



Explanation of the ASD Assessment Process

When someone undergoes an autism assessment, the assessors are looking for information that can help them to determine whether the person meets the criteria for an autism diagnosis. These criteria (according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) or International Classification of Diseases (ICD)) are:

Issues with Social Communication & interaction. These can include difficulties in having conversations, or with understanding non-verbal communication or developing or understanding relationships.

Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour, Interests or Activities. This can include repetitive speech, having difficulty with change, having special or focussed interests or sensory issues.

To effectively undertake the assessment, the clinician needs to gather a lot of information, including information about the person's childhood. They will be looking for examples of behaviours that demonstrate the person's difficulty in the above areas.

As part of the assessment, you might be sent a questionnaire to fill in about your child/family member. This contains lots of questions about them, which you should try to answer with as much detail as possible, using clear examples. One thing that you should be aware of is that most of these questions will concentrate on the person's difficulties or problems. This might be different from the way that autism (and other neurodivergences like ADHD, dyslexia) is increasingly being seen, as a difference and not a disorder. You might therefore find it upsetting to focus on the negative aspects of your loved one's behaviour. Unfortunately, the diagnostic criteria for autism is based on the person's difficulties and not their strengths, so the assessor/clinician is mainly looking for this type of information.

(if the person being assessed is a child, additional information might be required from other situations the child is normally in. This might mean the child being observed in school, but if the child is not in school, then it might mean them being observed during social activities or respite. The reason for looking at how the child behaves in different environments is that part of the autism diagnosis is that the person has to show difficulties in multiple environments (not just at home, or not just at school). If they are struggling in just one environment, there could be a different reason for their behaviour.)



The assessor will not be able to make a diagnosis based on these questions alone, they will also have to meet with the person. However, the answers to these questions will give them a very good basis to undertake the rest of the assessment process.

The next part of the process is conducted face-to-face and could mean more than one meeting with more than one professional. The full assessment may take up to 5 hours, but complex assessments may take longer than this. It will consist of them asking lots of questions, which will be like the ones in the questionnaire. This might feel like you are having to repeat yourself, but this might be important for the clinician to get as much information as possible. The person may also be asked to carry out some simple tasks, these are typically so that the assessors have an opportunity to observe behaviours of interest when assessing for autism. Sometimes multiple assessment tools are needed, to get as full-rounded a picture as possible. The assessment questions and tasks are standardised, which helps to ensure that the diagnostic assessment process is the same everywhere.

Once the assessment process has been completed, the information gathered during it is considered by the assessors and maybe by a wider team of people, to determine whether the person has reached the criteria for a diagnosis. It is important to remember that many people present with autism related traits/behaviours without being autistic, so it is essential to prepare that the outcome of the assessment may not be an autism diagnosis. The outcome typically be fed back either in person, online or via telephone. Sometimes you may be advised of the outcome by letter. A report detailing the assessment process and outcome will be provided.