Factsheet – Autism.

What is autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a condition that affects how a person behaves, communicates and interacts with others. It is a condition people are born with. Most autistic people are diagnosed in childhood, but many don't realise they are autistic until later in life.

Autism can affect how people:

- Communicate and interact with other people
- Understand how other people are feeling or thinking
- Experience sensory stimuli such as light, sound and touch
- Interpret information
- Feel in unfamiliar situations or routines
- Behave – such as repeating the same actions.

In other words, autism affects the way a person communicates, interacts and processes the world around them.

Commonly used names for autism.

Autism has had many different names over the years including:

- Autism
- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- Autism spectrum condition (ASC)
- Classic autism
- High functioning autism
- Asperger's syndrome.

The medical terminology in both the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) use autism spectrum disorder. However, autism spectrum condition or autism are often the preferred terms.

The term Asperger's is no longer used for new diagnoses as it comes under the autism heading. However, is still commonly used by individuals who were diagnosed with that

term when it was in use. One reason for this change is its association with Hans Asperger and his involvement with the Nazi eugenics programme in World War II.

As a result, references to Asperger's by people who are not autistic can be interpreted as outdated and possibly offensive.

How common is Autism?

It is estimated that 1-2 per cent of the population is autistic. With recent increases in understanding, awareness and research, this figure is likely to rise. Currently, more boys are diagnosed than girls in childhood.

It is estimated that the ratio of male to female diagnosis is 3:1. There are a variety of reasons for this including 'masking', different gender social expectations and a lack of research into how autism affects the different genders.

There is also growing evidence that people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups find it harder to access assessments and relevant support.

Assessment process.

Autism is diagnosed in adults by psychiatrists. It is important that the psychiatrist specialises in adult autism. Assessments are usually a result of a GP referral, but they can sometimes be self-referrals for private assessments. Private medical insurance usually does not cover assessments due to autism being present from birth.

Common strengths.

Below are some commonly associated strengths. Nobody will experience them all:

- Empathy
- Attention to detail
- Strong adherence to processes and procedures
- Extensive and passionate knowledge of specialist subjects, often in niche areas of interest
- Strong work ethic
- Honesty and loyalty
- Visual perception
- Creativity
- Fairness and social justice.

Potential impact on work.

Every autistic person is an individual with unique experiences. Below are some general points about how autism can affect a person at work:

- May have selected spoken language use or be ‘non-speaking’. They may be able to communicate well in written communication instead.
- Difficulty understanding subtext or metaphorical language – understanding language literally.
- Find small talk and networking difficult – conferences and social events may be challenging.
- May dominate the conversation on topics they are passionate about.
- May find new and unfamiliar experiences stressful, threatening and confusing.
- May find changes to routines upsetting. They may resist change and instead try to keep to strict routines and structures.
- Mental health – Autistic people can experience stress or anxiety in new situations and around managing or ‘masking’ their autism. Autistic people generally have higher rates of anxiety and depression, so managers should be aware and support autistic employees’ mental health.
- Stimming at work – Stimming or self-stimulatory behaviours are common for autistic people. They are often used for fun as well as to help cope with stressful situations. They often involve repetitive movements such as rocking, or humming, which may be present while they are working.

Workplace adjustments for autism.

Everyone with autism experiences their condition differently. The right adjustments will depend on the individual, their role, their team and the wider organisation. Work with the individual, their manager and other experts such as HR and Access to Work to identify and put adjustments in place that work for the individual in their role.

Common adjustments for people with autism include:

- Keeping fixed working hours and avoiding asking them to work outside of these hours.
- Reducing sensory stimuli at work – for example, working in an area with lower lighting or using headphones or ear plugs.
- Avoid euphemistic and metaphorical language, and encourage colleagues to do the same.
- Training for colleagues about how best to communicate with each other (with the consent of the autistic individual).
- Allowing people to opt out of social events.

- Removing behavioural requirements in performance reviews – for example, not requiring them to demonstrate being a ‘team player’ if their work can be carried out alone.
- Reassigning some tasks to colleagues (with all parties’ agreement).
- Establishing and keeping to pre-agreed routines and structures where possible.
- Providing clear instructions, timelines and deadlines for work projects and tasks.

Further information.

National Autistic Society

National Autistic Society provides support services and advice for autistic people and their families.

autism.org.uk.

Lexxic.

Lexxic is a specialist psychological consultancy that can advise on supporting neurodiverse employees.

lexxic.com.

Genius Within.

Genius Within has a team of neurodiversity specialists that can support employers and individuals.

geniuswithin.org.

Access to Work.

Access to Work is a UK government initiative that aims to support people with disabilities to get jobs and stay in work. It does this by providing employers with grants for specific support for a named disabled employee or candidate. Access to Work does not arrange or supply the support directly.

Access to Work also conducts workplace assessments as part of this process, to determine what barriers the employee or candidate is facing and what will help address them.

gov.uk/access-to-work.