

NEWS

UNDERSTANDING THE SPECTRUM

Question: Why is diagnosing autism challenging, yet so important?

Answer: Autism is difficult to diagnose because it affects people in various ways. But early diagnosis is key to timely support and good quality of life.

Affecting one in 100 people in the UK, autism is currently diagnosed as a lifelong development disability characterised by difficulties in the way a person communicates and experiences the world around them.

Some people with autism may have problems speaking and understanding tone of voice, jokes or sarcasm. They may be unable to make sense of what others say, without the help of pictures or signs.

Some have difficulties recognising people's feelings, or knowing how to behave socially, such as where to stand in proximity to another person and when to speak loudly or quietly.

This can make it problematic for some people with autism to have friendships and relationships. Some people with autism exhibit repetitive behaviours such as rocking, twirling and flapping hands.

The autism spectrum

Autism is a spectrum condition. This means that people with autism share certain characteristics but are highly individual in how the condition impacts them. Some live relatively independent lives, whereas others face additional challenges, including learning disabilities, which affect them so profoundly that they need lifelong specialist support.

Asperger's syndrome lies at the milder end of the spectrum. It generally manifests with fewer speech development problems and learning disabilities. Many people with Asperger's syndrome show average or above-average intelligence.

Early diagnosis is key

As autism affects people in different ways and to varying degrees, making an accurate diagnosis can be difficult, especially if other medical conditions — such as dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) — are also present.



Katy Lee
Senior behaviour analyst, Ambitious about Autism

Researchers agree that a timely diagnosis is crucial if children and families are to access appropriate support as early as possible.

This is important because, although we don't know what causes autism, and there is currently no identified cure for it, with early intervention and quality support, individuals with autism can learn, make progress and achieve.

Support is available

There is support available to individuals with autism and their families, from different education and healthcare professionals. Parents and family members may benefit from sharing their experience with others in the same situation, through online, forums and local community support groups. They can attend training or workshops to learn how to best support their loved one with autism.

People with autism can receive educational help, access to supported employment and assistance with practical matters, such as managing money or accessing benefits they may be entitled to.

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