**Autism Facts:**

**What is Autism?**

“Autism is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them”

(NAS, National Autistic Society, 2018)

* Autism is much more common than many people think.
* It is estimated that 700,000 people in the UK are on the Autism spectrum – that's more than 1 in 100.
* Five times as many males as females are diagnosed with Autism.
* Autism is a hidden disability – you can't always tell if someone is autistic.
* Autism is a lifelong condition but with the right support people can live ‘rewarding and fulfilling lives’

**Autism Diagnosis**

In order for a person to be diagnosed as Autistic, they must present with two elements:

1. **Social communication difficulties (must have all three of these)**

Problems reciprocating social or emotional interaction

Severe problems maintaining relationships

Non-verbal communication problems.

1. **Repetitive and Restrictive Behaviours (must have two of these)**

Extreme attachment to routines and patterns and resistance to changes in routines

Repetitive speech or movements

Intense and restrictive interests

Difficulty integrating sensory information or strong seeking or avoiding behaviour of sensory stimuli

It needs to be recognised that the elements above occur in varying degrees and how they manifest will be unique to the individual. “**If you have met one person with Autism, you’ve met ‘one person with Autism”** Dr. Stephen Shore

**Social and Communication Difficulties**

**Difficulties understanding non-verbal communication** People with Autism often find it difficult to understand or pick up on non-verbal communication i.e. facial expression, tone of voice, body language and gestures.

**Difficulty with eye contact** too much or too little. May appear withdrawn or uninterested in other people (e.g. not making eye contact), which can create an impression of aloofness, or may be over-friendly

**Slow Processing** **I**ndividuals with Autism can take much longer to process the information they hear, think about a response and then make that response than you or I (average 14 seconds) This can make them look like they have not understood.

**Difficulty understanding personal space** People with Autism may have difficulty knowing the ‘rules’ of personal space. They may have to be taught this, but as the rules can change it is very difficult.

**Difficulty knowing what topic to talk about, and understanding when or how to start, or end a conversation.** People can sometimes struggle to initiate and sustain a ‘two-way’ conversation. Or knowing what to say and how to say it.

**Difficulties understanding literal language like sarcasm, jokes and idioms etc.** They understand language literally, so for example, by saying ‘go and get the phone’ instead of answering the phone, a person with Autism is likely to go and physically get the phone and bring it to the person asking

**Difficulty understanding ‘social rules’** Sometimes it is ok not to tell the truth to make someone else happy (e.g. saying they do not look fat, even if they do). Some people call these 'little white lies'.

**Difficulty with making friends and establishing relationships** Because of the difficulty with understanding social rules, language and non-verbal communication, people with Autism may struggle to make friends and establish relationships; this can be very overwhelming.

**Repetitive and Restrictive Behaviours**

People with Autism often have restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour; they struggle with change and like when there is structure and routine. Some of the particular difficulties include:

**Difficulty managing change and transitions** Moving house or changing school, new teacher, change of staff, Change of clothing, things in environment, moving from one activity to another, moving from place to place

**Difficulty with choice** even simple choices like what to have to drink can be difficult for some people. This doesn’t mean that you don’t give individuals with Autism choice, but sometimes you might need to limit the choice or make the choice clearer

**Difficulty generalising things learnt in one subject or place to another.** Don’t assume that someone can do the same skill in different environments. It may feel different! Or same skill with different equipment/staff-e.g. kettle/ new member of staff

**Difficulty and anxiety during unstructured times as people may be uncertain as to what to do.** Some people with Autism find free time very difficult to cope with. They need structure and purpose otherwise they get highly anxious.

**Sensory Differences**

People with Autism can have either hyper or hypo reactivity to sensory input. This means that they can be under or over sensitive to sensory stimuli. Examples may include:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Hyper** | **Hypo** |
| **Hearing** | Covers ears,dislikes animal, sirens, easily distracted | Bangs object, crumples paper, likes crowds, makes loud rhythmic noises |
| **Touch** | Avoids touch, dislikes certain fabrics, showers, rain. Doesn’t like getting dirty. Extreme reaction to pain. Cannot tolerate new clothes, avoids wearing shoes | Likes pressure, tight clothes. Seeks pressure by lying under heavy objects, Enjoys rough and tumble play. Low reaction to pain and temperature |
| **Taste** | Poor eater. Avoids taste, texture, mixes and colours of foods. Uses tip of tongue for tasting. Gags/vomits easily. Craves certain food. Prefers bland foods | Eats anything (pica). Mouths and licks objects. Eats strongly flavoured foods (over use of spices, sugars, condiments) |
| **Vision** | Constantly looks at minute particles, picks up tiny things. Dislikes the dark and bright lights. Is frightened by sharp flashes of light, things moving suddenly. | Is attracted to light. Looks intensely at objects or people. Moves fingers or objects  in front of face |
| **Smell** | Runs from smells. Wears the same clothes. Moves away from people | Smells self, people and objects, Seeks strong odours. Over use of scented products. |
| **Motor** | May have a diagnosis of dyspraxia. Problems starting and stopping a movement ‘Clumsiness’. Problems with fine motor difficulties. Difficulty toe walking. Problems with posture. Stereotypies – may need to spin, jumps, flap hands. | |

**Some other terms you may hear…**

**Central Coherence:**

Rather than seeing the bigger picture, the person will often focus on the individual elements; they will struggle to see how these individual elements relate to each other. For example: Ikea furniture, speech (focus on the words instead of the whole message).

**Theory of Mind:**

Many individuals with Autism do not understand that other people have their own plans, thoughts, and points of view. They can also have difficulty understanding other people's beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. They will also think that others will know what they are thinking and think the same.

**Executive Functioning:**

This means that individuals with Autism may also have difficulty with problem-solving.