

'Autism Spectrum' is used to convey the many different ways people may be affected by autism. At one end of the spectrum, people are severely affected by autism and may be learning disabled. At the other end, people with high functioning autism or Asperger syndrome have average or above intelligence. It is important to realise that this is not always 'useful intelligence' when it comes to everyday situations. There is often an uneven profile of abilities, so a person may be extremely good at some things, but struggle to do things that most people find easy. They may lack what might be called 'common sense'.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability, caused by differences in the brain, which affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. The life experiences vary considerably from person to person, but the following are common:

- Social interaction difficulties
- Verbal and non verbal communication problems
- Repetitive behaviours, especially when stressed or anxious
- Focus on special interests
- Heightened sensitivity to TOUCH, light, colour, sound, smell, temperature etc
- Difficulty in foreseeing the consequences of one's own, or another's, actions
- Overload, when anxious, stressed and/or faced with the unexpected

Autism Spectrum Conditions are often referred to as a 'hidden disability' as they cannot be identified by appearance alone. The lack of 'social ability' causes many misunderstandings and often leads to low self-esteem. Consequently, unless there are appropriate support services, mental health problems (such as anxiety disorders and depression) are likely to develop.

Higher functioning, more able people on the spectrum are deceptively vulnerable and more likely to have contact with the police, not due to criminal tendencies, but because of social misunderstandings and the lack of ability to foresee consequences of words or actions.

Oxfordshire Autism Alert Card

T: 0844 381 4484
E: alertcard@autismoxford.org.uk
W: www.autismoxford.org.uk

Autism Oxford

T: 01844 353292
E: info@autismoxford.org.uk
W: www.autismoxford.org.uk

For Information on:

- Oxfordshire Autism Alert Card Scheme
- Developing services in Oxfordshire for teenagers and adults
- Affordable Autism & Asperger Speaker Events
- Bespoke Training by Team with Trainers on Autism Spectrum
- Becoming an Autism Oxford Speaker and/or Trainer
- Support groups for parents/carers of teenagers and adults

Oxford Aspies Pub Group

For Contact Details:
T: 01844 353292
E: info@autismoxford.org.uk

OASIS

T: 07900 144493
E: chair@oasonline.org.uk
W: www.oasonline.org.uk

Offering:

- Oxfordshire Parent/Carer Support Group
- Advice, Information and Support from parents
- Regular coffee mornings
- Monthly meetings in Oxford
- School holiday Playdays

Children in Touch Autism Family Support

T: 01844 338696
E: becky@autism-fs.org.uk

Offering:

- Free Support and Information for families of children with autism in Oxfordshire
- Youth Groups
- Activity days in school holidays for young people with AS/HFA

Oxfordshire MIND

T: 01865 247788
W: www.omhi.org.uk

Offering free of charge:

- Wellbeing and better mental health service
- Information
- Short Courses
- Peer Support Groups
- 1 to 1 Recovery Planning

The National Autistic Society

T: 0845 070 4004
W: www.autism.org.uk

For free fact sheets and leaflets and helpline

My World

T: 01844 339840

Autism Specialist Support Provider for Adults (funding required)

Kingwood Trust

T: 0118 931 0143
E: info@kingwood.org.uk
W: www.kingwood.org.uk

Autism Specialist Support Provider for Adults (funding required)

Oxfordshire Autism Alert Card

Autism Spectrum

Useful information

What to **DO**...

- DO** ask if the person has an Autism Alert Card
- DO** telephone named contact(s) as soon as possible
- DO** use the person's name to get their attention. Be clear and direct in what you say eg: "Sam, sit down" or "Lesley, get in the car"
- DO** say who you are and what you are going to do. Remember they may take your words literally.
- DO** ask simple, closed and direct questions. Use visual cues to increase understanding, eg: photos, writing, drawings, objects etc
- DO** allow the person extra time to process and respond to questions. If you interrupt their thinking process, they may have to start again or become overwhelmed
- DO** check for understanding. Their understanding may be different from yours. Clear, factual explanation is needed.
- DO** consider medical issues, eg people with ASC are at higher risk of having seizures, they may not tell you if they are injured, sick or in pain
- DO** watch for signs of stress, they may overload and go into meltdown quite suddenly
- DO** stop what you are doing or saying if the person goes into meltdown, harm will result if you persist. They need peace and quiet to calm themselves down.
- DO** turn off fluorescent lighting or flashing lights where possible and limit the amount of noise Get other people in the room to be still and silent.

DO STAY CALM

What **NOT** to **DO**...

- DON'T** make the person wait in a crowded, noisy room. This may cause overload and meltdown.
- DON'T** expect them to understand body language, gestures, tone of voice, or facial expressions.
- DON'T** use abstract ideas and phrases or phrases open to literal interpretation eg "Jump in the car" – they may try to jump whilst in the car
- DON'T** give a lot of choices, this may confuse due to difficulty in predicting consequences – how will they know which choice will be best?
- DON'T** take lack of eye contact as a sign of rudeness or guilt. The person may need to **not** look at you to be able to concentrate on your words
- DON'T** attempt to stop flapping, tapping, rocking, pacing or other repetitive behaviours unless essential – these are strategies used to keep control when over anxious or stressed
- DON'T** invade the person's personal space unless essential. Restraint should only be used if they are a definite risk to themselves or others
- DON'T** ask more than one question at a time and do allow extra time for a response
- DON'T** shout
- DON'T** assume the person is being deliberately rude or disrespectful if they talk inappropriately or about seemingly irrelevant topics. They may need to exhaust these topics first to be ready to understand what you are saying. This may be their strategy to process information.

What to **BE AWARE** of...

COMMUNICATION: Around 90% of communication is non-verbal, ie voice intonation, facial expression, body language, gestures. People on the autism spectrum miss most non-verbal information and rely on the 10% of meaning in words. This causes constant misunderstandings.

SOCIAL INTERACTION: They may lack social instinct, making it very difficult for them to understand people's motives, intentions and state of mind, eg they may not recognise that someone is bullying or conning them, or is angry and likely to hit them. They may not realise they have upset someone, or that they have talked for too long, or even that they have made someone happy unless it is said in words.

PAIN: They may have an unusual response to pain, including laughter, humming, taking clothes off etc. Look out for signs of bleeding or injury as they may not have registered the pain and therefore will be unable to tell you if they have been hurt. Avoid touching unless essential – this may be experienced as an assault if the person is very sensitive to touch.

SENSORY OVERLOAD: People on the autism spectrum can be easily overloaded by sights, sounds and smells in busy places. In a crowded area, they may hear every conversation as loudly as the next – this makes it impossible to focus on what you are saying to them and increases stress and anxiety. When overloaded, some may rock, tap, talk incessantly, pace or ask repetitive questions to try to cope.

These behaviours help to calm the person. It is very important not to stop them unless essential, as this may lead to meltdown and more challenging behaviour.

MELTDOWN: If unable to cope with overload, meltdown may occur, resulting in a Fight, Flight or Freeze response. Some may lash out at people and/or objects, others may try to run away and some may withdraw into themselves and shut down. All these responses are attempts to escape the overload they are experiencing.