

What is Autism, and how to support Autistic employees and colleagues

A Guide for the workplace written by Autistic people

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Introduction

We here at Autism Understanding Scotland are dedicated to helping people develop their knowledge and understanding of autism. As an autistic led organisation, all of our staff are autistic.

Drawing on our own lived and professional experiences, we offer insight into what it is like to be autistic, and how to support other autistic people.

The following document is designed to be shared between an autistic employee and their line manager, to help the line manager develop their understanding of autism, and discuss reasonable adjustments. We are grateful to the staff at [IntoWork](#) for their valuable input.

While it does not contain all the information there is to know about autism, it is intended to spark discussion with the goal of helping autistic employees to be comfortable in the working environment and reach their full potential.

Supporting Autistic Employees

Having an autistic employee can be a great asset. While we are all different, many autistic people are:

- Hardworking
- Dedicated
- Skilled at finding creative solutions
- Loyal

Here is a short guide to help you understand where your autistic employee is coming from and how you can support them.

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference. It presents differently in each individual autistic person. It means that autistic people have brains which are built in a fundamentally different way from non-autistic people.

As a result of this, autistic people literally experience the world in a different way – our senses take in information about the world differently, and we have differences in how we communicate and process information.

This is the reason why most autistic adults (though not all) prefer to refer to themselves as autistic rather than a person with autism. Autism informs every experience, thought and action we have. Many autistic people say it is not possible to think of themselves without autism as there is no point where the autism stops and they begin.

Autism is an integral part of who we are. Being autistic does make some things harder, but as it also makes some things easier, many feel that it evens it out.

What Language Should I Use?

Ask your colleague how they prefer to be referred to and respect their choice. We will use autistic person or autist in this leaflet as that is the preference for many in the autistic community. Some autistic people refer to themselves as an autist, autistic or Aspie – it is best to check how your autistic employees like being referred to regarding their diagnosis or identity. Some will not want it referenced.

Difference or Disability?

Under the Equality Act 2010, autism is classed as a disability and any employer has a legal obligation to provide support and accommodation to autistic employees.

There is not full consensus amongst the autistic community about whether or not they consider themselves disabled. Many autists would argue that autism itself is not a disability but living in a non-autistic world can be disabling, particularly due to sensory issues, difference ways of thinking and different ways of communicating.

If appropriate, talk to the autist about how they personally see it and how they would like to be referred. It is important to remember that regardless of their personal take, autism is considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010 and therefore a protected characteristic that legal warrant support and reasonable adjustments where necessary.

Some autistic people may not need any support, but if they do, try to avoid making assumptions. The things which some autistic people might struggle with are not necessarily the same things other autists will struggle with. It is also very possible that things you might not consider to be an issue could be a huge problem.

The only way to find out what challenges autistic employees are facing is to ask them. It is much better to say, “can you tell me about any aspect of your work you find difficult?” as opposed to, “I think this is difficult for you.”

Reasonable Adjustments

We sometimes need different supports from other employees in order to work most effectively.

Here are some suggested reasonable adjustments to discuss and decide which ones would be most beneficial.

Timetable of tasks

Some of use benefit from having a clear breakdown of our day/week. This won't be possible for every job, and not everyone will need it, but many autistic people thrive when we know exactly what is expected of us. Having a known routine may make things a bit easier, even if it is subject to change at times. Routine can be ver comforting and knowing expectations are being met may lessen anxiety.

Use Clear Communication

Try not to use words that can be easily misinterpreted and allow time for the employee to ask questions about what is expected so they are clear about their work. Miscommunication is quite common, so both parties need to be patient and understanding. While many autistic people can understand metaphors, similes, and sarcasm, they are not useful when trying to understand what is expected.

Methods of Communication

Discuss which methods of communication works best. For some, face to face is best, but it could be email, text, phone, messenger, any other method of communication. Some forms of communication increase anxiety – for some the thought of a phone conversation is very upsetting, but for others, it is far preferable to being in the same room as someone whose perfume is very strong.

Each autist has their own preferences, so make sure you know the preference for each autistic person and respect their choices.

Advance Notice

Some autistic people may ask for advance notice if you are planning to come into the office to speak to them. This allows time to get to a good point in a task to stop rather than being interrupted mid task. Interruption when in a flow state can mean it is really hard to get back on track.

Communication Alternatives

Some autistic adults can become mute when they are feeling stressed or had a lot of contact with other people. This is not the case for all autistic people, but if it is so, have a back up communication plan for if this happens.

Key Point of Contact

A key point of contact or mentor. Having someone we respect and feel able to communicate with may help us feel supported and understood.

This could be someone who doesn't work in the same department so there is no conflict of interest. This person should have a good understanding of the person they are mentoring or supporting, be respectful and view the autist as the competent individual they are.

Alternative Working Methods

Space to make changes to how a job is done. Your autistic employee may do things differently from the person who was in the post before. That's ok. If the job is getting done, it is fine to have a different method.

Many autistic people are skilled at finding new ways of doing things, finding options that other cannot see. Take time to listen to new ideas. Many autistic people are very creative, and this is a great asset in the workplace.

If a conversation with the line manager and the reasonable adjustments put in place based on that conversation does not improve the performance and wellbeing of the autistic employee substantially, it is recommended to arrange a formal workplace needs assessment with a specialist in neurodiversity at work service provider. [Access to Work](#) is also available to any disabled employees and the employer is recommended to offer assistance in applying and handling the administrative tasks involved as these can be stressful to anybody. If you need advice feel free to contact our [Employment Specialist](#).

Sensory Appropriate Workplace

The working environment is arguably the most important thing to discuss with autistic employees. Given that we experience the world differently, we are affected by our environment in different ways to non-autistic people.

