

1

What is Autism?

What is Autism?

Advice sheet for staff

An autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental condition which affects the way a person communicates with and relates to other people and the world around them. Current estimates suggest that around 1 in 100 people have autism.

The causes of autism are yet unknown. It is only since the 1980s that autism spectrum disorder has been a recognised condition within the diagnostic assessment manuals and initially the diagnostic assessments were focused on children especially those displaying the signs of 'classic' autism.

As more research into autism has been undertaken it has become evident that there are many people, both children and adults, who are autistic but this has not been recognised as they are unaware of their condition or have been misdiagnosed with other conditions like anxiety, mental health issues etc.

Many people report that 'they knew that they had difficulties but did not know why'. There are a significant number of adults who are now being diagnosed with autism.

Autistic people can be affected by their condition in a variety of ways and to very different degrees. This is why it's called 'the autism spectrum'. However, increasingly research tells us that people can have a range of different needs and abilities which results in them having a 'spikey profile' for example, they may have high intellectual capacity but lack social interaction and planning skills.

Autism can affect people with any level of intellectual ability, but it is not a learning disability, although some autistic people may have a co-occurring learning disability. Or they may have other co-occurring conditions such as ADHD, depression or anxiety. The cognitive strengths of some individuals may mean that they can focus on tasks without breaking their concentration.

A Person Focused Approach

An autistic person deserves the same rights to learn, engage and reach their potential as anyone else, and has potential to play an active part in the college community.

The way in which an autistic person presents and the difficulties they experience varies from one person to another. However, all autistic people will need some adjustments to be made in order to maximize their learning potential and reduce distress.

From experience it is evident that as a result of the range of difficulties that autistic students experience, more structure, adapted communication and increased understanding will need to be applied across all college activities.

Each person is an individual and therefore, it is essential that their Individual Learning Plan (ILP) accurately captures the unique strengths and needs of the person.

Many of the suggestions outlined in this guide are no or low cost, and colleges have a duty to make these reasonable adjustments in line with **The Equality Act**, and curriculum requirements.

What are the Signs and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder?

People have significant issues in the following areas to receive a positive autism diagnosis:

Social interaction

Difficulty understanding social rules, social behaviours and relationships, for example, difficulty taking turns during a conversation, being unable to adapt behaviour to suit different situations.

Social communication

Difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication, for example, not understanding the meaning of facial expressions or tone of voice, interpreting language literally.

Rigidity of thinking and difficulties with social imagination

A preference for consistency and sameness, difficulties with predicting outcomes to situations and planning ahead.

It is usual that all individuals with a diagnosis of autism have some difficulties in all of these areas. However, the ways in which they manifest themselves vary enormously. For example, some people are very aloof, some passive and some may want interaction but may lack the expected social 'norms'.

Also many autistic people have special interests and repetitive behaviours that can often preoccupy their attention.

Sensory issues

Increasingly research has shown that 90% of autistic people experience issues with processing sensory information as a feature of their condition.

Many of the tips within this pack relate to reducing identified sensory issues within the college environment (where possible).

For autistic people the brain tries to process everything at once without filtering out unimportant things like background noise, wallpaper, people moving about and the feel of clothes on their skin. This results in sensory overload.

If this happens you may find the individual either has a 'meltdown' or even 'shut down' which is beyond an autistic persons control as it is an involuntary fight, flight or freeze response. Both 'meltdown' and 'shut down' can result from this situation.

Meltdown

“It literally feels like my head is imploding. Building up to it gets overwhelming, but an actual meltdown is just like... like your brain is ceasing to exist.

Of course, it doesn't actually, but I lose control of my muscles and ability to talk, I can't modulate my voice or really send any signals from my brain to my body to calm down. It's as though my brain, as a last-minute thing, sends a bunch of energy to the rest of my body, but there's no instructions for how that energy should be used, so it just goes all over and is out of my control.”

Shayna G

Shut Down

Some autistic people describe that they sometimes enter 'shut down' after a 'meltdown' – kind of during recovery mode. It is important to understand that the autistic person may be unable to communicate, move, or interact with you, or the environment.

They may feel incredibly vulnerable in this state and hypersensitive to touch. You should reduce sensory input including keeping communication as brief and calm as possible.

“Shutdowns are hard for me, I become extremely hypersensitive to sensory input, to people in my environment, I even lose my verbal ability. It's hard for my loved ones too, because they want to comfort me, but any social demand, like speech, is unwelcome, and physical touch, like hugs or a tap on the arm can be excruciating.

If an autistic person is consistently stressed and overwhelmed for a long period of time, they can enter an extended shutdown sometimes referred to as 'autistic burnout'. This can drastically reduce an Autistic person's ability to function for weeks, months or even years.”

Emma D

For further information, please look on : www.ASDinfoWales.co.uk/further-education where you will find resources that relate to this topic.