

Tips: Communicating effectively with someone with an ASD

Taking steps to understand a person's ASD – and making sure other staff working with them understand it too, if the person with an ASD consents to disclosure – can greatly increase their chance of success in the workplace.

- ✓ If the person with an ASD responds in a way that seems inappropriate or unfeeling, remember that it is not deliberate. It may be helpful to gently explain what a more appropriate response might be in a similar situation.
- ✓ Remember that the person may have to work harder than others at social aspects of their job, and may find it difficult to make conversation. Make sure that other staff are aware of this (if the person consents to their being told) and encourage them to proactively engage the person in conversation.
- ✓ If the person doesn't laugh at people's jokes or join in the workplace banter, this doesn't necessarily mean that they don't have a sense of humour. People with an ASD often interpret language very literally, which can make it hard for them to understand humour such as wordplay and sarcasm.
- ✓ Try to treat the person as an individual, focusing on their strengths, abilities and skills, and avoid assumptions about their likely performance because they have an ASD. Many people with an ASD are successful in jobs requiring 'people skills', including receptionists, tour guides and youth workers.
- ✓ Remember that it's not only people with an ASD who struggle with communication and social relationships – we all find these things hard at times. It's just that people with an ASD are more likely to find these situations more difficult – especially if they are feeling stressed. But remember that we have all misread cues, misjudged what is the 'right' thing to say, or felt uncomfortable in some social situations, and we all need support from time to time.

To find out more

Prospects factsheets

More factsheets are available from prospects.london@nas.org.uk. Other topics include:
Recruiting someone with an ASD
Managing someone with an ASD
How can Prospects help you as an employer?

Further reading

A range of books about ASDs are available from The National Autistic Society. To view the full listing or to order online, go to www.autism.org.uk/pubs. For more information phone 020 7903 3595 or email publications@nas.org.uk

Telephone support

The Autism Helpline provides an information service to those affected by autism or Asperger syndrome
Tel: 0845 070 4004 Monday to Friday, 10am-4pm
Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

Support for employers

Prospects Employment Service provides a range of services for organisations that employ, or would like to employ, someone with an ASD. (See details below.)

Employer factsheet

What is an autism spectrum disorder?

Working with someone with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be confusing if you don't understand how the condition affects them. This factsheet explains what an ASD is, and offers some practical tips to help you understand and communicate better with a colleague with an ASD.

What does 'autism spectrum disorder' mean?

'Autism spectrum disorder' (ASD) is the name for a range of conditions that affect the way a person sees the world, processes information and interacts with other people. People with an ASD typically find it difficult to develop social relationships, communicate with others and think in the abstract. Often the condition is almost unnoticeable, and people can go through life without ever being diagnosed with the condition until they are in their twenties, thirties or forties. ASDs are called 'pervasive developmental disorders', which affect every part of a person's life. In the workplace, even when their qualifications and skill levels are ideally suited to the work concerned, a person with an ASD may experience difficulties interacting with colleagues, and this can affect their ability to hold down a job.

ASD is a 'spectrum' condition, which means it can range from scarcely perceptible difficulties to severe disability. Diagnoses on the autism spectrum are varied, and include:

- > **'Classic' autism** – some people with autism have an accompanying learning disability, which is usually defined as having an IQ of less than 70
- > **Asperger syndrome** – people with Asperger syndrome often have average or above-average levels of intelligence, and are often highly educated, but they may experience significant social difficulties
- > **High-functioning autism** – this term is often used interchangeably with Asperger syndrome.

ASDs occur across cultural and language barriers. They affect around six times as many men as women, and people sometimes find that the social difficulties experienced by women with the condition are less noticeable. People with an ASD are more likely than the general population to have accompanying problems such as dyslexia (difficulty with reading, spelling and/or writing), dyspraxia (severe difficulty with tasks requiring fine motor skills such as drawing or writing) and digestive problems. They are also vulnerable to developing mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

"We need support to learn domestic things, and how to work out emotions and friendships."
Person with an ASD

What is an autism spectrum disorder?



