

What is autism?

Autism is a life-long neuro-developmental disorder which is characterised by difficulties in social communication and restricted repetitive behaviours. Many individuals with autism also have difficulties with sensory processing and emotional regulation. 700,000 people in the UK have autism. Research has shown that people with autism are more likely to have a mental health problem, especially anxiety, than the typically developing population.



Recent Research has found that the term 'autistic person' is preferred by the autism community and 'person with autism' is preferred among professionals. It is best to ask the individual you are speaking to which term they prefer.

People with autism have said they want other people to have a better awareness and understanding of autism. It is important that we ask people with autism how we can support them in the best way possible. It is also important to remember that some people might not feel comfortable sharing that they have a diagnosis or have not yet received a diagnosis. This leaflet provides some general tips and advice that may help when working therapeutically with an individual with ASD.

Questions it might be important to ask when you begin to work with someone on the spectrum

- What does it mean to you to have a diagnosis?
- How does your diagnosis affect you?
- What do you feel you need help with?
- What do you find difficult to manage about your day-to-day life?

Practical Adaptations to Therapy

- Allow more time – people with autism may take longer to process information, describe their difficulties, or to think about questions they might want to ask you.
- Be flexible with appointments – evening appointments, length of appointments, face-to-face vs telephone.
- Too much information can be overwhelming, if you are providing session notes giving these out one session at a time is more helpful than providing them all at once.
- Discuss adaptations to printed materials for individuals who may also have dyslexia or dyspraxia.
- Offer information in accessible formats – whether this is printed, via e-mail, online, audio recorded, more visual than text etc.
- Ask for feedback – ask what works, what is helpful and whether your ideas and rationale for strategies make sense.

Things that might help engagement in Therapy

- Regular appointments in a familiar location/building.
- Being flexible with homework – it is important to discuss how to adjust homework/strategies to match needs and goals.
- Some people with autism might think of things as either “black” or “white”, “yes” or “no” and might find it difficult to identify anything in between. It is important to discuss this.
- Adapt response formats for rating scales so they are meaningful to the individual.
- Some people with autism experience difficulties recognising and labelling their own emotions. Spending some time on emotional recognition and developing a shared vocabulary for the emotions being discussed may be helpful.
- Be aware of additional sensory difficulties people with autism might have. (e.g. finding it difficult to sit in a noisy waiting room, cross out a mistake, panic if there is a fire drill etc.).
- A collaborative approach can help the individual to feel more in control and invested in their therapy, it also may support them to open up about their difficulties.

General Advice and Tips

- People with autism often report that not having enough notice if appointments are changing can be distressing.
- People with autism often report difficulty in getting to appointments during rush hour.
- Some people with autism may also feel distressed or uncomfortable traveling on public transport to and from appointments.
- Some people with autism report mindfulness strategies to be helpful, for others focusing on senses can be very difficult.
- Social contact can be very demanding and tiring for some individuals on the spectrum and so shorter appointments may be helpful.
- People with autism found therapy helpful when you individualise strategies.
- Asking questions and discuss things using terms that are familiar, meaningful and accessible is important. Spend some time agreeing on terminology.
- Consider being more directive – being overly Socratic in your questioning may cause difficulties. Structure your questions so that they can be answered unambiguously.
- Some people with autism have an exceptional ability to analyse materials at a very detailed level and may initially reject an idea or strategy due to one small aspect of it. If ideas are initially rejected it is important this is discussed because it may still be possible to use the strategy with adaptations.
- Identify and, where possible, incorporate the clients’ interests and hobbies into therapy to illustrate information, increase accessibility and make materials more engaging and concrete. Metaphors can sometimes be more confusing.
- Actively identify and discuss barriers to accessing therapy ensuring the clients knowledge and expertise of what works best for them is incorporated into sessions.

Further Information

- The National Autistic Society have lots of information on their website and also have a video which gives you an idea of what it might be like to experience sensory difficulties. The video is called 'Too much Information' and can be found here: <http://www.autism.org.uk/get-involved/tmi/film.aspx>
- Research Autism have further information on interventions with people with autism and what the current research has found
- Scottish Autism also have some helpful information which can be found on their website <https://www.scottishautism.org/>
- Mind have put together a booklet to help practitioners who are working with someone with autism and a mental health problem. This booklet can be found here: <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/3120340/autism-guide-web-version.pdf>

If you have any comments, suggestions or feedback on this document, please contact Jacqui.rodgers@newcastle.ac.uk

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