



## Advice Sheet for Staff

This advice sheet is for all staff working in a primary healthcare setting. The sheet is broken into the three stages of accessing healthcare – before, during and after – and offers advice of how best to prepare the environment and your communication methods in order to better an autistic patients' experience of accessing the service.

To gain a basic understanding of autism, watch our ["What is Autism?" film](#) and complete our Online Module 1 [Understanding Autism - Awtistiaeth Cymru | Autism Wales | National Autism Team](#) & Module 2 [Understanding Effective Communication and Autism - Awtistiaeth Cymru | Autism Wales | National Autism Team](#) which is part of our autism aware organisation certification scheme. If you have time to complete this online training please do so, as it is a good way of learning about autism from the perspective of autistic people.

The main points to keep in mind are:

- Keep all communication with the patient short, clear and specific.
- Don't ask open-ended questions.
- If things change let the patient know beforehand. This might include restrictions due to Covid-19, such as the entrance door being different to the exit, or if appointments are running late.
- Be Sensory Aware

### Before

#### Highlight on the System

Have a "flag" on the system so that staff know immediately that the person calling in is autistic, and therefore know to adapt their communication methods. The "flag" should also note any known specific triggers for the individual so that staff can begin to prepare the surgery environment.

#### Communication

Ensure that all communication is clear and specific, especially over the telephone (some autistic people may not be able to communicate on the phone). Do not ask open-ended questions such as "how are you feeling?", instead try and be as specific as possible "are you feeling any pain?" or "are you aware of any pain". It is important to remember that sensory processing differences and interoception (the system that enables us to process body signals like hunger, pain, needing the toilet, and emotions) may affect how an autistic person feels pain (please see additional information sheet below).



Some autistic people take longer to process information or a question, so be patient, and wait for the response, even if it takes up to a minute for them to respond. Please be mindful that processing speed and intellect are not the same. Some autistic people will not be intellectually impaired but may still need longer to process information so they can process thoroughly.

### **Appointment Information**

Inform the patient in plenty of time what form their appointment will take place e.g. over the telephone, in person, or online. Ensure that the patient understands what they will need to access the appointment, and how it will be done. If possible, offer to send instructions via email after the telephone call.

Creating a visual guide to the surgery is a good idea, including photos of the entrance, waiting area, various rooms in the building and the exit. A simple sheet with photos and supporting with one sentence.

If things change let the patient know beforehand. This might include restrictions due to Covid-19, such as the entrance door being different to the exit, or if appointments are running late.

### **Prepare**

You might find it helpful to re-familiarise yourself with this advice sheet before the patient attends their appointment. If the appointment will take place in person, staff might find our [Primary Healthcare Professionals](#) film helpful.

## **During**

### **Communication**

When meeting with the patient, be clear and specific in the language you use. Never assume that the patient has understood what you have told them. They may appear to understand, but don't. Make sure that they understand before providing further information. Equally, some autistic people may appear to have NOT understood when they already have. Using facial cues to determine how autistic people are feeling can be a very unreliable way of determining mood, understanding, pain, etc.

Do not ask open-ended questions such as "how are you feeling?", instead try and be as specific as possible "are you feeling any pain?" (Please be aware that autistic people may feel pain differently due to their sensory processing differences and Interoception, see Sensory Processing Handout below).

You might like to use pictures to ask the patient to point out where they are feeling pain on their own body or where there is a problem.



## Processing Time

An autistic person may require processing time after you have asked a question or provided information. Be patient and wait until they are ready. If asked to repeat something, repeat what you said in exactly the same way so that there is no new information for the patient to process. As stated above, remember that just because an autistic person needs additional time to process, this may not be reflective of their intellectual ability.

## Sensory Processing Differences

The patient might experience sensory processing difficulties during the appointment which will hinder their access to the service e.g. the lights in the room could be too bright, and you will need to turn them off. If you are unsure, ask the patient (or the person supporting them), what you can do to make it a better environment, and remember any adjustments you make for the next time they attend the surgery. It might be useful to "flag" it on the system or if possible request the patient to record such information on a Health Communication passport **before** attending appointments <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/my-health-passport> and bring it with them and/ or keep a record electronically for future reference, thus alleviating anxiety and distress. Autistic people are often unable to advocate for or articulate their own needs, especially when in an anxious state (e.g., medical appointments).

For more information on Sensory Processing please click on the document below:



Sensory  
Processing.docx

## Examination or Procedure

Discuss any examination or procedure with the patient before starting and be specific. Tell them what will happen/ how long will take/ how it might feel. A visual support may help clarify what will happen during a procedure/ examination.

## What Happens Next

Be very clear with the patient about the next steps – explain what the patient needs to do after the appointment, what they can expect, and whether or not they need to book another appointment.

After providing verbal information on the illness and instructions on any prescribed medication, make sure you also write it down on a piece of paper for the patient to take home with them.



If prescribing medication, say exactly what the medication is for and what will/might happen. The same should be done if asking the patient to go for a scan or to the hospital. Provide clear instructions on which hospital the patient needs to attend, how to book an appointment, and when to go (ASAP, or can it wait a couple of weeks?). When writing the referral, give the onward service as much factual information as you can about the patient – let them know that they are autistic, if they have any sensory processing or communication differences.

## After

Ensure that the patient knows what they need to do after the appointment by being very clear and specific in your instructions.

### **Prescriptions**

If you have prescribed medication, be clear about when the medication needs to be taken and how. Let the patient know what to do if there are any problems e.g., stop taking the medication/ speak to a pharmacist. Write all the information down so that the patient can take it home with them. Routinely offer or just provide, day by day pill boxes/dispensers.