

Autism Spectrum Disorders are a group of developmental disorders that can be identified from early childhood onwards, and can affect a person throughout their life. The cause is unknown, and there is no specific medical or genetic test. Instead, diagnosis is based on the presence of particular patterns in the areas of social functioning, communication and behaviours. 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.

Within 'autism' there are several labels that place people at different points on the spectrum of severity. At one end of the spectrum disorder, diagnostic labels such as "Asperger's Syndrome", "High-functioning Autism" and "Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified" (PDD NOS) are used. At the other end of the spectrum you will find labels such as "Autism" and "Autistic Disorder". A diagnosis of an ASD will only be made if 'autistic-like' pattern of behaviour is apparent before the age of three years.

ASPERGERS

HIGH
FUNCTIONING
AUTISM

AUTISM

Areas of Difficulty

Social

People with ASD typically have some differences in the way that they communicate and socialise. At the core of these differences is a difficulty with 'Theory of Mind'. This refers to difficulties people with ASD might have understanding the feelings, thoughts and intentions of others; and difficulties they might have identifying and communicating their own feelings, thoughts and intentions to others. These differences can lead to difficulties in the areas such as:

Using eye contact, facial expressions and body language; Expressing empathy to or understanding of others; Identifying and following social cues and conventions such as how to meet new people or what to do at a party.

Communication

While many young people with ASD speak fluently, they might have problems in the area of 'pragmatic' language or using language appropriately in social situations. This might mean difficulties in holding 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 specific situation – their language might be very formal, and their vocabulary might be very rich. Some young people with ASD can sound like "little professors" when they speak. Because of this area of difference in young people with ASD, they might have difficulty describing situations and they might prefer facts to stories.

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 adolescent special interests.

Like having special interests, young people with ASD might have special preferences with respect to routine and consistency. Activity participation, diet and clothing might be areas young people with ASD express unusual rigidity as they prefer for situations to be consistent. As a result, young people with ASD might experience difficulties managing change and transition.

ASD and the body

Young people with ASD might also 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. People with ASD can also be very sensitive to different sensations – finding a particular noise disturbing, or a particular item of clothing very uncomfortable.

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, Adolescence and Mental Illness

Adolescence is a tricky time, and for young people with ASD, things like more complex social demands, increasingly difficult skills to be learned at school and at home, and transitions such as graduating might all be major stressors. It is 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 and bullied, and they themselves might feel frustrated by their difference. These negative experiences can leave young people with ASD at risk of low self-esteem, and increased risk of 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.

Diagnosis

Some young people begin seeing a mental health service and during their treatment, suspicions they (or their family) might have about an ASD might be raised. Diagnosis of an ASD is a reasonably lengthy process involving multiple health professionals. Diagnosis is important for young people, in order to be able to provide effective treatment options into the future.

Treatment

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

What Can You Do To Support Someone Who Has an 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, troubles or worries that 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 stories/drawings.
- Help them build confidence through doing things that build on their strengths.
- Some people with ASD can find being around other young people who feel 'different' a supportive experience. Groups at schools, local councils and health services might be one option, but 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

<http://www.autism-help.org/>

<http://www.autismvictoria.org.au>

<http://www.autism.org.au>