What is Autism?

Autism is a complex, lifelong developmental disability that typically appears during early childhood and can impact a person’s relationships, self-regulation, communication and social skills. While there is not a known single cause of autism, early diagnosis helps a person receive the support and services that they need, which can lead to a quality life filled with opportunity.

Nearly 1 in 54 Americans are affected by autism. Autism is a spectrum that each individual experiences differently. If you have met one person with autism, then you have met one person with autism. Autism is an infinite number of people presenting an endless number of different lived experiences. Signs and symptoms vary from person to person and between male and female. People with Autism will not usually have all of the signs and symptoms.
While we will always work to spread awareness, words matter as we strive for autistic individuals to live fully in all areas of life. As many individuals and families affected by autism know, acceptance is often one of the biggest barriers to finding and developing a strong support system.” states Christopher Banks, President, CEO of the Autism Society of America. The shift in terminology fosters acceptance to ignite change through improved support and opportunities in education, employment, accessible housing, affordable health care, and comprehensive long-term services.

Acceptance comes with understanding, and while individuals and families living with autism live this life everyday, there is still a need for factual education and awareness for the general public. Knowledge promotes acceptance because it allows people to understand how to be more inclusive, and build more supportive communities.
Common signs and symptoms of ASD in adults can include:

- Clumsiness
- Difficulty making conversation
- Difficulty making or maintaining close friendships
- Discomfort during eye contact
- Challenges with regulating emotions
- Extreme interest in one particular topic, such as a specific period of history
- Frequent monologues on the same subject or subjects
- Hypersensitivity to sounds or smells that do not seem to bother others
- Involuntary noises, such as repetitive throat clearing
- Issues understanding sarcasm or idioms
- Lack of inflection when speaking
- Only having an interest in a few activities
- Preference for solitary activities
- Problems reading the emotions of others
- Trouble understanding facial expressions and body language
- Reliance on daily routines and difficulty dealing with changes to routine
- Repetitive behaviors
- Social Anxiety
- Superior abilities in mathematics and related disciplines
- Need to arrange items in a specific order

How to Calm a Person with Autism

- Give them space and ask them what they need.
- Keep your language simple and let them respond with behaviors, as words often fail when they are distressed.
- Provide a safe sensory environment. Some needs are a quiet personal space, dim lighting, and a gentle pressure touch (i.e.; weighted blanket)

What Not to Do

- Don’t punish them for being distressed. A lot of aggression and self-harm behaviors are rooted in deep, deep pain or frustration. A meltdown is an involuntary neurological reaction. It can’t be prevented, only responded to.
- Don’t bombard them with questions. Autistic people often don’t process information well when upset.
Autism Spectrum Disorder is lifelong and impacts emotions, sensory experience, and social-interactions. As autism diagnosis rates continue to increase, it's important that we educate ourselves about the disorder. In doing so, we'll be better equipped to build relationships, understand sensory awareness, offer support to family and friends, and learn how to support autistic colleagues in the workplace.

**What Can We Do To Help?**

- **Autism Understanding**
  - What can you do to embrace neurodiversity?
  - **Say what you mean**
    - Some autistic people may not be able to see your intentions or read body language so help them understand what you are thinking.
  - **Reduce sensory input**
    - Autism affects the senses and can cause overload. Can you reduce the noise, smells, colours, patterns or light in your environment?
  - **Be a mentor or friend**
    - Autistic people say they suffer from misunderstanding and from an overwhelming environment. Find out how their autism affects them.
  - **Reduce pressure**
    - Try to reduce the number of options and give clear expectations. Offer regular constructive feedback to help mutual understanding.
  - **Allow thinking time**
    - At least 6 seconds, which is longer than you think! Perhaps invite them to respond by email or arrange to talk with them again later.
  - **Play to their strengths**
    - People are at their best when they can be themselves so be flexible with how the work gets done to allow space for their way of thinking.
  - **Be open-minded**
    - Does it really matter if they take their shoes off in the office? If they wear headphones? Understand how they regulate their sensory input.

