
Autism and adults

Summary

- Autistic people often experience difficulties when trying to understand the emotions of other people. Subtle messages that are sent by facial expression, eye contact and body language are often missed.
 - Social skills training can assist autistic people to identify different social settings and what the social expectations are in that setting.
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Autism is a neuro-developmental condition that affects how the brain processes information. Autistic people have a wide range of strengths, weaknesses, skills and challenges.

Common characteristics include:

- difficulties interpreting social rules and body language, which can lead to confusion or misunderstandings
- difficulty in forming and maintaining friendships
- a tendency to take things literally, which can lead to communication difficulties.

Although autism cannot be cured, appropriate intervention and support can help people to develop skills and coping strategies. Social skills support can assist autistic people in understanding how to read the different expectations of social situations.

Counselling or psychological therapy can help autistic people to understand and regulate their emotions.

Asperger syndrome now comes under the single umbrella term of autism spectrum disorder (autism). In 2013 the diagnostic criteria for autism and Asperger syndrome changed. What was previously diagnosed as Asperger syndrome is now diagnosed as autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Symptoms of autism

More males than females are diagnosed with autism (although there is mounting evidence to suggest that girls and women are underdiagnosed).

Every autistic person is different but some of the more common characteristics include:

- difficulties with high-level language skills such as verbal reasoning, problem solving, making inferences and predictions
- problems with understanding another person's point of view
- difficulties initiating social interactions and maintaining an interaction
- may not respond in the way that is expected in a social interaction
- a preference for routines and schedules – disruption of a routine can result in stress or anxiety
- specialised fields of interest or hobbies.

Diagnosis of autism in adults

It is not unusual for autistic people to have reached adulthood without a diagnosis.

Sometimes people will read some information or see something about autism that makes them think 'That sounds like me.' They may then choose to talk to a health professional for a diagnosis, or they may not.

You may choose to seek an autism diagnosis if:

- you have been diagnosed with a mental health condition or intellectual disability during childhood or

adolescence, but think that you may have autism

- you have struggled with feeling socially isolated and different
- your child or other family member has been diagnosed with autism and some of the characteristics of autism sound familiar to you.

If you wish to seek an assessment for autism, you can:

- talk to a psychologist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism
- talk to your GP
- seek a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism in adults from your GP.

A psychologist or psychiatrist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism will ask you about your childhood, and experiences at school and as an adult. They may also do some psychological or psychiatric testing.

A speech pathologist (also known as a speech therapist) may also be consulted to assess your social communication skills.

All of this information will be used to help make a diagnosis.

If you are diagnosed with autism, you may feel relieved to know why you feel or behave the way you do. A diagnosis may also help you and your family to understand and cope with the challenges you face.

Autism and understanding the emotions of other people

An autistic person may find it hard to understand the emotions of other people.

Emotions are interpreted by subtle messages sent by facial expression, eye contact and body language. These are often missed or misinterpreted by an autistic person. Because of this, autistic people might be mistakenly perceived as being rude or unfeeling.

Autistic people may find it difficult to understand how others perceive their behaviour.

Partners of autistic people

Some autistic people will successfully maintain relationships. However, like most relationships, there are challenges.

An adult's diagnosis of autism often follows their child's diagnosis of autism or that of another relative. This 'double whammy' can be extremely distressing to the partner who has to cope simultaneously with both diagnoses. Counselling, or joining a support group where they can talk with other people who face the same challenges, can be helpful.

An autistic partner, like any partner, will have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to relationships. A non-autistic partner may find that there are communication breakdowns, such as misunderstandings or finding that your partner is not able to predict your feelings. An autistic partner may need routine, order and time to pursue their hobbies.

Relationship counselling with a counsellor or psychologist experienced at working with autistic people can assist couples to develop strategies and to communicate more effectively with each other.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Amaze** (previously Autism Victoria) Tel. **(03) 9657 1600**
- **Aspergers Victoria**

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