



How do we describe autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterised by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech and nonverbal communication. Therefore, autism is a condition that affects how a person thinks, feels, interacts with others, and experiences their environment. It is a lifelong disability that starts when a person is born and stays with them into old age. Every person with autism is different to every other, which is why autism is described as a 'spectrum'.

What are the myths and misunderstandings about characteristics of autism?

There are lots of myths and misunderstandings about autism, but while many people with autism experience difficulties, with the right support people with autism can achieve a great quality of life.

There is also a misconception that the autism spectrum is linear. In fact, people with autism can display a wide range of characteristics in their strengths, communications, social interactions, leisure and play – which can appear more like a constellation.

Strengths and interests

- Areas of strength vary but include: logical or visual thinking, persistence, eye for detail, good skills with technology, memory for facts and figures.
- Very strong focus on specific interest areas.
- Deep interest in typical topics such as Pokémon, sport, Disney or trains or more unusual topics e.g. air conditioners or bins.
- Up to 20% of people with autism have exceptional or above average skills in one or more areas such as reading, maths, art, mechanics, music, memory etc.

Communication

- Communicate honestly and directly.
- A dislike or difficulty with small talk, sarcasm or understanding jokes.
- Repeating words or phrases in a way that can seem out of context.
- Not using or understanding gestures like pointing.
- Using sounds, signs, gestures or pictures to communicate instead of spoken words.
- Taking extra time to understand spoken information.

Social interactions

- Discomfort in busy complex social situations.

- Might prefer to play alone or next to others more than with them.
- An ability to pay attention without making eye contact.
- Using or responding to body language differently.
- Social interactions are often misunderstood by non-autistic people.

Leisure and play

- Preference for leisure based on passions.
- Non-traditional play such as repetitive lining up of toys.
- Preferring to do things in the same way.
- Comfortable socialising through technology such as phones, video conferencing or online chats and games.

Sensory

- Being constantly aware or more aware of some sensations (sounds, smells, tastes, touch etc).
- Feeling distressed or overwhelmed if there are too many sensations at once (loud noises, lots of touching, bright lights etc).
- Working hard to avoid distress by covering ears, hiding in quiet places, etc to block out sensations.
- Discomfort with touch such as materials of clothes, tags or light touch from others.
- Seeking sensory experiences by smelling food, flicking fingers in front of lights.
- Not noticing internal sensations like hunger or pain.

Thinking

- An uneven pattern of thinking abilities.
- An ability to focus on one thing for a very long time.
- Difficulty switching from one thing to another.
- An ability to notice specific details, patterns or changes that other people are unaware of.

Experiencing or displaying emotions

- A strong, sometimes overwhelming, emotional connection to others.
- Repeating movements such as flapping hands or pacing around to show excitement or to help cope with stress.
- Delay in learning to understand and regulate emotions.
- Difficulties understanding how non-autistic people think in some situations (Just as non-autistic people have difficulty understanding people with autism).

What challenges are associated with autism?

Autism is often linked with physical, developmental, or mental health conditions such as intellectual disability, epilepsy, gastro-intestinal issues, ADHD, dyspraxia, anxiety, or depression.

However, many of the disabling challenges associated with autism come about when individuals don't have the respect, understanding and supports that allow them to be comfortable in a non-autistic world.

References:

<https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/about-autism/what-is-autism>