

**Welcoming those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders  
(Autism and Asperger Syndrome)  
in our Churches and Communities**



## **Autism**

### **What is autism?**

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them.

It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while people with autism share certain difficulties, their condition will affect them in different ways. Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives but others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support. People with autism may also experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours.

### **Asperger Syndrome**

Asperger syndrome is a form of autism. People with Asperger syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence. They have fewer problems with speech but may still have difficulties with understanding and processing language.

### **How people with autism see the world**

People with autism have said that the world, to them, is a mass of people, places and events which they struggle to make sense of, and which cause them considerable anxiety.

In particular, understanding and relating to people, and taking part in everyday family and social life may be harder for them. Other people appear to know, intuitively, how to communicate and interact with each other, and some people with autism may wonder why they are 'different'.

People with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), may be referred to in other various ways: as having autism, Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism. People on the spectrum are affected in different ways by their condition, and all are individuals.

The three main areas of difficulty which all people with autism share are sometimes known as the 'triad of impairments'. They are:

difficulty with social communication

difficulty with social interaction

difficulty with social imagination.

It can be hard to create awareness of autism as people with the condition do not 'look' disabled: parents of children with autism often say that other people simply think their child is naughty; while adults with autism find that they are misunderstood.

### [More about autism](#)

For people with autistic spectrum disorders 'body language' can appear just as foreign as if people were speaking ancient Greek. People with autism have difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal language. Many have a very literal understanding of language, and think people always mean exactly what they say. They can find it difficult to use or understand:

facial expressions of tone or voice

jokes and sarcasm

common phrases and sayings; eg. 'It's cool', which people often say when they think that something is good, but strictly speaking means it's a bit cold.

Some people with autism may not speak, or have very limited speech. They will usually understand what other people say to them, but prefer to use alternative means of communication themselves, such as sign language or visual symbols.

Others will have good language skills, but they find it hard to understand the give-and-take nature of conversations, perhaps repeating what the other person has just said or talking at lengths about their own interests.

It helps if other people speak in a clear consistent way and give people with autism time to process what has been said to them.

### Difficulty with social interaction

Socialising doesn't come naturally – we have to learn it.

People with autism often have difficulty recognising or understanding other people's emotions and feelings, and understanding and expressing their own, which can make it more difficult to fit in socially. They may not understand the unwritten social rules which most of us pick up without thinking: they may stand too close to another person for example, or start an inappropriate subject of conversation, appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling, prefer to spend time alone rather than seeking to company of other people, not seek comfort from others, appear to behave 'strangely' or inappropriately, as it is not always easy for them to express feelings, emotions or needs.

Difficulties with social interaction can mean that people with autism find it hard to form friendships: some may want to interact with other people and make friends, but may be unsure how to go about this.

### Difficulty with social imagination

We have trouble working out what people know. We have more difficulty guessing what other people are thinking.

Social imagination allows us to understand and predict other people's behaviour, make sense of abstract ideas, and to imagine situations outside our immediate daily routine. Difficulties with social imagination means that people with autism find it difficult to:-

understand the concept of danger, (eg. Problems with road safety)

engage in imaginative play

prepare for change and plan for the future

cope in new or unfamiliar situations.

### Characteristics of autism

The characteristics of autism vary from one person to another but as well as the three main areas of difficulty, people with autism may have:

A love of routines

sensory sensitivity

special interests  
learning disabilities.

### Love of routines

The world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place to people with autism, who often prefer to have a fixed daily routine so that they know what is going to happen.

Rules can also be important: it may be difficult for a person with autism to take a different approach to something once they have been taught a 'right' way to do it. People with autism may not be comfortable with the idea of change. But can cope well if they are prepared for it in advance.

### Sensory sensitivity

People with autism may experience some form of sensory sensitivity. This can occur in one or more of the five senses – sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. A person's senses are either intensified (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hypo-sensitive).

For example, a person with autism may find certain background sounds, which other people ignore or block out, unbearably loud or distracting. This can cause anxiety or even physical pain.

People who are hypo-sensitive may not feel pain or extremes of temperature. Some may rock, spin or flap their hands to stimulate sensation, to help with balance and posture or to deal with stress.

People with sensory sensitivity may also find it harder to use their body awareness system. This system tells us where our bodies are, so for those with reduced body awareness, it can be harder to navigate rooms avoiding obstructions, stand at an appropriate distance from other people and carry out 'fine motor' skills, such as writing and tying shoelaces.

### Special interests

Many people with autism have intense special interests, often from a fairly young age. These can change over time, or may be lifelong, and can be anything and perhaps unusual.

## Learning disabilities

People with autism may have learning disabilities, which can affect all aspects of someone's life, from studying in school, to learning how to wash themselves or make a meal.

As with autism itself, people can have different degrees of learning disability, so some will be able to live fairly independently, while others may require life-long, specialist support.