How are ASDs caused?

The causes of ASDs are still being investigated. Many experts believe that the pattern of behaviour from which an ASD is diagnosed may not result from a single cause. There is strong evidence to suggest that ASDs can be caused by a variety of physical factors, all of which affect brain development. ASDs are not due to emotional deprivation or the way a person has been brought up. There is evidence to suggest that genetic factors are responsible for some forms of ASD. An ASD is likely to be caused by several genes interacting rather than by one single gene. For some years, scientists have been attempting to identify which genes might be implicated in ASDs.

"People can help us by communicating clearly - by explaining tasks well so they are easy to understand, and giving support to do some tasks."

Person with an ASD

What are the common characteristics of someone with an ASD?

Each person with an ASD has individual gifts, strengths and difficulties, like anyone else. However, a person will be diagnosed as having an ASD if, to a greater or lesser extent, they show some of a range of typical characteristics. The three areas in which people with an ASD often experience difficulties are in social communication, social interaction and social imagination – commonly known as the 'triad of impairments'.

Social communication

- › The person may interpret language in a literal way, may have difficulty interpreting idiomatic terms such as "She must have eyes in the back of her head", and may not know when someone is joking or being sarcastic.
- › They may have formal or stilted language, or a monotonous tone of voice.
- › A person with ASD may not pick up on non-verbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions or tone of voice, or they may misinterpret them. They may also not recognise other people's emotions, motivations or expectations. In particular, they may be unaware of the 'unspoken' rules of behaviour – such as instinctively knowing that it might be considered rude to mention certain things. They may also find it difficult to maintain eye contact.

Joseph's story

When people first meet Joseph, they often don't realise that he has any difficulties. Joseph desperately wanted to fit in at school, and felt frustrated that he couldn't participate in some social activities. He was never picked for school teams, and didn't know how to join in in the playground. However, he was very good at maths and computing, achieved good grades at GCSE and A level, and found he could entertain his peers with his excellent memory for jokes. At 18, he received a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome. He was later diagnosed with dyspraxia and also experiences depression. As he moved on to adulthood, Joseph found it difficult to study at college, until he was given some specialist support. He found it hard to get a job until he was given special training in interview techniques and, once he got a job, he needed help to organise his working day. This support opened up many more opportunities for him and his employers found him hard working and very efficient, with a great eye for detail.

Social interaction

- › The person may find it difficult to form or sustain friendships.
- › They may struggle with certain social situations and with making conversation.
- › They may not notice if the person they are talking to is not interested in what they are saying.

Social imagination

- › The person may feel more comfortable with facts than imagining hypothetical ('what if?') situations, or thinking in abstract or conceptual ways.
- › They may find it difficult to put themselves in other people's shoes and understand other people's perceptions or points of view.
- › Their strengths may lie in following procedures or routines rather than dealing with situations spontaneously.
- › They may have a narrow range of interests.

Other factors

- › The person may also be sensitive to noise, smell, taste or touch.
- › They may become anxious if a routine or process is broken.
- › They may have special interests such as a hobby that they are obsessively interested in.

The list above gives an overview of the various difficulties that people with ASDs experience. However, it is important to remember that each individual with an ASD will have a unique mix of factors, and not all of the above will be present. These factors will be combined with all the usual characteristics that contribute to someone's personality. Each individual is different. So it is important to be aware of what the condition means for them, and to treat them on their own merit.

What strengths may someone with an ASD have?

Having an ASD can cause a person problems in some areas of life, but the characteristics associated with ASDs mean that there are some things that they may be able to do better than other people. Many people with an ASD – particularly those with Asperger syndrome – are intelligent, with high IQ levels. Colleagues of people with ASDs have described a variety of strengths, which often include:

- › accuracy
- › a good eye for detail and reliability
- › an excellent memory for facts and figures
- › the ability to thrive in a structured, well-organised work environment.

"It would help if people were accepting and tolerant of the condition, and of our sometimes eccentric behaviour."

Person with an ASD

"We need the rules making clear. We need telling what to do and what not to do in social situations."