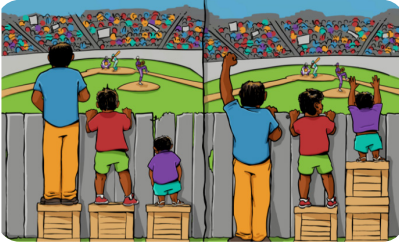
- I struggle to 'read' non-verbal clues like body language and voice tone.
- I have difficulty 'reading' other people or understanding others' feelings and intentions.
- I find it hard to work out implied meanings and 'read between the lines'

### How you can help:

- Please use clear and precise language. Email is easier for me than phone calls.
- Please state what is expected of me very clearly, trying to avoid using vague language.
- Please bear with me, I sometimes may need to ask for clarification if I am unsure about something. This helps me to process the information and allows me to do my work well.

# Reasonable adjustments

An employer is only required to make adjustments that are reasonable when considering the cost and practical issues. For example, a large supermarket potentially would be able to offer more adjustments than a small local shop.



The aim of reasonable adjustments is not to give people an advantage, but to enable them to have an equal opportunity in the workplace.

## Adjustments that can help

Whilst there is no prescribed list of reasonable adjustments, some of the following examples, if practical, may be helpful for different people:

- Flexible working hours to avoid peak time travel
- Allowing an employee to use noise reducing headphones

- Having a 'workplace buddy' to share concerns with, and help to interpret communication
- Identifying a 'quiet space' where a person can go for a short break if feeling overwhelmed
- A workspace in a quieter area
- Providing instructions in writing as well as verbally. Illustrated lists can help some people
- Offering a weekly check in to provide clarification if needed
- Allowing support at interview, and even questions in advance
- Offering a work trial instead of an interview for a job

If the help a person needs is not covered by the employer making reasonable adjustments, the Government's Access to Work scheme may be able to help.

## Access To Work

An Access to Work grant can pay for:

- special equipment
- an employment mentor
- help with travel

For more information go to: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) and search for 'Access To Work'.

The money does not have to be paid back. Employers do not pay towards the cost of employment mentoring, though some employers may need to contribute towards costs of equipment.

As part of their application, a mentor can write a support plan with an autistic person, which outlines the support the mentor would provide, and the costs.

To find out more about employment mentoring go to: [www.autismforward.org.uk](http://www.autismforward.org.uk)

## Strengths, strategies and further examples of reasonable adjustments



Once I'd explained about my autism, colleagues were much more understanding. They know that food smells really affect me, and that I need quiet time, so they don't think I'm being rude when I sit in my car during lunch!



I have a great eye for detail, and customers often comment on the quality of my building work.



I sent an email to my colleagues explaining about my autism, that I struggle with vague communication, and find it difficult to read between the lines. As a bit of a joke I'll often say that neurotypical (non-autistic) communication is my second language!

People now check to ensure we've understood each other, and no longer seem irritated by my many questions asking for clarification.



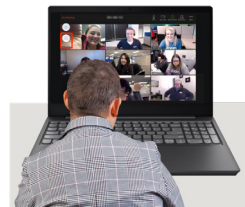
I work in a busy supermarket. If I get a bit overwhelmed I have a 'time out' card that I can show my manager. I can then take a short break without needing to explain why.



My employment mentor supports me at job interviews. She helps me to interpret the questions, and reminds me to tell people about the things I'm good at.



I got really stressed when my manager asked if I had put something about the company on Twitter - it felt like he was accusing me. My employment mentor explained that he would have asked everyone privately about this, and wasn't just picking on me.



In Zoom meetings, everyone else finds the background noise unbearable as all the noises come through on one channel - that's what the office is like for me all the time !



On the training course the tutor looked at me and said "It's a bit stuffy in here, you're nearest the window, do you mind?". She was implying that I should open the window, but I just didn't get it at first.



Having a screen for my desk really helps to minimise distractions, and I get a lot more work done.



I now work from home two days a week, which helps as I find the train journey really overwhelming as it's so busy.

The anti glare screen cover really helps with my visual sensitivity.



I find large meetings and group work really difficult, but people understand this and know I'm likely to be quite quiet.



My workplace buddy helps me if I'm worried about workplace banter. She also helps me to understand instructions, and to write emails that are not too blunt.



Prior to my interview I explained in advance that I might need more time to process the questions, and don't always give eye contact. It went really well and I got the job.



Ginny volunteers in our office one day a week. We make sure she has the same desk each time, and that her work routine for the day is explained using pictures. Shredding is her favourite job.

I was brilliant at my data analysis job, so good in fact that I ended up promoted to management. I found managing people a nightmare and just couldn't do it



I have a great visual memory for routes, which helps with my job as a bus driver.