## A bit more information

About 1 in 100 people in the UK have autism. That is about 40 people with autism in the average parish. There are possibly some people with an autistic spectrum disorder already in your church, perhaps already doing a useful job. They may never have told you that they have this diagnosis, or they may not even yet realise that they are on the autistic spectrum.

People from all nationalities and cultural, religious and social backgrounds can have autism, although it appears to affect more men than women. It is a lifelong condition: children with autism grow up to be adults with autism.

The exact cause of autism is still being investigated, but it is known that it is not caused by a person's upbringing or social condition and it is not the fault of the individual or their parents.

## **Two minutes to spare?**

### **Just read this:**

Quick low cost things to make a difference for people with an ASD  
and everyone in you congregation

(Written by someone with Asperger syndrome)

1. Check the **lights in each room**, especially fluorescent ones – any flickering ones? Please replace them. (This also helps people with epilepsy).

2. **Noise** levels. Is there anything unexpected in today's service/meeting? Can it be changed easily? If not, can you warn us? (This also helps people with mental health conditions and those who are deaf).
3. The **building**. Do we know what it looks like, and what the **layout** is like today? Is information on a simple website, perhaps? (This also helps people who have visual disabilities or those who are nervous of attending somewhere new).
4. The **order of service** – really clear **instructions** for us e.g. where to sit, when to stand and sit, what to say at each point? Either write it down, or get someone to be with us to quietly say what to do, please. (This also helps those new to church). Different colour paper may help some to read service sheets, e.g. light blue paper rather than white.
5. We are very **literal**, and our minds may see pictures, not words. If you need to use complicated language, can someone be available to explain it afterwards if we need it, maybe by email? (This helps people who find reading more difficult, too, which is one in every five people in the UK).
6. **Physical** events e.g. **shaking hands**? Water being splashed about? We may find this physically painful, as we're hypersensitive. Please warn us what will happen, and avoid physical contact unless we offer first. (This also helps those with arthritis, and those who are nervous of being touched because of memories of violence).
7. **Rest** area – somewhere to go if we need to, please. Or don't worry if we wander outside for a while. (This also helps people who have chronic fatigue illnesses, or perhaps mental health conditions, as well as those with back conditions who may need a quick lie down on a bench).
8. **Socialising**. Be aware we find it difficult and exhausting as we may not 'see' or hear you that well. Our **body language** can be different to yours, and we may not make **eye contact**. Please don't think we're rude. (This also helps people who are more introverted).

9. **Be clear and accurate.** If you say you'll do something, please do it. Those on the autistic spectrum will usually find it very distressing if you promise to help and don't, or promise to phone at a certain time, or if you use expressions like "I'll be back in five minutes" when you mean, "I'll be back some time this afternoon". If you need to change arrangements, please let us know.
10. **Support:** Find a quiet, caring person to be aware of us, someone to lend a little assistance if we need it. Brief them well, and please respect our confidentiality and privacy.

### What you can do to help

If you suspect that someone coming to church is on the autistic spectrum, they may not yet have identified themselves that they have any kind of autism, and you will understand the need for sensitivity. Please do not diagnose by yourself (some characteristics of autism are shared by other people). Even if someone tells you that they are on the spectrum, please do not assume that you know what they need. It is always helpful to ask people (particularly newcomers to church) if there is any help that would assist them to take part in the service and/or the social elements of church. A label can be useful to begin to understand someone's difficulties, but on its own it is not enough to predict what an individual will find helpful. People are the experts in themselves and can help us understand their needs if we speak with them. These principles also apply to anyone with a disability or on the autistic spectrum that you may encounter through baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Please be patient and understanding if people on the spectrum appear rude – they do not mean to be – they may just not know the right thing to say. It may simply be that they need time to process questions and to respond.

It would be very helpful to have a person in the congregation who can quietly support anyone with autism – to be alongside them, and to perhaps explain anything not understood at first.

It is possible for people on the autistic spectrum to do jobs and tasks within the church – you may already have people in your parish filling valuable roles. Many people with autism bring skills and commitment to all that they do.

### Supporting parents of children on the autistic spectrum

Having a child with autism can be very difficult. The first hurdle is often for the parents to find out what is behind puzzling and sometimes very challenging behaviour.

It can be extremely hard for parents to take their children who have autism into any social situations, including church. Autistic children are often seen as naughty. (Adults with autism are often misunderstood.)

Parents of children with autism (as with other disabilities) may be under great stress and be having difficulty in getting the appropriate education for their children. The church has the opportunity to support parents pastorally in these circumstances through awareness of autism and providing a listening ear and perhaps other means of help.

Through providing a welcome for all God's children, churches are able to show the love of God to all people.

### Acknowledgements

*Some information here is taken from the National Autistic Society website. The 'Ten Points' are courtesy of the Oxford Diocesan policy for welcoming those with Autism and Asperger Syndrome.*

### Further Information and Contacts

*For advice please contact the Revd Linda Shipp, Diocesan Officer for People with Disabilities, on 01642 701777 or [revlmshipp@btinternet.com](mailto:revlmshipp@btinternet.com).*

*National Autistic Society Website at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)*