



# Understanding Autism

For teachers and other school, college and university staff



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

This figure comes from The National Autistic Society

### Neurodiversity



Neurodiversity is the idea that all humans vary in terms of our cognitive ability. Everyone has talents and things they find difficult. For some people the variation between those strengths and challenges is more pronounced.

A neurodiverse person may excel at certain tasks but find other, seemingly less complex, tasks very challenging. This is described as having 'uneven abilities'.

Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyscalcula, Dyspraxia and Tourette Syndrome are all described as neurodiverse conditions, and some people may have more than one neurodiverse condition.

Neurodiverse people often have skills that are highly valued in modern society.

### People of any gender can be autistic

Autism is a lifelong condition, and autism in girls and women is more likely to be missed, or misdiagnosed.

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

Mencap estimates that about 50% of autistic people also have a learning disability, however people of all intellectual abilities can be autistic.

Some autistic people use the term Asperger Syndrome which was an official diagnosis given until 2013.

### Supporting people

With the right support and adjustments autistic people can succeed at school, college and university.

In this handout we describe common challenges autistic people experience and the adjustments, approaches and strategies that can be helpful.



### There is no such thing as a typical autistic person

Issues such as sensory differences, communication differences and anxiety can have a greater or lesser impact on the lives of different autistic people.

"If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Dr. Stephen Shore

### Living in an uncertain world

Many of the challenges an autistic person experiences relate to finding the world an uncertain, and sometimes frightening place. Anxiety is estimated to affect at least 40% of autistic people.

Uncertainty can be caused by sensory sensitivities, unwritten social rules, communication differences, fear of bullying, unstructured time, misunderstandings or unexpected change. An autistic pupil is likely to need support to feel safe, secure and ready to learn.

## Getting to know my strengths



### My interests

I may have specific interests that I'm really passionate and knowledgeable about. This expertise may be useful in my studies.

I may like to talk about my interests a lot!

### Helping you helps me too

It helps me to have a role as I may find unstructured time tricky. If you need someone to put the chairs out or serve the drinks, I'm a good person to ask.

### I may have a good memory for facts

It's quite common for an autistic person to have a good semantic memory, which can be really useful for exams!

### I may be good at logical things

Some autistic people have an instinct for solving logical problems and understanding how systems work. I may do well with languages, information technology, maths and science - but don't assume this applies to all

### I may have a really good eye for detail

Many autistic people do, and can be really good at tasks like spreadsheets, art and science experiments.



### I'm likely to be a terrible liar!

It's common for autistic people to be very honest and upfront. Autistic people are often very reliable too, and are likely to have a strong sense of fairness.

### I may have uneven abilities

There may be things I'm brilliant at, things that just come naturally to me, such as learning facts.

There may be things I really struggle with that might seem easy to you, such as planning an unfamiliar journey, generalising learning from one environment to another or organising my priorities and keeping track of tasks.

### I'll often stay on task

I may be able to concentrate on an activity for long periods of time. I may also not get as bored as others when doing repetitive work.



### I'm likely to follow the rules

Rules help me to make sense of the world, so I'm quite likely to adhere to them.

I may get stressed when others break the rules, and even try to stop them, which can cause problems.

### Help me value and use my strengths

I may not always value my strengths. If I find something easy to do, I might assume everyone else does too.

I'm likely to be acutely aware that I struggle with some things my peers find much easier, so using my strengths to my advantage can really help me develop my confidence and self esteem

## I may have a different communication style to you

### I may not always pick up on body language

I may struggle to read facial expressions, and to pick up on your body language or tone of voice. If you tell me you are fine, I might assume you are fine, even if you said it in a grumpy way.

People may misinterpret my non-verbal communication as well. For example, it may seem like I'm not interested in something because I don't appear enthusiastic - but it might just be that I'm not particularly expressive.

### I may find eye contact really intense

I may struggle to process what someone is saying if I look them in the eye. I may find it easier to listen when I'm looking away.



### I may struggle to read between the lines

I might not always pick up on hints. For example, if my uniform is untidy just tell me rather than saying "did you get dressed in the dark this morning?"

If you say something like "I'll speak to you later", I might seem confused and ask for a more definite answer - this isn't me being awkward, I just need a bit more clarification and certainty than most people.

### I may seem a bit blunt sometimes !

By being direct and honest I may come across as rude without meaning to be.

I may have very fixed opinions about certain things, and at times struggle to see other people's point of view.

### Moving around may help me to focus

I might find it easier to listen if I'm able to have something to fiddle with, or I am moving in my chair. Some autistic people find that trying to sit still takes up all their concentration, and they're not able to focus on what anyone is saying.

## A few tips to help with understanding

### Check with me

I may struggle to work out what you mean when you explain something to the class. I may think I've understood, but may have got the wrong end of the stick completely !

