

What is autism?



Autism is a processing difference that can have an impact on many areas of a person's life. Autistic people can often experience differences in how they process information, their sensory environment and how they interact with other people.

It is estimated that one in 100 children, teenagers and adults in the UK are autistic.

While autistic people share some similar characteristics, they are also all different from each other. This is because autism is considered a spectrum. The autism spectrum is not linear from high to low but varies in every way that one person might vary from another.

Autism is lifelong condition; autistic people are born autistic and autism can be identified at any point in a person's life. You can't see if someone is autistic just by looking at them and some people might not have been diagnosed as autistic when you meet them.

Many autistic people also have co-occurring conditions which can make their needs more complex. Autistic people may also have ADHD, anxiety disorders, depression, mental health issues, learning disabilities, physical health conditions and communication difficulties. Officially, autism is considered a disability, but some people do not identify in this way. Autism can be viewed as a disability or disabling due to the impact autism and co-occurring conditions can have on daily life.

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Being autistic is not a bad thing and does not make you less than other people; autistic people have a lot of strengths that balance the challenges and difficulties they may face. Some of these strengths may include: having exceptional attention to detail, having an increased interest in a topic that brings them joy and the ability to offer different perspectives to questions.

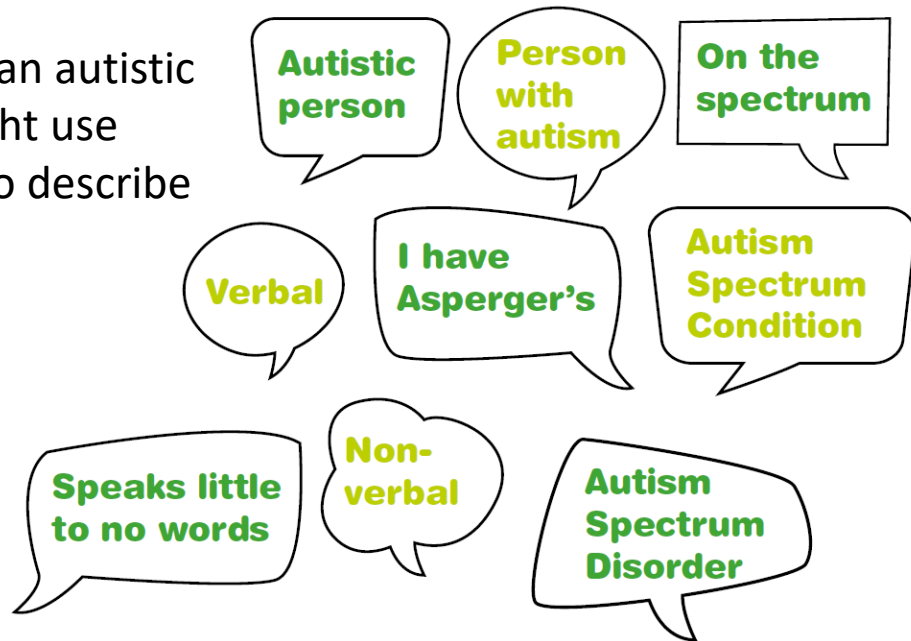
Young autistic people already face exclusion from school, activities with friends and the opportunities offered to their peers because they have been misunderstood and don't receive the support they need. A youth group can change this by offering the space to develop independence, friendships and new skills.

Most importantly, while there are similarities amongst autistic people, when supporting an autistic individual, the best approach is to ask the person what they like and don't like for support.

How do we talk about autism?

There have been a lot of changes and differences to how people talk about and understand autism. There have also been many terms used, some of which are still in use today as they still hold meaning and understanding.

When you meet an autistic person, they might use different terms to describe themselves:



People have different preferences of what they like used when describing them and autism, so it is always best to ask the individual themselves what their preference is.

There are also different labels used when talking about an autism diagnosis; some are no longer used, and some are new. Some autistic people may have been diagnosed with: Asperger's syndrome, Autism Spectrum Condition or Disorder, Pathological Demand Avoidance, Atypical Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder or High Functioning Autism. These are all autism but have different labels and have been used to mean slightly different ideas or profiles of autism.

Talking positively about autism:

- + When talking about autism don't use terms like 'suffer' or 'disease'. Autism is not a mental health condition or a disease, it is a different way of experiencing and processing the world around you. You could describe what someone struggles with, what challenges they may face and the strengths they have.
- + Try not to use 'high functioning' or 'low functioning'. Instead you could describe a person's support needs. Some autistic people might need higher levels of support in a situation that they find difficult and others may have low support needs as they can put in place strategies to manage a situation by themselves or with less outside support.



- + Try not to assume what someone might be like because they are autistic but instead ask them or someone who knows them well what their strengths and difficulties and likes and dislikes are. It is better not to make a presumption about what someone is like or their abilities before you meet them as the idea of what someone is like can often shape how we treat them.