- **How to support people with autism**
  - Explain at every stage what you are about to do, what will happen next and why.
  - Give the person enough time to understand the information you are sharing and wait a few seconds for a response if it is not given immediately.
  - Questions should be clear and direct using language that is easy to understand and pictures where necessary – do not rely on the person to pick up on the meaning of your questions or body language.
  - People with autism might take what you say literally so avoid words with a double meaning and humour that could be misunderstood.
  - Maintain a routine – familiarity is often important to some people with autism.
  - Social difficulties may include lack of eye contact and unusual body language, talking at inappropriate moments or about inappropriate topics.
  - Repetitive behaviours might be a coping mechanism and therefore should be respected.
  - The environment is important – some people with autism are particularly sensitive to light, movement, sounds, smell and touch. Try to keep the immediate environment as calm as possible to help alleviate any anxiety.
  - Always consider the person's behaviour in terms of his or her autism, even if it becomes challenging.
  - Ask the person and/or parent, carer or advocate what support they might need.
Have you ever seen light streaming through a window and noticed the dust?

Some people with Autism mention they can see light waves like that all the time!

High pitched noises and minor keys are both mentioned as sounds that caused a fight or flight reaction.

Smells can also be overwhelming and be triggers.

### The Impact of Sensory Processing

It was only in 2013 that sensory processing issues was added to the list of symptoms to diagnose Autism. Those living with Autism can tell you it has a huge impact on their lives. Sensory issues are very common among autistics, This might be seen by others as someone being dramatic (saying something is loud when it doesn’t seem loud to you) or even rude (wearing headphones in a restaurant) but it’s important to understand that just because it doesn’t seem loud, bright, or overwhelming to you doesn’t mean the autistic person is experiencing it the same way you do.

### Sensory Hotspots

- I find it difficult to focus on a task or concentrate
- I have difficulty listening to what others say
- I close my eyes in bright light
- I am a fussy eater and like to eat the same things daily
- I don’t always feel pain like others might
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I hate being bullied
- I prefer to walk on tiptoes
- I have the tags cut out of my clothing
- I have trouble with balance
- Some fabrics make me upset and uncomfortable
- I have poor gross motor skills and have coordination difficulties
- I am a fussy eater and like to eat the same things daily
- I don’t always feel pain like others might
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushed or touched
- I don’t like loud or unexpected noises
- I don’t like being tickled
- I have poor fine motor skills and hate writing and cutting etc.
- I dislike having my hair brushing

### Stimming

**What is Stimming?**

Autistic people stim for all kinds of reasons, but it's generally a way to regulate emotions and sensory input, you might find a person who flaps their hands when excited or rocks when upset. Various forms of stimming are:

- **Visual** - Staring at lights, repetitive blinking, moving fingers in front of the eyes, hand-flapping.
- **Auditory** - Tapping ears, snapping fingers, making vocal sounds
- **Tactile** - Rubbing the skin with one’s hands or with another object, scratching
- **Taste** - Placing body parts or objects in the mouth, licking objects
- **Smell** - Smelling objects, sniffing people
- **Vestibular (Sense of Balance)** - Rocking front to back or side to side, continually shaking leg or foot.
The Autism Puzzle Piece logo, which is associated with autism and autistic people, is a controversial symbol that has divided the autism community for far too long. A topic which everyone has an opinion on, the Puzzle Piece logo debate is one which is far from over and, like the never-ending battle of whether pineapple belongs on pizza, it only grows more heated as time goes by.

What is clear though is that the meaning behind the symbol still elicits strong reactions, both positive and negative.

