

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

+ YOUNG PEOPLE



Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition that can be identified from early childhood onwards and can affect a person throughout their life. The cause is unknown, and there's no specific medical or genetic test to diagnose it. Instead, diagnosis is based on the presence of: particular patterns of social communication and interaction, restricted interests, and rigid routines, repetitive behaviour (e.g., lining up objects) or repetitive speech.

The diagnosis of ASD has replaced three diagnoses that were previously used: autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified. These disorders no longer exist as separate diagnoses. Instead, they are reflected in the autism spectrum by specifying whether a person has mild, moderate or severe symptoms and difficulties.

With early intervention and support, young people with ASD can begin to understand how their experience of the world is different from others, and can begin to make sense of what supports they might need to live the kind of life that they want.

Areas of difficulty

Social communication and interaction

People with ASD typically have some differences in the way that they communicate and socialise. People with ASD have difficulty understanding the feelings, thoughts and intentions of others and difficulty identifying and communicating their own feelings, thoughts and intentions to others.

While many young people with ASD speak fluently, they might have problems in the area of 'pragmatic'

language – that is, using language appropriately in social situations. This might mean they find it difficult to hold two-way conversations. A tendency for making literal interpretations can mean figures of speech and sarcasm are misunderstood or misused. Problems with pragmatic language might also lead to people having trouble using the right language for a social situation – their language might be very formal, and their vocabulary might be very rich.

Young people with ASD might also prefer to be alone or seem uninterested in others. Difficulties in reading social cues or situations, expressing empathy and understanding others mean that they might need help to interact with others. They also might have difficulty with eye contact, facial expressions and body language and forming or maintaining social relationships.

Areas of difficulty for young people with ASD



Social



Communication



Behaviour



Body



Thinking

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Interests and behaviours

Young people with ASD often develop special interests that are unusual in their intensity and focus. Public transport, maps, physics and computers are all examples of the wide and varied special interests of people with ASD. Young people with ASD prefer situations to be consistent and may have special preferences with respect to routine and consistency. As a result, young people with ASD might experience difficulties managing change and transition. Activity participation, diet and clothing might be areas in which young people with ASD express unusual rigidity.

Thinking

Young people with ASD are often logical thinkers and can be good with facts, figures and details. This logical thinking may mean that they can have difficulty understanding non-concrete ideas.

ASD and the body

Young people with ASD might experience clumsiness and problems with body awareness that can lead to difficulties with sports, handwriting and other physical skills. People with ASD frequently have problems with sleep and can be very sensitive to different sensations – finding a particular noise disturbing, or a particular item of clothing very uncomfortable.

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What might not be so bad about it?

Whilst people with ASD might have difficulties in a range of areas, they might also present with admirable differences in perception, attention, memory and intelligence.

ASD, youth and mental illness

Youth is a tricky time. For young people with ASD, things like progressively more complex social demands, increasingly difficult skills to be learned at school or home and transitions, such as graduating, might all be stressful. It's often at this time that young people with ASD and others around them might become more alert to their social differences. Young people with ASD might feel excluded, bullied and frustrated by their differences. These negative experiences can leave young people with ASD at risk of low self-esteem and at increased risk of developing mental ill-health, such as depression and anxiety.

When young people with ASD develop mental illness, diagnosis and treatment need to be tailored to account for the young person's different personality style and their differences in the areas of socialising, communication and interests.

For some young people, it's only during their treatment for mental health difficulties that they or their family may raise suspicions about ASD. Diagnosis of ASD is a reasonably lengthy process involving multiple health professionals. Diagnosis is important for young people because it provides effective treatment options and helps to better address their needs.

Treatment

Effective treatment will target any mental health difficulty, support the young person to adjust to the changes they have as a result of ASD and make use of the skills that they have. Many people with ASD might still find social situations, personal relationships and major life changes challenging, but with support and encouragement, many people go on to undertake further education, develop their interests through hobbies and membership of clubs, work successfully in jobs that interest them and find fulfilling friendships.

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Supporting someone who lives with ASD

Here are some ways you can help someone you know who lives with ASD.

- Any approach to support someone with ASD needs to be unique and individualised.
- Encourage the person to talk about what's going on for them, and any troubles or worries they have. It might be hard for them to find the right words or to express themselves, so be patient and try other preferred routes for communication (e.g. stories/drawings).
- Help them build confidence through doing things that use their strengths.
- Some people with ASD can find being around other young people who feel 'different' supportive. Groups at schools, local councils and health services might be options, and internet forums and chat rooms can also be helpful and accessible.
- Have a routine and try to be consistent. It doesn't need to be too rigid, but might mean that a young person with ASD can begin to take advantage of planned opportunities to talk to you about their worries or hopes.
- Be patient. It takes a lot longer for people with ASD to get used to things and make changes in their lives.

Some useful websites

www.autism-help.org
www.amaze.org.au
www.autismspectrum.org.au
www.autism.org.au

Related factsheets

Depression + Young People
Anxiety + Young People

Disclaimer: This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, please always seek medical advice.