



A Quick Guide to Autism

London Borough of Hounslow



What is Autism?

Autism is a natural difference in the way some people think, feel, and experience the world. It is **not** an illness, disorder, a deficit or something that needs to be "fixed." Autistic people have strengths and challenges, just like anyone else.

Every autistic person is unique and has their own set of needs, strengths and differences. Just because you've met one autistic person, doesn't mean you know what every autistic person is like.

Some autistic people may keep their feelings inside, while others show their feelings and distress more openly. Anyone can be autistic, and you can't tell by looking at someone or based their gender. We know from research, though, that autistic girls and women are more likely to internalise their distress – or keep it all in, and they tend to get diagnosed later in life than boys.

The Three Key Areas of Difference Common in Autistic People

1. Social Understanding and Communication

Autistic people may have a different way of understanding social situations and communicating. This means they might approach friendships, conversations, and other social situations in a different way to neurotypical (non-autistic) people. This doesn't mean they don't want friends—it just means they may need some help or more time to understand and connect with others.

2. Sensory Processing and Integration

Autistic people might have sensory differences; they might be more sensitive to certain things around them or have reduced sensitivity to things. These things include:

- Sight (what they see)
- Hearing (what they hear)
- Touch (how things feel)
- Taste (what food tastes like)
- Smell (how things smell)
- Interoception (how they feel inside, like being thirsty or hungry)
- Balance (how they feel when moving)
- Body awareness (how they feel their body in space)

Sometimes these sensitivities can be very strong, and other times they may not be as noticeable. It can change based on the person's mood or environment. Increased sensitivity could mean that they find certain aspects of the environment overwhelming or distressing, while reduced sensitivity could mean they seek out sensory experiences or have difficulty recognising sensations in their own bodies.

3. Flexible Thinking, Information Processing, and Understanding

Autistic people may focus deeply on things they enjoy, and they often feel safer when they can follow routines or plans. Routines help them feel more in control of what's going on around them. They may also learn in ways that are different from others.

Masking

Sometimes, autistic people might hide or "mask" their differences to fit in better with others. This can be tiring and could mean that autistic children behave very differently at home and at school. It's important to remember that when someone masks, they may not be showing their true self.

Emotional Regulation

When an autistic person is overwhelmed and their needs aren't being met, they might have meltdowns (extreme emotional reactions) or shutdowns (where they stop responding to everything around them). These are expressions of their distress outside of their control – they are **not** "tantrums". Some autistic people also engage in stimming (repetitive movements or sounds) as a way to calm themselves down or express feelings.

Myths and Misconceptions About Autism

There are many myths and misunderstandings about autism, some of which can be very harmful:

- **Eye contact:** It's a common misconception that if someone isn't making eye contact, they're not listening or paying attention. Many autistic people find eye contact uncomfortable and, in fact, find it easier to focus when they're not looking directly at you. We should never demand eye contact from an autistic person if they find it uncomfortable.
 - **"Cures" for autism:** Autism is not a disease, so "interventions" or services that claim to "fix" or "cure" autism are not only misleading and inaccurate, but also potentially very harmful. Autistic people don't need to be "fixed"—but they may need support in certain areas of their lives they find difficult.
 - **Empathy:** Some people think autistic people don't feel empathy, but this is not true. In fact, many autistic people experience *Hyperempathy* - overwhelming empathy for other people, animals, fictional characters or even inanimate objects
 - **Causes of autism:** Some myths suggest autism is caused by things like vaccines, certain metals, or parenting styles. These are all false.
 - **Friendships:** It is a myth that autistic people don't want friends. Many autistic people desire friendships, but they may find it harder to form them or communicate in the way others expect.
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Autism is a natural and valuable part of human diversity. It's important to understand and respect the unique ways that autistic people experience the world. Every autistic person is different, and getting to know them as individuals helps create more understanding and acceptance.