



# Autistic Characteristics

Talkback and Talent Unlimited

*“Autism is a developmental condition which affects how people process information, perceive and make sense of the world. Autism also impacts how people communicate, relate to and interact with others. Autism affects each person in different ways.” – Talkback*

Autism affects around 1.1% of the general population. The exact cause of autism is unknown however, we know that autism can sometimes run in families suggesting biological and genetic influences. Autism is a lifelong condition that cannot be cured. Autism can be diagnosed in both males and females however it is more commonly diagnosed in males. Sometimes autism is not picked up until later in life meaning that people can receive a late diagnosis in adulthood.

When you have met one autistic person you have met one autistic person. Some autistic people see autism as their ‘superpower’ while others find it very difficult and disabling. As well as the individual, autism impacts their families and those who care for them.

## The Autistic Spectrum

Autism is a spectrum which means everyone experiences autism in a unique way. Some autistic people can function with little to no support while others will need significant support throughout their life. All autistic people will experience some challenges with social communication and patterns of repetitive behaviour. Some autistic people can have very good verbal communication whilst others don’t communicate verbally at all. Asperger’s is on the autism spectrum.

## Social Communication

Autistic people can find using and interpreting both verbal and non-verbal communication, such as gestures or tone of voice, difficult and stressful. They





can also take things very literally and have difficulties understanding metaphors or sarcasm.

Autistic people often need extra time to think about and process new information and find it easier to follow clear and precise instructions. It is important to listen to autistic people to understand their way of communicating.

## **Social Interaction**

Autistic people may find social situations stressful and difficult to navigate. They often have difficulties 'reading' other people, including finding it hard to recognise or understand others' feelings and intentions. They can also experience difficulties understanding and expressing their own emotions. However, we know that autistic people can experience their own and others' emotions very intensely, sometimes even more so than non-autistic people. Due to challenges with social communication and social interaction, autistic people can find it difficult to navigate relationships including friendships and romantic relationships. These can also be problematic due to difficulties understanding and applying social norms and seeing others' points of view. This can lead to misunderstanding and potential arguments. Sometimes the desire to make a friend, have a relationship, or to fit in can lead to autistic people being mistreated or taken advantage of which can lead to extreme anxiety for the individual.

Many autistic people have experienced some form of bullying through school, workplaces or social groups and activities which can impact self-esteem and can result in social isolation.

Often, autistic people copy the emotions and behaviours of those around them to try and fit in, this is called masking. This can be done both consciously and unconsciously. While masking can be effective, it can be very fatiguing as individuals are pretending to be something they are not which increases the pressure on them. Also, people tend to be less effective at masking when experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety meaning they can come across as 'more autistic' during these times.





## **Repetitive Behaviours**

With its unwritten rules, the world can seem a very unpredictable and confusing place for autistic people. Therefore, routines can be very beneficial so autistic people know what is going to happen and can prepare. If changes must happen, autistic people greatly benefit from knowing the clear reasons for changes and prior knowledge of what the changes are and when they will be. This would help individuals adapt and cope.

Autistic people may repeat movements such as rocking or the repetitive use of an object such as twirling a pen. This is called stimming. Autistic people often engage in these behaviours to help calm themselves when they are stressed or anxious. Many autistic people also do these because they find it enjoyable and it helps their concentration.

## **Sensory Sensitivities**

Autistic people may experience over or under-sensitivities to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light as well as balance and coordination and internal bodily signals including body temperature or pain. For example, they may find background noise like music in a restaurant unbearably loud or distracting whereas others can ignore it or block it out. This can affect communication skills, increase stress and anxiety, and sometimes even cause physical pain.

Autistic people can avoid everyday situations because of their sensory sensitivities including workplaces and shopping centres as they can be particularly overwhelming and can cause sensory overload.

## **Special Interests**

Many autistic people have intense and highly focused interests. These can be evident from a fairly young age and can be lifelong or change over time. Autistic people can become experts in their special interests and often like to share their knowledge and the pleasure they experience from their interest. These interests are hugely beneficial for autistic people as they can be used to build relationships, be an escape from the world or be the centre of a successful career.





## **Mental Health**

Autistic people tend to experience higher levels of anxiety than the general population. This can be explained by autistic people having to face more challenges in day-to-day life, including social situations, adapting to changes, finding the world to be unpredictable and recognising their own and others' emotions. This anxiety can make functioning more difficult and impact things like self-organisation, making choices, engaging with activities of daily living, and adapting to change. Autistic people sometimes find it difficult to make sense of or explain their 'inner' life, including how it feels when they are anxious and stressed. Sometimes, autistic people do not show their inner distress in an outward physical way meaning it can be hard for others to recognise their true emotional state.

Experiencing typically higher levels of anxiety means that mental health issues are common among autistic people. Some more common mental health issues in autistic people can include anxiety, depression, OCD, psychosis and eating disorders. Some of these can lead people to think about or engage in self-harm or suicidal behaviours. Some mental health issues, such as eating difficulties, may also include a sensory aspect.

## **Autistic meltdowns and burnout**

When things become overwhelming, autistic people can experience meltdowns or shutdowns. When experiencing a meltdown individuals can temporarily lose control of their behaviour and lash out verbally or physically. Due to being so overwhelmed, this may feel the only way they are able to express themselves. Shutdowns are also a response to being overwhelmed but may appear more passive – e.g., an autistic person going quiet or 'switching off'. These experiences can be very intense, unpleasant and exhausting and can leave individuals feeling ashamed, scared or embarrassed, especially if they happen in public.

Things that can contribute to autistic people becoming overwhelmed can include sensory or information overload, social situations, sudden changes and if they feel out of place or unsafe.

When an individual is overwhelmed for a prolonged period, meltdowns and shutdowns can occur more often and individuals may appear to seem more





autistic as they have less capacity to mask their autistic traits, which can lead to autistic burnout. Autistic burnout can include extreme fatigue, physical pain and headaches and impact individuals' ability to function, including their ability to communicate or look after themselves. Autistic burnout happens when autistic people can no longer cope.

### **Associated conditions**

It is common for autistic people to also have other conditions. Some related conditions to autism include dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, learning disability, hearing impairments, visual impairments and epilepsy. These conditions may not be diagnosed. It is important that individuals are supported with these in the context of their autism.

