

What is **AUTISM**?

For more information contact:

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) is a lifelong developmental disorder characterised by a triad of impairments. These are impairments in: social interaction, social communication (verbal and non-verbal) and social imagination. Alongside the impairments, people with ASC often demonstrate repetitive behaviour patterns; narrow, obsessional interests; resistance to change; motor coordination difficulties and unusual sensitivity to their environment. ASC can be described as a “hidden” disability as it cannot be identified by appearance alone.

The Autism Spectrum ranges from low to high functioning autism and includes Asperger Syndrome. People with Autism may have some level of learning disability. There is a higher prevalence of mental health problems (such as anxiety disorders and depression) amongst people with ASC than there is in the general public. The police and the criminal justice system are more likely to come into contact with the higher functioning, more verbal people on the spectrum. Non-verbal lower functioning people on the spectrum are usually accompanied by parents/carers. However, verbal ability can mask problems with understanding and those to appear to speak confidently may still have extreme difficulty making sense of language. This can occasionally lead to inappropriate behaviour, especially when the person is anxious, which others may find challenging.

This leaflet offers some quick suggestions and practical advice to anyone who may come into contact with someone with ASC.

Berkshire Autistic Society

Unit 7, Richfield Place
Richfield Avenue
Reading RG1 8EQ

Telephone: 0118 959 4594
Email: contact@autismberkshire.org.uk
www.autismberkshire.org.uk

Charity Registration No: 1076217

The National Autistic Society

Telephone: 0845 070 4004
www.autism.org.uk

Further reading

www.autism.org.uk for books and free leaflets

- **Adults with Autism**
(1996) by Hugh Morgan
- **The complete guide to Asperger's Syndrome**
(2006) by Tony Attwood
- **Autism: The Facts**
(2002) by Simon Baron-Cohen and Patrick Bolton

Berkshire Autism Alert Card

Autism Spectrum Condition

Useful Information

What to **DO**...

- DO** ask them if they have a Berkshire Autism Alert card.
- DO** contact family and/or carers as soon as possible.
- DO** keep your language simple use the person's name to get their attention and use short sentences e.g. "Sam sit down" or "get in the car"
- DO** explain to the person who you are and what you are going to do.
- DO** ask simple, closed and direct questions. Use visual cues to increase understanding e.g. photos, symbols, writing, drawings, objects etc.
- DO** allow the person extra time to process and respond to questions. If you interrupt them then they may have to start again or become overwhelmed.
- DO** check for understanding as they are unlikely to tell you that they do not understand.
- DO** support them if they are left alone, as self harming behaviours can occur in times of stress and they are vulnerable around others due to their lack of social understanding.
- DO** take into account medical issues e.g. people with ASC are at a higher risk of having seizures.

DO STAY CALM

What **NOT** to **DO**...

- DON'T** make the person wait in a crowded, noisy room. This will increase anxiety.
- DON'T** expect them to understand body language, gestures, tone of voice or facial expressions. Be concrete in what you say.
- DON'T** use abstract ideas and phrases open to literal interpretation e.g. saying "Jump in the car" may lead to the person physically jumping in the car.
- DON'T** give too many choices due to problems with understanding.
- DON'T** take lack of eye contact as a sign of rudeness or guilt.
- DON'T** attempt to stop flapping, tapping, rocking, pacing etc behaviours unless it is essential.
- DON'T** invade their personal space unless necessary. Restraint should only be used if they are a definite risk to themselves or others.
- DON'T** ask several questions at once due to confusion.
- DON'T** shout.
- DON'T** think they are deliberately being rude or disrespectful if they talk inappropriately or on seemingly irrelevant topics. This is likely to increase in times of stress.

What to **BE AWARE** of...

COMMUNICATION: People with ASC may interpret or misunderstand communication or the situation.

People with an ASC can be extremely sensitive to specific sensory stimuli (vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch) and this varies depending on the individual. It is important to think about the senses when talking to the person.

SENSITIVE VISION: Turn off the fluorescent lights or flashing stimuli where possible.

SENSITIVE HEARING: Limit the amount of noise in the room e.g. close windows, don't shout.

PAIN: People with autism can have a very high pain threshold and may demonstrate an unusual response to pain, including laughter, humming, singing, taking clothes off etc. They may not tell you if they are injured, so look out for bleeding, signs of injury etc. They may also find certain touch painful, so do not touch the person, even to guide them somewhere.

A person with ASC can easily be overloaded with sensory information in busy places, where there are lots of people etc. Individuals cope with this in different ways. It can trigger a fight or flight reaction. Some may rock, tap objects, talk incessantly, pace, repetitive questioning etc, whereas other might withdraw, place their fingers in the ears etc.

These behaviours help calm the individual so it is very important not to stop the behaviours unless necessary, as this may lead to more challenging behaviour.