I may be reluctant to say I'm confused, because I don't want to appear less capable than my peers.



### Give me time and write things down

It may take me longer to process verbal information, and to understand what other people are saying. Try not to talk too quickly, whilst not sounding patronising !

I may need to ask lots of questions to make sure I've understood.

Writing things down for me often helps. Written information is permanent, so I can process it in my own time.

### Be clear and direct

Rather than being too polite by saying "Would you like to help me with this?", say "I'd like you to help me with this please."

Very open questions like "How's the project going?" can be hard to answer. Be specific, and ask something like "How much work have you done on your project this week?"

### I may struggle to communicate when it's busy

I may be overwhelmed by background noise, movement or even smells, and struggle to focus.

I may also struggle to process what you're saying when I'm also doing something else.

There's a risk I might agree to things I haven't fully understood just to get away from all the distractions.

## Interacting with other people

### I may struggle when put on the spot

For example, I might find unexpected questions in class really hard to answer as I need more time to process what I've been asked, and work out what to say. This can cause me to panic, making it even harder to think straight!



### Sarcasm and banter

I may struggle to work out if someone is just having fun, or whether they're being nasty.

I may need help to tell the difference, and work out whether a person is a real friend or someone who might pretend to be my friend to get something from me.

### My interests

As children get older their interests usually move on.

As a teenager I may still be interested in the things I liked when I was younger.

My peers may be more interested in things like fashion and relationships, so I may struggle to find people my own age who I have things in common with.

### I may enjoy time on my own

I may not want to be as sociable as many other people are. I may prefer to have a small group of friends and family.

### Playing alongside others

I may enjoy activities such as gaming as you can play alongside each other, and the interactions are predictable.



### Making friends

I may struggle to work out how to make friends. It's like there's a secret code that I can't quite work out. It's not that I don't want to make friends, I just find it hard. I often feel like an outsider.

I may not know what to say to others, and struggle to keep conversations going. I might not see the point of small talk sometimes. I may want to talk a lot about things I'm into, and it can seem like I'm talking at people sometimes. I may not be good at being flexible and switching topics.

### Group conversations

I might find groups tricky at times, as it's hard to keep up with the conversation and know when to speak.

I might get it wrong and interrupt, or I might lose track of the conversation so just stay quiet.

### I may need breaks from socialising

I may find socialising really tiring, as I often have to work harder to interpret what people are saying, and to keep up with conversations.

Busy places are particularly tiring, and I may need time to recover afterwards. Having short breaks during an event can help.

I may need help to notice that I'm starting to feel tired and overwhelmed. I may need time on my own to recover after a busy day at school or college.



### Structured activities

I may enjoy structured activities, where there's clarity about what I'm supposed to be doing.

Unstructured time like break times can be tricky.

For example, I might not know what I'm supposed to do in the playground.



## Helping me make sense of a sometimes confusing world

### I may need help to understand the behaviour of other people

Sometimes people behave in really confusing and inconsistent ways, and this can cause me a lot of anxiety. I may struggle to imagine why someone might be feeling or behaving in certain ways - you could be my social interpreter !

Because of this, I may often think that it's my fault if someone is in a bad mood, even if it's nothing to do with me.



### I might not pick up on social rules

It's possible that at times I might do something inappropriate, or be misinterpreted as inappropriate because I didn't pick up the rules.

It really helps to explain the rules clearly to me and write them down.

For example, I may not realise that just because one person greets a friend with a hug, that I shouldn't also offer them a hug.

### I may need help to see the big picture in situations

I may struggle at times to work out everything that's happening in a situation. You may be better than me at seeing the big picture.

For example, my teacher asked me if I had said something on Twitter about the school. I was really upset as I thought he was accusing me. He later explained that he had asked everyone in private, which hadn't occurred to me.

### I may make social mistakes

I may get very anxious about making social mistakes, such as asking people questions that are too personal. I don't mean to cause offence, and often feel terrible about it.

### I may not always be aware of how I come across to others

For example, I know that I'm not a threatening person, but if I'm wearing my headphones and have my hood up, other people may think I look a bit threatening.

### I may need things to be correct

I may find it hard to settle if something is unfinished, or not quite right. For example, if a report written about me isn't accurate I might feel anxious and find it hard to let it go.

## I may need support to stay safe



### I might think other people are just as honest as me

I may find it hard to work out if people are manipulating or taking advantage of me. I may be vulnerable to be led into behaving badly by other people who think it's funny.

### I may get bullied by others

This is very common for autistic people, particularly at school and college. I may not even realise I'm being bullied.

I may be very vulnerable to bullying if I don't have many friends. I may feel frightened and unsafe a lot of the time.