When the puzzle piece is used as the symbol for autism, it tells autistic people not to embrace their experiences but instead be ashamed of them until hopefully, someone comes by one day with the missing piece that fixes us. But I’m not missing any pieces, and neither are other autistic people. We need to be accepted, not “fixed.”
**ASC/ASD:** Autism spectrum condition / Autism spectrum disorder. While ASD is the term in common diagnostic use currently, many Autists prefer the term ‘condition’ as being more neutral than ‘disorder’.

**Asperger’s Syndrome:** has been incorporated into a category titled “Autism Spectrum Disorders”. Although Asperger’s Syndrome is out of date now, lots of people still use it. Some people object to its incorporation into the Autism category who would prefer to be distanced from what they almost invariably call “low functioning Autistics”.

**Auditory processing:** In very simple and practical terms, this is the processing of spoken information. It can sometimes be delayed in Autistic people, and for many (not all), speaking on the phone can be very difficult, and written communication is preferred.

**Burnout:** This is a long-term response to a long-term build up of stress. Most Autistic adults who experience burnout describe trying to act neurotypical for too long, and then one day, the mask is no longer available — it’s not possible to pretend any more. It is usually accompanied by a sudden loss of daily functioning, along with anxiety and depression, and appears to be particularly prevalent among people who either did not know they were Autistic (and therefore didn’t know what they needed to do for self-care), or who have previously been suppressing their Autistic responses in an attempt to be seen as competent in a competitive world.

**Executive function:** This is a term used for the way the brain processes the tasks we have to do. It involves planning the steps of a task, maintaining attention, working memory, (i.e. remembering the information needed for the task – like a temporary folder), and the reasoning and problem-solving processes required to complete the task. These are the basic processes affected in ADHD (which often co-occurs with ASCs), and can be quite challenging for Autistic people even if ADHD is not present. These processes are easily affected by stress, anxiety, illness, and depression, whether or not you have an underlying executive dysfunction.

**Functioning labels:** Terms such as “high-functioning” and “low-functioning” are strongly rejected by a very large proportion of the Autistic community (note, this is the actually Autistic people, not necessarily the surrounding parents, careers and professionals). The objection is for several reasons, but one of the most commonly expressed issues is that to give a functioning label creates an impression that the level of functioning ability is fixed and immutable, whereas the experience of Autistic adults is that the capacity to function (as we’re expected to by societal pressures) fluctuates day to day, and based on external and internal circumstances. Burnout, for example, can mean that someone who was previously perceived as highly capable can lose many aspects of their capacity, whereas delays in development that led to the label of ‘low-functioning’ may well be caught up given time, support and techniques (e.g. alternative communication options, assistance dogs). People labelled “low-functioning” have their strengths ignored. This group of people have traditionally been recommended for institutionalization; even if this did not happen, they are frequently not given opportunities to use their gifts and strengths. Even today, many parents tell Autistic Adults that their child is “too low functioning ever to be able to make choices for themselves” – dismissing the fact that these Autistic adults may have had similar challenges as a child. People labelled “high-functioning” instead have their challenges ignored. Many people spend a lot of time and energy masking their difficulties, afraid to be seen as ‘different’ or less capable.

**Meltdown:** *This is not a tantrum.* Tantrums are relatively deliberate, made in order to get one’s own way. The child (or adult) is often able to stop a tantrum if the person it’s directed at gives in or ignores it. A meltdown is an outward ‘explosion’ in response to a sensory overload. This is not a deliberate action, the Autist usually has very little control over it, and it will happen whether or not there is anyone there to watch it. For a visual type of analogy, a tantrum is like shaking a bottle of soft drink (soda) and taking the lid off. A meltdown is more like the internal pressure blowing the lid off. (See Shutdown)

**Neurodivergent** (ND): different (from the typical) in neurology. This includes autism as well as other neurodivergencies including ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, acquired brain injuries, OCD, giftedness and other conditions. The term is used as a neutral term to avoid pathologizing or stigmatizing differences in neurology.
Neurotypical (NT): having typical or average neurology. Not just not Autistic, although it is often used in that way by members of the Autistic community. Sometimes described as “normal”.