Different autists have different sensory needs so it is important to discuss the needs with the autistic employee.

Things that some autistic people may be more sensitive to include:

- The hum coming from computers, lighting, and anything else electrical
- The tapping of the keyboards
- The conversations happening around them, including the office next door
- The smell of colleagues' perfume or aftershave
- The glare of harsh lighting and the computer screens
- Certain fabric on chairs
- Touch from others including handshakes

While non-autistic people can filter out the various workplace sensory input, autistic people usually find that much more difficult. We generally do not habituate to sensory information the way non-autistic people do.

If you cannot turn down the noises in the workplace, allowing headphones, ear plugs or ear defenders may help. If a chair is too scratchy, either swapping with someone else or allowing them to cover it might do the trick. Some autistic people might prefer to work facing a wall to minimise visual input. Some may prefer working in an office alone. Ask them what changes will allow them to be the most comfortable and productive.

Conversely, some autistic people are sensory seekers and desperate for a bit more noise – the only way to know is to discuss it and make adjustments wherever possible.

Discretion

Not every autistic person is 'out' as autistic. Autism is a medical diagnosis, and it is up to the individual to choose whether or not we share this personal piece of information. Many autists choose only to tell a handful of people that they are autistic because of stigma and misunderstanding surrounding autism.

If someone discloses to you that they are autistic, do not assume it is ok to tell everyone about it, check with the autist. Having others treat us differently when we disclose our diagnosis is a common occurrence for autistic people. The decision to share whether or not someone is autistic is purely down to the autistic person in question.

What to do when an Autistic employee is struggling

Firstly, please do not judge, make assumptions, or decide to do anything without discussion with the employee.

Arrange a meeting and ensure appropriate support is available. If they have a mentor, let them discuss the issue with the mentor in advance of the meeting. Let them know what will be discussed, who will be present, and where the meeting will be held. Ensure the area is private and will not cause sensory issues for the autistic person. Respect their choices for communication, and ensure you listen carefully.

Meltdowns and Shutdowns

Autistic people do not grow out of meltdowns and shutdowns (autistic crisis points). We may never have either in the workplace, and we most certainly do not want to, but it is a good idea to discuss what it looks like if they are on the verge of a meltdown or shutdown, and what to do should one happen.

Many autistic adults are able to hold back a shutdown or a meltdown by masking, but this is very difficult, and the meltdown or shutdown will likely happen but in a more extreme way later on. This is not always possible for every autist however.

Some likely causes of meltdowns and shutdowns are:

- Tremendous amounts of stress
- Feeling too many demands are placed on them
- Heightened anxiety
- Sensory overload

Each autistic person has their own triggers, so ask what your employee's triggers are. Every autistic person deals with meltdowns and shutdowns differently.

Some suggestions of things that may help if we are close to a crisis point:

- Sometime along in a quiet room
- Wrapping ourselves up in a blanket
- A walk outside
- Sensory or stim objects

Not all of these things will be useful for everyone, and do try to discuss what will help individuals, but if an autistic employee says they need one of those things, where possible, let them do it. If they do not have an office of their own, try to designate a quiet space for them to go to if/when they feel overwhelmed.

We often know when we are on the verge of a meltdown or shutdown, so allowing us time to deal with it before one happens will be beneficial for everyone. Having an agreed upon code, gesture, picture or any other method to share that a crisis point may be imminent may be useful too.

Meltdowns and shutdowns are extremely distressing for the person experiences them. If you feel distressed what it, know it is much, much harder for the person going through it. We are not doing it to give other people a hard time; we are having a hard time.

Meltdowns and shutdowns can be exhausting, and it may be necessary for them to take some time off to recover. Respect the need for space and ask what kind of support they need. Meltdowns and shutdowns are not an inevitable part of being autistic, but when they happen, we are especially vulnerable.

Working with Colleagues

Teams can be tricky. Some autistic people love working in teams, but some find it really difficult. We often have good ideas but may struggle to communicate them.

Sometimes it is easier to work alone. If a task can be completed as a solo project and autistic employees ask to do that, it is reasonable to take that option.

Team Building

Some autists love a surprise, but many more do not. Springing a team building day without any warning is likely to ramp up anxiety for most autistic employees. Some may end up melting or shutting down and be unable to participate.

If you would like to organise a team building event, discuss this in advance. Try to ensure it is something your employees may be comfortable participating in. Do not force participation.

Work Nights Out

Some companies and departments have staff who enjoy socialising outside of work. Autistic staff members may enjoy this, but if they do not want to, that is perfectly fine.

Key Points to take away:

- Try to avoid making assumptions. While all autistic people share certain traits (or we would not have the same diagnosis), we are all wildly different from each other. Some are gregarious, some introverted, some thrive in a team, some thrive working solo
- Keep communication open, clear and frank
- Be willing to make reasonable adjustments, it is your legal duty as an employer
- Respect that autistic people have sensory differences
- Listen without judgement

Action Plan

Talking About Autism

Preferred language when discussing autism (e.g., autistic person, autistic, ASC)

I wish to share my diagnosis with others:

Yes No

Sensory Considerations

Employee finds these sensory inputs difficult _____

Employee is comfortable with these sensory inputs _____

Employee is comfortable with handshakes:

Yes No

Employee finds the following materials uncomfortable _____

Communication

Preferred method of communication is:

- Face to Face
- Email
- Phone
- Messages

Please avoid these methods of communication if possible:

- Face to Face
- Email
- Phone
- Messages

Dealing with Crisis Points

When employee feels overwhelmed they can use this space _____

Early warning signs of stress _____

On the verge of a crisis point, the employee will _____

When having a meltdown or shutdown colleagues should do the following:

Reasonable Adjustments / Other Agreed Upon Actions

Employer

Employee