### I may get overwhelmed if there's a misunderstanding

I may misunderstand other people at times and need help to sort the situation out. I may get very upset, or even angry if I feel I've been treated unfairly, or have been told off for doing something when I don't understand what I've done wrong.

## I may experience sensory things differently

### Different autistic people have different sensory sensitivities

Many autistic people find noisy and busy environments overwhelming at times, and some people may also have differences with their visual, taste, touch and smell senses.

- Some people may find certain smells overpowering and impossible to be around.
- Some people may find certain textures, or unexpected touch very uncomfortable.
- Some people may not be able to tolerate certain food textures or flavours.
- Some people may find lights very bright, or busy walls overwhelming at times.



### It's too simplistic to say that autistic people don't like noise

I may enjoy listening to loud music, but also find certain background noises unbearable, making it hard for me to focus on anything else.

I may not filter out background noise in the same way you can.

### I may not fully understand my sensory differences

I may wonder why I seem to find certain situations more difficult to manage than other people.

When tired, anxious or unwell my sensory sensitivities may feel amplified, so background noise like a ticking clock may bother me much more.

### I won't just get used to things

For example, I may find a busy dining hall really hard to cope with due to the combination of noise, smells and movement of people.

These places are always likely to be hard for me to cope with, and in adult life many autistic people simply choose to avoid very busy places.

### My internal body senses may work a bit differently too

I may be very sensitive to pain, or even not always notice pain. Some autistic people may struggle to notice that they feel hungry or thirsty.

I may get nervous on escalators if my balance sense is a bit slower, and I may be more likely to get travel sick. I may find it hard to describe my symptoms when I'm not feeling well.

## Helping me manage my sensory differences

### I may use strategies to manage my sensory needs

It may help me to use noise cancelling headphones or tinted glasses to help reduce the sensory input in busy places.

### Make adjustments for my sensory needs

Don't just label me a fussy eater if there are food textures and tastes I can't tolerate. Let me wear clothes that don't irritate me.

Allow me to take short breaks to move around when I need to. Let me sit at the back if I find people behind me very distracting.

### I may really enjoy sensory activities

I may like using things like a weighted blanket, and aromatherapy oils.

I may enjoy being out in the open air, and love the feel of the wind on my face.

My sensory differences can bring pleasure as well as discomfort.



## I may find uncertainty really frightening

### I may really like familiar things

I may not have the same need for variety as you. For example, I may like to have the same lunch every day !

Things being consistent and predictable might be really important to me, as the world can seem very confusing a lot of the time.

### When things change, they feel more uncertain

I may need more time to get used to the idea of change, particularly when it's unexpected or sudden. It can take me a long time to work out how I feel about a new plan, and I may simply say no at first out of fear. I may need to ask lots of questions to help me fully understand what's involved.

I may struggle to work out what to do with myself if the thing I had planned is cancelled. Uncertainty can make me feel unsafe.



### New situations can feel very uncertain as well

I may need support when going to a new place, or doing a new activity for the first time. For example, going to a new leisure centre might involve an unfamiliar journey, a new system for signing in, a new building to find my way around and different lockers to work out. By the time I get to the gym or my class I'll probably already be exhausted !

## Routines can help make things feel more predictable

### I may rely on my routines for security

A familiar routine, such as following the usual route to work/college or a morning routine at home, puts less strain on my brain ! My routines may be really important to me, and I might plan things in a lot of detail. I may find it stressful if my usual routine is changed, or can't be completed. I'm more likely to use 'repetitive behaviours' such as rocking or doing tasks over and over when stressed.

### I may find unstructured time difficult to manage

For example, at college I might find independent study time and lunch breaks challenging, as I'm not sure how to fill the time - what to do or where to go. I may need help to create structure and make a plan for these times.

### I may find it hard to switch between tasks

I might be really engrossed in something and need to get it finished before moving onto something else. I'm likely to be better at doing one thing at a time than trying to multi-task.

Transitions can be challenging for me.

### Having things written down, or designed with pictures can be really helpful

These 'visual supports' help as I can check them to reassure myself - like you do with your diary or rota. Some autistic people benefit from very detailed routines and lists.



## I may need support to organise myself



### I may need support to set up my routines

I may get overwhelmed by everything I need to do, and struggle to know where to start. I may have difficulty judging what are the most important things to do, and what order to do them in.

I may need help to set up systems and routines which I can then follow.

### I might need help to break tasks down and get started

I may get overwhelmed with large tasks and struggle to work out how to get started, even if I'm motivated.

For example, open-ended tasks like 'research into this topic' can be hard. I may feel overwhelmed by the number of possible ways I could approach this

Breaking down tasks helps, so instead of planning to 'start on my project' I have a list to work through in order.

### I may find it harder to transfer skills

For example, I may struggle to work out how to use a new oven because it's different to the one I'm familiar with.