Sensory Overload: One of the commonalities in Autism is that we have differences in sensory perception and sensory processing. This can seem like the world is turned up too loudly, too brightly, and there is no filter or way to reduce the barrage of input. A sensory overload usually occurs when the sensory input is too much, and there’s nowhere to go to escape from it. Senses – awareness of noise, touch, smell, brightness and movement – keep heightening and soon become too much to bear; it all becomes completely overwhelming. Sensory overload is very likely to end in meltdown or shutdown. Avoiding loud, bright or otherwise stimulating situations that you can’t remove yourself from goes a long way to avoiding these responses.

Shutdown: This is an alternative response to sensory overload, as opposed to a meltdown. A shutdown is like the consciousness removing itself from the outside environment. This may not look like being curled up in fetal position – although it may. It may include becoming immobile and staring off into space, or becoming so absorbed in a special interest or somewhat mindless activity that you become unresponsive to people calling your name.

Stimming: The word ‘stim’ comes from the vaguely uncomfortable term ‘self-stimulating behaviors’. It’s a habit or action that people use to comfort, settle, or relax themselves. Hand-flapping is one example of this, but it can be as diverse as sucking a thumb or finger, fixing makeup frequently, tapping feet or fingers, repeating words or phrases, knitting, fiddling with hair, or spinning in circles.

**AUTISM MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES**

Autism is a childhood condition. Signs of autism start very early in childhood, but it is a lifelong condition. Autistic kids don’t grow out of their autism—they grow up to be autistic adults.

Autistic people have something wrong with them that needs to be fixed. Autism isn’t a disease like diabetes or asthma, and there is no cure for it. Many autistic people say they wouldn’t want to be cured. The way they see it, autism is like their gender or nationality—it’s part of who they are. Think of autism as a different way of processing information and making sense of the world. Autistic brains find some things more challenging, like relating to others, but they tend to excel in other ways, like noticing details and remembering information.

If someone can’t speak, it means they can’t understand. For a long time, doctors thought that if someone couldn’t speak, they couldn’t possibly be intelligent. Now we know that many non-speaking individuals are very smart, they just have trouble getting their bodies to obey their minds. You can show respect to non-speaking autistic people by talking to them like you would talk to anyone else their age.

Autistic people learn slower than others their age. Some autistic people do take longer to learn new things, while others learn very quickly, and most are somewhere in between. Every autistic person has strengths and challenges, just like everyone else.

Autistic people are “in their own world.” People often mistake common autistic behaviors, like fidgeting, covering ears, and lack of eye contact as signs that autistic people are spacing out. Actually, these behaviors do the opposite. If you’ve ever been to a country where you don’t speak the language, you know how overwhelming it is when you don’t know what others are about to do and aren’t able to communicate with them. That’s how autistic people feel all the time! Their behaviors aren’t a sign of being lost—they’re a sign of working hard to stay calm and focused.

All autistic people are the same. Autistic people share a few traits, like challenges communicating and relating to other people, but they are unique in every other way. You can find autistic people everywhere—they are athletes, doctors, teachers, actors, Youtubers, counselors, artists, and even moms and dads.

Autism is more common than it was in the past. Autism used to be very rare because it was only diagnosed in children who showed an exact list of challenges. Today, the autism spectrum is much broader, ranging from those who need a lot of help to those who need a little extra help in certain areas. It’s not that there are more autistic people, we’ve just gotten better at identifying it.

Autistic people don’t want to make friends. If an autistic person doesn’t respond the way expected, it doesn’t mean they don’t want to be your friend. It takes a lot of effort for many autistic people to interact. They may need a break, a quieter place to hang out, or a different way to communicate (like texting or using a special app). If they seem shy or anxious, keep in mind that they might have been teased or bullied in the past. Remember—you don’t need special knowledge or skills to be friends with an autistic person. Just be kind, be yourself, and be accepting of others and their differences.