### I might need help to keep track of time

I may find it hard to judge how long things will take. For example, I might need help to work out what time to leave to get somewhere on time.

I may use alarms to judge when food is cooked, rather than judging it by instinct.

### I want to do things for myself

I may get frustrated if people do things for me. I'm aware that there are things I struggle with more than most people, but I really want to fit in, so I'm keen to learn the skills I need for independence.

### I may struggle to multi-task

For example, it may be hard for me to listen and take notes at the same time. I'm likely to be better at doing one thing at a time.

Having lectures recorded can really help.

### Give me ideas

Suggest options rather than just asking me to tell you what help I need. I may struggle to imagine possible solutions to problems.

## I may need help to understand my emotions



### I may struggle to recognise my own emotions

I may not always experience emotions straight away, so I may be confused about what has upset me. I may feel the emotions much later after the event. I might then feel these emotions very intensely.

### Recognising other people's feelings

I may sometimes find it hard to recognise how others are feeling, and it helps when people support me with this. Often once I realise a person is upset I'm really caring and supportive.

### I may need help to manage my emotions

I may get very upset or angry sometimes, and feel overwhelmed by my emotions. I may need support to help me calm myself down.



## I may experience a lot of anxiety

### I may struggle to switch off at times

Many autistic people describe having difficulties switching off. They feel they are 'on alert' most of the time and find it hard to relax. I may worry about details that other people don't see as important.

### Anxiety is a separate thing to autism

People may assume I'm anxious because I'm autistic and there's nothing anyone can do.

I may need help to get treatment for my anxiety, which should be treated as a separate condition.



### Structure can really help me

I may rely much more on my calendar, lists and timetable when I'm anxious. They give me certainty, and help things to feel less chaotic and out of control.

### Overthinking

When feeling anxious I may over think things and fear the worst.

Help me to think of all the other possible outcomes too, many of which might be more likely than the worst case scenario.

### Noticing my anxiety

Help me to notice the signs that I'm anxious. For example I may start pacing around a lot.

### Help me control the things I can

If something's making me anxious, help me think about what actions I can take, and support me to do them. It also helps to suggest things I can distract myself with.

## I may get overwhelmed at times

### Help me avoid overwhelm as much as possible

It helps to have a back up plan in case things unexpectedly change. It helps to avoid places like the dining hall at peak times.

### I may need to stim

Doing repetitive things like rocking, flapping, repeating phrases or pacing can help me cope in overwhelming situations.

### Help me find calming strategies that work for me

This could include escaping into my interests, using mindfulness, sensory strategies or even physical exercise. When feeling overwhelmed I may struggle to remember my strategies as I might not be able to think clearly. Having a list of strategies can be useful.



### Support me if I have a meltdown or a shutdown

When extremely overwhelmed I may not be able to process any more information. My mind may just shutdown, or I may become very distressed or angry - known as a meltdown. I may need help to keep myself and others safe.

A meltdown is not simply bad behaviour - it's a temporary loss of control due to extreme overwhelm. A person is not aware of their actions.

Ideally I will need a quiet place to recover and not have people crowding around me. It will take me time to recover, and it's important not to overload me any further by asking questions or offering choices. It can really help to have a written support plan so everyone who supports me is aware of what to do.

## I may seem like I'm coping when I'm not



### I may mask my autism at times

I may not want to come across as different, so might stop myself doing things like rocking, try to give eye contact, and laugh at jokes I don't really understand when with other people. Masking takes up a lot of energy as I have to think carefully about everything I say and do. I may get exhausted, or suddenly get overwhelmed and upset for no apparent reason.

### I may seem like a model student

I may seem shy and get on and do all my work, but inside I may be incredibly lonely and anxious.

### I may be good at reading

I may really struggle with comprehension and need extra support in this area.

## A few other things that can be really helpful

It would be great to have a neurodiverse group at a school or college, somewhere to meet others with similar experiences and develop friendships.

### Help me understand about myself and my autism

I may not understand autism very well, so it may help me to learn more about sensory differences, communication differences and my strengths. It may be helpful for me to get to know, and learn from, other autistic people who experience things in a similar way to me.

It would really help to have a quiet lunch club to go to instead of the busy dining hall. Also, I'd feel less anxious if I knew I could leave a busy place like assembly if I'm overwhelmed.

### My ideal life might not be a typical life

It's important that autistic people are encouraged to be themselves. An autistic person may need support to develop a lifestyle that suits their needs. It's okay not to enjoy all the things most other people do.

### Don't try to make me 'less autistic'

I may behave a bit differently to you at times, and that's okay. For example, I may need to 'stim' to help keep me calm in a busy environment. If there's a danger my stimming may be harmful, help me to find an alternative.

Having a named buddy, or autism champions at school or college would be really helpful, so I know who to go to for support.